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Navigating the Terrain:

Emerging Frontiers in Learning Spaces, Pedagogies, and Technologies

Exploring the relevance of Universal Design for Learning implementation in the post-secondary landscape from the perspective of sustainability

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This presentation showcases findings from a Canadian study which was carried out through 2023-24. This project explores an innovative facet of the momentum around sustainability within higher education, one that goes beyond the focus on environmental and operational preoccupations and concentrates on social and pedagogical sustainability. It examines the way the introduction of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) to a campus, through the creation of a cross-discipline community of practice, can (i) empower faculty to develop sustainable accessible practices within their own classroom, (ii) significantly reduce the reliance of the campus on accessibility services and reduce the pressure felt by these services, (iii) successfully integrate accessibility and inclusion within institutional strategic thinking around sustainability. The presentation synthesizes findings from a qualitative action-research project which examined perceptions and experiences of 14 stakeholders with different status and toles across the campus. The study adopted a phenomenological approach to data collection and analysis (Holland, 2014) and explored the participants' own constructs in relation to the overlap between UDL and sustainability.

Accessibility in the higher education has thus far been addressed through a medical model approach focused on retrofitting. In a nutshell, teaching and learning is designed for the 'traditional learner' and support services take on the task of supporting students who experience barriers in this design, with remedial, targeted services outside the classroom. The demographics of higher education, however, have changed widely over the last two decades, and retrofitting approaches are no longer sustainable. The volume of demand is growing exponentially, wait times increase, and the cost of Accessibility Services increases in a way that becomes unmanageable within most post-secondary campuses (NEADS, 2018). Universal Design for Learning (UDL) can address many of these strains on resources. Indeed, UDL is an emerging model for the management of diversity in the classroom which equips instructors to remove the majority of barriers to access to learning and support the needs of most diverse learners within the classroom itself (Al-Azawei et al., 2016). The literature highlights that most of the needs of diverse learners can be addressed with ease within the classroom itself once inclusive design and UDL are adopted and integrated as a mindset, across institutions (Baumann & Melle, 2019; Dalton et al., 2019). UDL can therefore address some of the concerns over the sustainability of current disability service provision models.

The need for a sustainable lens in this area is therefore tangible and pressing. Accessibility services, student services personnel, and faculty are all painfully feeling first-hand the inability of the current structure to meet the needs of diverse learners and to address the volume of service requests. UDL has the potential to address this strain on support services and to re-empower faculty to create inclusive provisions within the classroom space. A practical example of this would be the considerable pressure placed on accessibility services to digitalize printed material or to seek alternate versions of PDFs that are shared in class but are not accessible with reading software. This is an example of costly, repetitive use of resources that can be solved sustainably by empowering instructors to use the UDL principles in their class design and not rely on print only or on non-accessible digital documents. This has immediate resource and funding implications. UDL integration represents a clear example of sustainable transformation: an initial focus on professional development with faculty leads to a reduction in spending and resources

that are non-renewable (Fovet, 2017). The presentation showcases the wider implications for UDL development across the sector.

Keywords: Universal Design for Learning, sustainability, higher education, diverse learners, campus ecology

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