



Greater Faculties: A Review of Teaching and Learning

Volume 1

Article 6

2017

Designing for Universal Success


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Recommended Citation

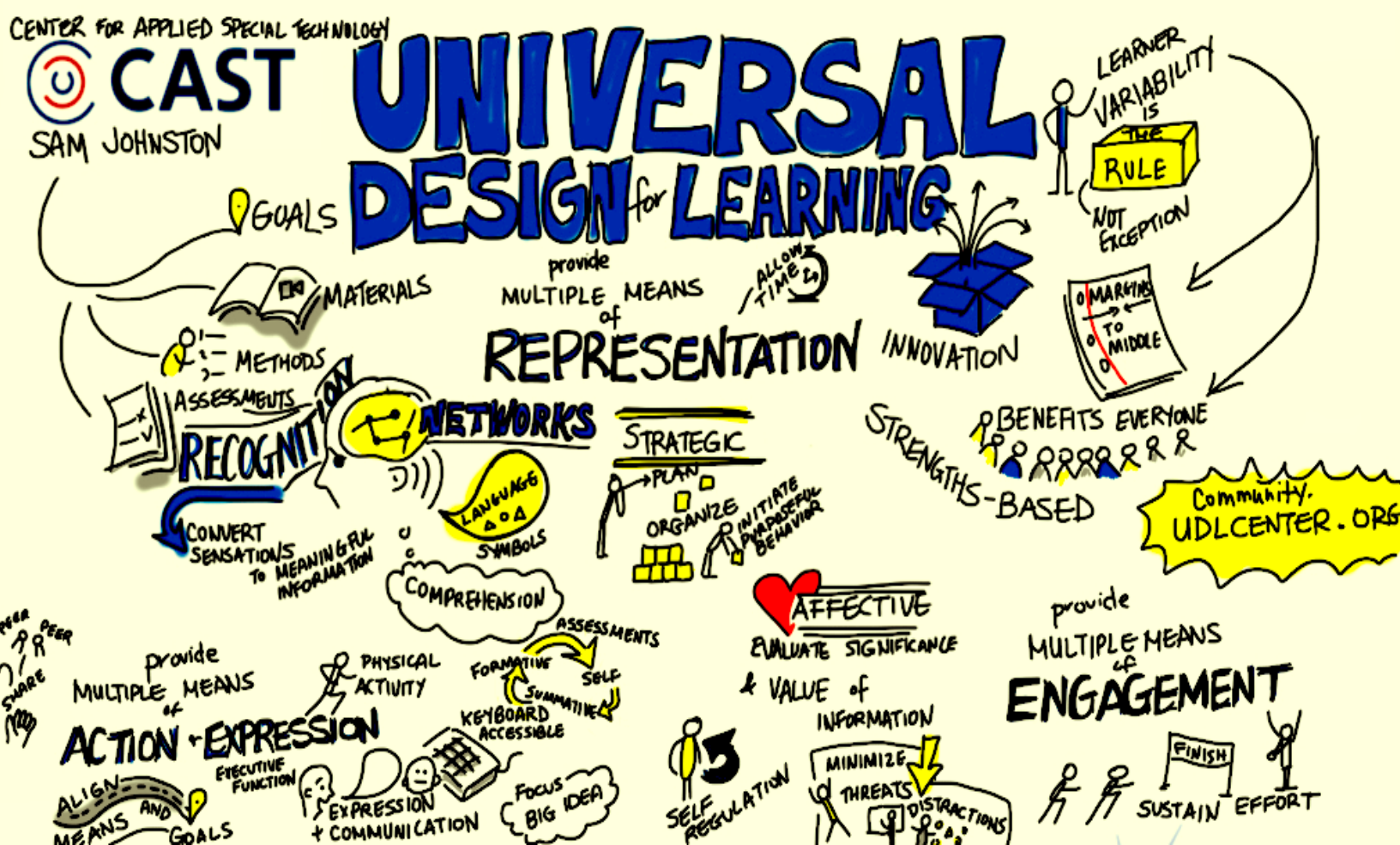
Martin, Nicole and Conatser, Trey (2017) "Designing for Universal Success," *Greater Faculties: A Review of Teaching and Learning*: Vol. 1, Article 6.

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.13023/GF.2017.06>

Available at: <https://uknowledge.uky.edu/greaterfaculties/vol1/iss1/6>

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Designing for Universal Success

Nicole Martin and Trey Conatser

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New software and technologies continue to allow more people to learn in ways that best align with their abilities, situations, and experiences. Beyond the tools, however, we are witnessing a growing pedagogical attention to designing learning environments that empower *all* learners. At the University of Kentucky, Dr. Deb Castiglione is the Universal Design and Instructional Technology Specialist at the Center for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching. She has worked to secure a campus-wide license for the Texthelp software Read&Write Gold, which follows the principles of Universal Design for Learning. We asked Dr. Castiglione about what the software can do for learners and why we should think about inclusive practices such as Universal Design in our teaching.

NM/TC: What is Universal Design for Learning (UDL), and how is it different than accessibility?

DC: UDL is about incorporating principles and strategies to meet the needs of all learners (including those with disabilities) from the beginning of course/content design/development. By integrating accessibility practices into the mix, you can reach a larger percentage of student needs.

For example, if you were to caption a video, not only would you meet the needs of an individual that is deaf or hard of hearing, but captioning also benefits English language learners, students with reading difficulties, as well as those whose hearing ability is affected by noise, or in situations where playing sound is not an option (e.g. no speakers, quiet environment such as the library, sleeping children/spouse, and so on).

Typically, incorporating strategies for student success comes as the result of a current need and, thus, are retrofit to the situation/individual. This can cause access delays and affect a student's ability to be successful in a course. UDL helps to avoid delays and potential rush costs. UDL also can help to reduce the need for some academic accommodations.

