
Developing an Institutional Approach to UDL – Big Bang or Slow Burn?

Introduction

De Montfort University (DMU) has pioneered the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) pedagogic framework in the UK and uses it to underpin our institutional approach to teaching and learning practice. UDL focuses on three main principles: Multiple means of Representation, Multiple means of Student Engagement and Multiple means of Action and Expression' (Meyer, Rose and Gordon). As the study of how students learn has proliferated, a consistent finding is that natural variability is the rule. Moreover, some of this variability is systemic, which means that it can be planned for. In response, DMU has embedded a proactive approach in its Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy that means we expect our students to display individualised learning requirements, and so we can design all learning materials accordingly.

Overview

In 2016, DMU commenced a one-year UDL strategic project to explore the applicability of this framework to our highly varied student body. The project's outputs include:

- Institutional agreement on the UDL principles for DMU
- Institutional commitment for all teaching and learning to be underpinned by UDL
- Modular level audit to identify areas of UDL enhancement requiring appropriate module modification, and to identify existing UDL practice (covering 2000 modules)
- A suite of staff learning and development resources to support UDL teaching developments (engaging more than 2000 academic staff)
- Infrastructure to manage the staged roll-out of lecture capture technology
- A new Postgraduate Certificate in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education, designed to exemplify UDL learning and teaching practice
- A new professional recognition scheme in which the principles of UDL are mapped alongside the UK Professional Standards Framework
- A new Continued Professional Development (CPD) strategy and framework with UDL embedded within each individual element

UDL was seen as a way of reflecting diversity in the student body with regard to teaching and learning in higher education (HE), and much of the work began with students with disabilities. DMU's large disabled cohort was an initial reason to take this up. However, because UDL refers to a set of principles designed to inform lecturers as they plan and deliver their teaching to students, DMU soon extended this approach to cover all students (Merry 2018). Lecturers are prompted to design curricula that are flexible and adaptable, allowing multiple forms of engagement, thereby facilitating the learning of all students and taking into account their individual abilities and strengths. The project sought to understand the viability of this approach against the more common mode of retrofitting curricula for students via adjustments, special compensation and modifications.

The development of the UDL framework at DMU took place in the context of significant reductions in the funds available to students with disabilities through the Disabled Student Allowance (DSA), and responded to the challenge set by the then Department for Business Information and Skills (BIS) for the sector to improve its compliance with the requirements of the Equality Act. 17% of DMU students enrol with a disability, the third highest proportion in a United Kingdom (UK) university, excluding the Open University. However, by focusing on the experience of all DMU students, we have been able to increase their autonomy and level the playing field to account for a multitude of different learning needs, which in turn has narrowed attainment gaps and improved students' future employment prospects.

The UDL framework is now reflected within the DMU Strategic Framework and also forms one of the main pillars of the university's Teaching, Learning and Assessment Strategy. It has delivered recognised sector leading improvements in teaching and learning for all students at De Montfort University.

Collaboration, collaboration and more collaboration

Embedding UDL into the learning and teaching practice of the University required extensive collaboration across Learning and Organisational Development, the Centre for Enhancing Learning through Technology, the Department of Academic Quality, Information Technology and Media Services, Student and Academic Services, Library and Learning Services (LLS), and staff and students from the four academic faculties. We have funded academic 'champions' in each Faculty as well as the Doctoral College and LLS.

Moreover, our ground-breaking approach has seen more than 30 United Kingdom (UK) universities and six sector research groups, including the Department for Education (DfE) and Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), contacting DMU to learn more about our UDL approach and many have requested visits, information and training advice. We have disseminated our good practice via publication and conference presentations (e.g. Equality and Human Rights Commission 2014, Institute for Public Policy Research 2017 and DfE 2017). After visiting DMU to learn more, HEFCE commissioned the Institute of Employment Studies to investigate models of good practice in relation to the support of students with disabilities and to undertake in-depth research into DMU's approach. DMU is one of just three education providers whose work on inclusive student support is referenced in this review (Institute for Employability Studies 2017).

So what happened?

The UDL project has engaged research assistants to undertake a full study of the impact of UDL, focusing on retention and achievement. While it is too early to provide long-term data, we have already seen a reduction of 2% in

