

Equitable, Accessible, and Inclusive Teaching Practices

By Saili S. Kulkarni, PhD, Associate Professor, San José State University

Higher education can mirror some of the same inequities documented in P-12 education, especially when considering meeting the needs of marginalized students (i.e. emergent bilinguals, students with disabilities, first generation students). As a teacher educator, and former elementary and middle school special education teacher, I believe that teaching involves the integration of content knowledge and pedagogical approaches to instruction. One of the challenges of higher education is that faculty may not necessarily be trained in the pedagogy of teaching. By ignoring the integration of content knowledge and pedagogy, we do a disservice to marginalized students in our higher education classrooms. In this article, I describe some of the ways to embrace the differences that students bring into the higher education classroom using the framework of Universal Design for Learning (UDL). I begin by describing the key principles of UDL and then include a personal example of how UDL can generate a more dynamic, engaging and ultimately equitable classroom environment for all students.

CAST (2018) provides us with the key principles of UDL which includes providing multiple means of Engagement, Representation, and Action & Expression. By incorporating these principles, learners will be purposeful & motivated, resourceful & knowledgeable, and strategic & goal directed respectively (CAST, 2018). At the core of all instruction we provide, we want students to be engaged with the material. The first principle of UDL encourages us to provide authentic and meaningful experiences for all learners and, as Fitzgerald (2020) implores, instruction that is culturally responsive. The second principle of UDL has us think about how we deliver instruction and whether it will indeed reach all learners. Multiple means of representation indicates that all learners need to be able to understand and learn the material. The way we provide representation matters. Lastly, the third principle of UDL, multiple means of action and expression, moves us to think beyond traditional ways of assessing student learning. Giving students a choice in how they demonstrate learning opens up new possibilities for accessing content.

Example: The Reading Reflection

In almost all of our courses, irrespective of area of study, we want students to be able to do the assigned reading. Countless times, we complain that students are coming to class without having done the reading and are therefore unprepared to engage in class. Reading reflections, reading quizzes, or reading discussion guides are all common ways to check in and hold students accountable for their assigned reading. Tapping into UDL and culturally responsive instruction, however, we can make reading a more dynamic and engaging endeavor. Last year, I assigned a total of six reading reflections over the course of the semester (two at the beginning, two at the midpoint, and two at the end). However, instead of having students submit written work, students were

encouraged to choose among several options for how to submit their reflections. They could submit a traditional written reflection, but also had options of submitting an audio recording, a presentation of 4-5 slides, a poem, or another creative submission (approved by me in advance). What I noticed after using the multiple means of action and expression principle of UDL, is that students were more likely to (a) turn in their reflection assignments on time, (b) engage in class discussions related to the readings, and (c) provide positive feedback informally and in course evaluations about the fact that they had choice in how to demonstrate their learning. In addition to this, many of the marginalized learners in my course, who had areas of challenge in writing, appreciated the opportunity to voice their thoughts through audio or visual representation. This de-stigmatized their areas of need and created meaningful participation.

Going even deeper, I set up reflection assignments with a prompt asking students to make their own connections to the reading. Essentially, I challenged students to answer the question “How does this apply to *you* and *your experiences*.” While this works extremely well for teacher education courses, it is adaptable to any major or area of study. It encourages students to make deeper connections to their readings and foster direct connections to content. Essentially, learning then becomes responsive and relevant. As an added bonus, it allows faculty to get to know their students in new ways and, by combining the overlapping UDL and culturally responsive aspects of this assignment, makes for more interesting grading and feedback because we’re not looking at 30, 50, or even 100 papers!

Concluding Thoughts

Doing the work of providing more equitable, accessible, and inclusive teaching practices doesn’t happen overnight. It requires us to unlearn some of the inequitable ways that higher education teaching has been traditionally designed. It takes time, and patience to get to this place. By committing to these changes, however, and being open to relearning how to engage, deliver and assess instruction through UDL and culturally responsive approaches, we can expect to have students who are more satisfied and engaged with their learning!

References

CAST (2018). Universal design for learning guidelines. Wakefield, MA: Author.

Fitzgerald, A. (2020). Anti-racism and universal design for learning: Building expressways to success. CAST Inc.