



UDL Implementation in Higher Education: Drawing lessons from the COVID online pivot and reconnecting with inclusive design in the face-to-face classroom

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After two decades of advocacy across North American campuses, it is fair to assert that Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is finally having an impact on the inclusion of students with disabilities across campuses (Schreffler et al., 2019). It is helping shift instructors and departments away from medical model approaches to students with disabilities (Edwards et al., 2022), and facilitating the adoption of the social model of disability in classroom practices (Author 1, 2014). In 2020, however, the COVID-19 pandemic forced campus closures and an overnight shift to online instruction and assessment across the world (Hodges et al, 2020). Many have argued that this pivot has helped increase awareness of accessibility and has developed inclusive design as a mindset among instructors (Dhawan, 2020). Equally numerous are researchers and practitioners who feel that the pandemic has weakened institutions' commitment to inclusion, made accessible learning more difficult to achieve, and generally hindered the development of UDL in higher education (Napierala et al., 2022). This dichotomy in perspectives is pervasive and encountered in most jurisdictions; it demonstrates the need for higher educators to 'reconnect' despite these lived experiences and to journey collectively and collaboratively towards more inclusive practices, in this period of healing. This interactive session will lead the audience in assessing to what extent each of these assertions might be true, and how campuses can draw important lessons from these experiences, in relation to UDL implementation – particularly in Technology Enhanced Environments (TELEs). It will examine how researchers and practitioners must draw from lessons learnt in online teaching and learning in these two disruptive years to 'reconnect' with the inclusive design mindset et advance UDL implementation as they return to the face to face classroom. It will demonstrate how sometimes difficult and rushed reflections around inclusive design in TELEs that occurred during the global health crisis, now have the potential to radically overhaul previous attitudes and assumptions, and to erode initial resistance to inclusive design as a mindset. The presentation draws from multiple interactive workshops which have been offered to UDL advocates and faculty throughout the pandemic. It presents the analysis of phenomenological data gathered throughout these professional development sessions.

Session objectives include:

1. become aware of the dichotomy that exists in the way faculty and campus staff see the impact of COVID-19 on UDL adoption;
2. explore & assess the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the development of UDL in higher education;
3. examine the lessons that campuses can draw from these experiences in order to support UDL adoption;
4. plan the integration of key observations, made during COVID-19 about Teaching and Learning in TELEs, in one's reflection on the growth of UDL in the post-COVID-19 landscape.

Keywords: UDL, UDL implementation, COVID-19 crisis, online pivot, inclusion, higher education

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Fovet, F. (2022, December 4-7). *UDL Implementation in Higher Education: Drawing lessons from the COVID online pivot and reconnecting with inclusive design in the face-to-face classroom* [Pecha Kucha Presentation]. 39th International Conference on Innovation, Practice and Research in the Use of Educational Technologies in Tertiary Education, ASCILITE 2022, Sydney, NSW, Australia. <https://doi.org/10.14742/apubs.2022.174>

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