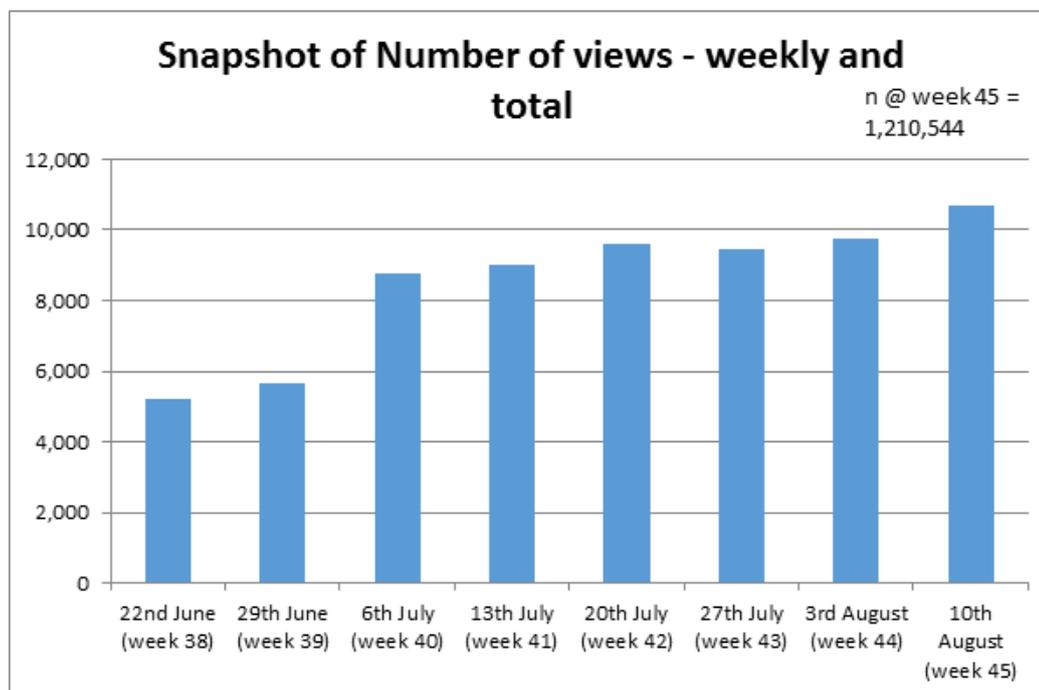
the attainment gap for Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic students (BAME).

The UDL champions have also evaluated their impact on their areas and have compiled evidence to show that knowledge and understanding of UDL is now widespread among staff and the De Montfort Students' Union. A UDL approach is now expected for all new module and programme proposals as well as any changes made to assessment.

Impact of UDL and change implemented

As of July 2018, more than 2000 staff members have included familiarising themselves with UDL in their development plans. All lecturers new to teaching at DMU are required to undertake the PGCert in Teaching and Learning in HE, which both utilises UDL as a pedagogy and covers UDL as a distinctive DMU framework.

Our initial technological UDL development, DMU Replay, provides all students with anytime access to audio and/or visual material, which lecturers record before, during or after a staff-led session. Introduced in September 2016, in the vanguard of the sector, DMU Replay made all staff-led teaching activities available to year zero, year one and all postgraduate taught students. In September 2017, this was extended to cover all DMU students. Since its introduction, DMU Replay has had over 1.2 million student views in 15 months (see below for a snapshot of the viewing trends).



DMU Replay has also encouraged staff to evaluate their teaching practice to make it more accessible and effective, especially keeping in mind the capacity for students to view lectures multiple times. We are currently exploring more creative ways to use video and audio enhancements. As noted, we now expect all module and programme proposals, including those developed at our partner institutions (both UK and abroad), to fully conform to UDL principles, which has led to a wider variety of teaching and assessment methods being used across the piece.

The UDL Project at DMU was awarded runner-up for The Guardian Student Diversity and Widening Participation Award 2017 and The Times Higher Education Outstanding Support for Students Award 2017.

Summary and review

A UDL curriculum incorporates a variety of options to allow it to be accessible and inclusive for individuals with different cultural backgrounds, disabilities, different learning styles and preferences, and different learning abilities. As such, UDL reflects an awareness of the unique needs of each learner, enabling individual learning experiences that remove barriers from the learning environment. The opportunity for effective learning for all learners is optimised, making UDL transferable to all learning contexts, as applicable in the primary school classroom as it is in the university lecture theatre. By applying the three principles upon which UDL is based, learners are provided with a variety of ways of acquiring information as well as flexible learning resources. These principles mandate that learners' interests and learning preferences be taken into account, ensuring that they are appropriately challenged and motivated, as well as being provided with alternative ways to demonstrate their understanding. Hence, any scenario, which requires the engagement and motivation of individuals, the acquisition of information or the requirement for individuals to demonstrate understanding, can benefit from UDL. Examples may include staff and student recruitment processes, staff training and development, stakeholder engagement, communication strategy, project management, policy development, and quality assurance and enhancement processes; each represents processes that can be positively impacted by being made more UDL friendly.

At DMU, therefore, we have found that UDL makes a real difference across disciplines from the Sciences to Humanities; across teaching styles from straightforward lectures to interactive teaching sessions; and across parts of the university from academic faculties to Information Technology to Student Welfare. By approaching each learner as an individual, we are further developing ourselves as teachers and student supporters and our campus as fully inclusive.

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Abigail is the University Director of Teaching and Learning at De Montfort University Leicester, a TEF Gold Institution with a passion and success in teaching and learning. DMU is a post-92 University with a celebrated diverse student population, including a high proportion of students with declared disabilities, from a BAME background and with a LGBTQ+ identity. A registered nurse and practising clinician. Abi continues to be passionate about both the NHS and Higher Education. Abi has published in a number of books and articles on healthcare and is a contributing author of 'Universal Design for Learning and Strategic Leadership: A Whole University Approach to Inclusive Practice,' in the book 'Transforming Higher Education through Universal Design for Learning: An International Perspective'. This will be published in early 2019. She continues to talk widely across the UK HE sector about UDL and presented at the UDL Symposium at Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts in August 2018.

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