

UNIVERSAL DESIGN FOR LEARNING: ENHANCING STUDENTS' INVOLMENT

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Abstract

What is Universal design for Learning (UDL)?

The underlying idea is that lectures, exercises and evaluations are designed for maximum accessibility right from the start. UDL is an educational framework stating that students assimilate what they have learned in various ways. Therefore students' learning capacities and needs differ widely. Traditional teaching methods do not always take into account students' backgrounds and previous trainings.

UDL offers a scientific framework to develop an inclusive learning environment that meets a wide range of needs, strengths, backgrounds and interests of current students. It offers a method to diminish barriers in the learning process without the need to find various solutions for the individual need of each separate student.

Project UDL

The policy Unit Diversity and Gender (Ghent University) offers its lecturers an UDL-coaching project. The aim is to get teachers from different faculties acquainted with the concept of UDL and to help them to apply the theory to their teaching and evaluation methods. In doing so, the policy unit wants to support teachers in their educational tasks and to bring them together to investigate how to make academic lectures more accessible and effective. The outcome is to enhance the involvement of all students.

Together with the coaches, the lecturers will examine the way in which their study material is currently structured and how small adaptations can be made to reach a larger group of students. The participants of the coaching sessions will learn how exercises and lectures can grip and hold the students' attention.

Although the project has a central theme, each participant will be able to give UDL a highly personal interpretation, depending on his or her needs and wishes. To guarantee this personal approach the group of participants is limited to 20. Participants come together with the project coach four times a year. During these meetings the principles of UDL are explained and the progress the teachers make is monitored.

This coaching project enables lecturers to motivate a large amount of students with various backgrounds. They learn how to make small adjustments to their everyday teaching and evaluation practice. Moreover, by exchanging experiences and ideas about the principles of UDL we hope to bring about an enduring dynamic between the participants.

Keywords: : universal design for learning, ICT

1 INTRODUCTION

Ghent University (UGent) is one of Flanders' major universities. It has 11 faculties and 8 departments in central administration. Ghent University has over 30.000 students and 7.000 staff members. In the first years, most lectures are ex-cathedra classes. Exams may be written (often multiple choice) or oral, depending on the lecturer and the subject matter. One of Ghent University's nuclear responsibilities is to discover and develop its students' talents. Even with large groups of students, this can only be fully achieved by paying sufficient attention to diversity. Because of the growing number of students, the student population becomes more diverse each year. Paying attention to the individual differences between students and members of the staff demands extra care and attentiveness of everybody involved. It is therefore very important that both staff and students learn how to deal with all kinds of differences between people.

Because Ghent University strongly believes that consciously dealing with diversity is an enrichment to the university as a whole and to the staff and students individually, it has shown increasing attention to

this topic in various ways. In 2008, Ghent University embedded diversity in its policymaking by establishing a policy unit Diversity and Gender. This unit stimulates through concrete actions the mutual involvement between students and staff and implements diversity in all layers of the academic policy. One of its focal points is developing actions to improve the academic chances of students from certain target groups (e.g. students with a disability, students with an ethnic minority background, students with an untypical educational background...).



2 DIVERSITY IN THE UNIVERSITY

2.1 Enhancing student's involvement

- Would you like to get concrete tips about enhancing students' involvement in the classroom?
- Are you interested in using ICT-tools during your lectures?
- Do you want to know how you will be able to evaluate students in a more flexible way by making little adjustments?
- Do you want to share your personal experience as a lecturer?

Lecturers who answered 'yes' to most of these questions, were the target group for a new UDL-project at Ghent University. The aim is to teach them the principles of 'Universal Design for Learning' (UDL) and to show them how to use these principles in their everyday teaching and evaluation methods.

The goal of this project, coordinated by the policy unit Diversity and Gender, is to encourage faculties to rethink the possible strategies to stimulate and implement diversity within their own structures and teaching methods. This theme allows the participants to address a large amount of students from various backgrounds by using an inclusive approach. The project helps them to adjust their own teaching and evaluation methods and to focus on those issues they believe are important. By enabling the exchange of ideas and experiences between various lecturers, the project also creates more interaction between lecturers from different faculties.

2.2 What is Universal design for Learning (UDL)?

The underlying idea is that lectures, exercises and exams are designed for maximum accessibility right from the start. UDL is an educational framework stating that students assimilate what they have learned in various ways. Therefore students' learning capacities and needs differ widely. Traditional teaching methods do not always take into account students' backgrounds and previous trainings.

UDL offers a scientific framework to develop an inclusive learning environment that meets a wide range of needs, strengths, backgrounds and interests of current students. It offers a method to diminish barriers in the learning process without the need to find various solutions for the individual need of each separate student.

Together with the project's coach, the participants investigate the way their teaching material is currently structured as well as the way in which this material can be adjusted to approach more students and stir their enthusiasm for the lectures. The participants of the coaching sessions will learn how exercises and lectures can grip and hold the students' attention.

The basic principle is that subject material should be offered to students in various ways (e.g. by using cartoons, showing movies, using digital texts...). To meet the needs of a large variety of students UDL has three basic principle:

1. Offer subject matter in various ways (= multiple means of representation)
2. Teach students to use the subject matter in more than one way (= multiple means of action)
3. Involve students more during the lectures (= multiple means of engagement)

The more means used to offer information, the bigger the chance that a large group of students understands and learns the subject matter effectively. Offering subject matter solely in a paper syllabus may give certain students a disadvantage. Combining written information with audio fragments, digital text or movies may solve this problem.

Advantages of a digital course:

- The student may use speech software
- The text can be translated into braille
- The lay-out of the text can be changed according to the students' wishes
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By making use of different media, students will feel more involved in the classroom. When students are encouraged to share subject material with each other, or to explain the material themselves (e.g. by using online forums) they will be more involved with each other and with the teaching environment.

However, UDL is more than using ICT tools. Simple adjustments to a traditional way of lecturing and evaluating can enhance the accessibility of subject material significantly.

2.3 UDL as a project for lecturers

By offering UDL as a project, the policy unit Diversity and Gender aims to introduce lecturers from various faculties with the concept of UDL and give them the opportunity to test the principles during their own teaching time under supervision of a coach. The project's coach supports the participants by investigating together in which ways their educational methods can be made more accessible and effective for a large group of students, thus enhancing those students' involvement.

Central to the coaching sessions are:

- Teaching method and material
- The use of ICT-tools in lectures and exercises
- The way in which students process academic texts
- The importance of exercises and practice-based tasks
- The students' involvement

- Methods to stimulate students
- Methods to evaluate and give feedback

Central to the project are the individual questions of the participants. Although this project has a central theme, each participant has to be able to emphasize on certain tools, according to their own needs and wishes.

Lecturers who participate in this project come together on a regular basis. The project's coach is always present and explains a UDL principle. Afterwards the participants can ask questions and share their experiences. They are able to try various tools or make certain adjustments in the time between the meetings. The coach remains available during the whole process, thus being able to intervene when necessary. The course of the project is one year, during which the participants meet four times:

- First workshop: What is UDL? How can I use these principle in my everyday educational methods? Good practices from the academic world
- Second workshop: the participants investigate the way their own lectures are structures and come up with adjustments to make their lectures more accessible. The participants write down an action plan.
- Third workshop: overview of ICT-tools that can be used in a teaching environment
- Fourth workshop: evaluation of the project

At the end of the project, the progress of each participants will be evaluated, taking into account the students' experiences as well. The project will be adjusted after this evaluation.