What is the history of UDL software (when developed, for what purpose, in what context, etc.)?

“UDL” software, so to speak, came out of the UDL movement that began in the late 1980s when universal design was adopted by educators in an effort to enhance learning. There are limited software tools that consider themselves universally designed. Read&Write Gold is one of the few. It is not designed specifically for students with disabilities, but to enhance the learning experiences of all students. Read&Write Gold is free to the UK Community through the UK download site: download.uky.edu.

Why did you become interested in advocating for UDL software—and Read&Write Gold specifically—across campus?

I have been familiar with Read&Write Gold for many years and believed that it would be of benefit to our students here. With the emphasis on student success and retention, it seemed like a perfect fit. Plus, we were able to purchase it at a discounted rate due to a prior site license. It didn't make sense not to purchase it and UKAT (now ITS) agreed to make the purchase.

How did the University of Kentucky become invested in implementing UDL programming in its undergraduate courses?

My position [at CELT] came about as the result of the ongoing work of an accessibility committee here at UK and a white paper that came out of the committee. Through networking UDL has become a greater part of the university, but there is still much work to do.

Why is it important for teachers to consider software like Read&Write Gold, even if they don't see an immediate use for them or their students?

Read&Write Gold can benefit all students. Students can customize the toolbar to meet their personal needs and can use the tools in a way that fits those needs. Not everyone will use the tools the same way.

At least one support tool will be of benefit to every student in the course of their academic career. Many will benefit from more. There are tools to help organize research and references, assist in creating bibliographies, and aid in writing and editing papers. There are tools that address different learning preferences. For example, auditory learners can have text spoken aloud, and visual learners can visually map their thoughts.

Faculty can use Read&Write Gold to create more universally designed course content that provides students options for engaging with course materials. Read&Write Gold can be used to convert inaccessible PDF documents to Word documents. It can be used to create an MP3 or sound file from digital text. And, students can use it to create higher quality papers and research.

Did I mention that it's also free for everyone in the UK community? So, it can't hurt; it can only help.

Now that you've accomplished the goal of obtaining a campus-wide license and are in the process of publicizing the software, has there been any change in how you pitch Read&Write Gold to faculty members and students?

In Spring 2015 we conducted a workshop on Read&Write Gold for faculty. There were some views that it did too much for students, but others thought it wasn't doing enough. Sure, it doesn't do everything, but if Read&Write Gold can get students to the next level of success, why not?

We are now attempting to incorporate Read&Write Gold into CELT presentations where there is a good fit. Our goal is primarily student use. We need faculty to help us market the tool to students, so our efforts are currently concentrated on connecting with faculty teaching UK101 and UK201 and creating tools that will help them.

We've also learned from our communication with students. The students have told us what they like and how they use or intend to use the software. This has helped us streamline and target the tools we demonstrate. We were at the KWeek Resource Fair this year and received a very positive response from students. We used several student quotes on our display:

"This application allows for students like myself to get the little help they need. I personally really struggle with reading comprehension and this application helps tremendously."

"This toolbar is extremely helpful because I am terrible when it comes to spelling...This Spelling Helper icon is better quality compared to Microsoft too."

"[T]he 'Play' icon...is actually the most helpful overall to me and it was the reason I will keep this application on my computer...This helps me out because of my low reading comprehension skills. This will not only save time and energy, but this will also help me understand the material better, which returns better grades."

"I was also very impressed by the program's text-to-speech capability. I found it very convenient that I could be on the web, highlight an article, and have it read to me instead of reading it myself. I have found that if I hear the words, and read the words, I am more likely to retain the information in the text...This will surely minimize the amount of time I spend doing homework, as a lot of my time is taken up by reading (I am a slow reader!)"

"I wish I could have had this available to me sooner."

We've also heard a student say:

"I love Read&Write Gold. I have found it to be incredibly useful, and it has really helped me work more efficiently. I especially like the Fact Mapper, which I use to make a visual representation of the notes after my Physics class so that I can more easily understand the concepts and how they are connected."

Generally speaking, how can institutions and academic cultures support UDL practices in the classroom?

Implementing UDL is a matter of providing learners with choices in how they engage with the course, how they access and interact with the course content, and how they demonstrate what they have learned. It's a good teaching strategy. Some might align it to differential instruction because the effort is made to meet the needs of all individual students; however, UDL is incorporated upfront, not in an ongoing, as-needed basis.

For someone who is totally new to the concept of UDL and wants to dip their toes in the water, what might be a good resource to consult or a first step to take?

I'm happy to meet with anyone to talk about UDL and to brainstorm steps to incorporate UDL into higher education. The best way to reach me is by email (deb.castiglione@uky.edu). More information can be found at the following sites:

Universal Design for Learning at the University of Kentucky @ www.uky.edu/udl

Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST) @ www.cast.org

UDL on Campus @ udloncampus.cast.org

National Center on Universal Design for Learning @ www.udlcenter.org

Postsecondary Education and UDL @ www.udlcenter.org/implementation/postsecondary

Deb Castiglione earned her doctorate in distance learning from the University of Kentucky and works as the Universal Design and Instructional Technology Specialist at the University of Kentucky's Center for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching. She brings skills, knowledge, and experience in instructional design and development, universal design, accessibility, and assistive technology. Deb is a RESNA certified assistive technology professional (ATP) and has worked with children and adults with disabilities. She has developed and taught courses in instructional design, assistive technology, and universal design for Gateway Community and Technical College, the University of Cincinnati, Northern Kentucky University, and the University of Kentucky. Her passions include incorporating accessibility and universal design into learning for everyone.

MEDIA

Giulia Forsythe, "Universal Design for Learning from Center for Applied Special Technology," Flickr, CC-BY (Title).

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