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People, Partnerships and Pedagogies

Documenting and analyzing the relevance of Universal Design for Learning in developing inclusive provisions for culturally diverse learners in online pedagogy

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Recent profound societal transformations have led to a broad reframing of the collective understanding and use of the term 'diversity'. In the tertiary sector, in particular, this widening and deepening of the reflection on learner diversity has meant a move away from a simple focus on impairment; this term now also encompasses all intersectional dimensions of culture, race, Indigeneity, socioeconomic, gender and sexual orientation, and age. The tertiary sector is urgently seeking tools to embed this emerging lens into teaching and learning practices. The online facets of post-secondary teaching have lagged behind in this reflection, and the COVID pandemic pivot has highlighted how challenging management of change could be in online pedagogy. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) has offered powerful promises in supplying instructors with hands-on resources to navigate this rapid transformation of online pedagogy and guarantee that online learning spaces are fully inclusive. This paper explores and analyzes auto-ethnographic data collected by the author along the last four years, while he provided support and professional development around UDL as a consultant through the sector. The paper presents key findings from this analysis in relation to the usefulness of UDL in the diverse online class, and invites a reflection related to their strategic implications for higher education.

Keywords: UDL, inclusion, higher education, online pedagogy, culturally learners

Context

Wide societal transformation

The last decade has seen rapid and dynamic societal changes shatter common understandings of what diversity represents. The #MeToo and Black Lives Matter movements, as well as the Truth and Reconciliation discourse, together with the global search for sexual orientation and gender inclusion policy and legislation, have all radically transformed the public landscape (Crawford et al., 2019). In higher education in particular, this profound rethink has meant a move away from a narrow lens on learner diversity that focused solely on impairment and disability (Farley & Burbules, 2022). There is a growing need, as a result, to equip faculty with hands on tools to translate these social justice objectives into their teaching and learning practices. As many tertiary sector instructors see themselves as content specialist rather than pedagogues, there is urgency in providing pragmatic frameworks to address learner diversity efficiently and consistently. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) had begun establishing its pertinence as a suitable lens (Kieran & Anderson, 2019).

Irreversible impact of the COVID pandemic on higher education

The COVID pandemic and the online pivot which occurred in most jurisdictions, have reshaped the higher education landscape in an irreversible way. While online pedagogy was always considered like the specialist domain of a few online institutions, it is clear in this post-pandemic climate that all learners have enjoyed some aspects of the flexibility afforded by hybrid teaching options and that they now seek to see the best practices developed during the health crisis integrated in a sustainable way in delivery and assessment (Imran et al., 2023). Online pedagogy is now no longer seen as a specialist market but instead is presumed to be available, to an extent, in all courses in the form of at the very least a hybrid flavour (Bashir et al., 2021). This, in turn, places added pressure on the sector to develop adequate provisions for inclusive teaching for diverse learners in the hybrid options being offered, as online delivery prior to the health crisis had not been seen as particularly focused on or well adapted to the needs of this diverse student population (Araujo Dawson et al., 2022). UDL, here again, may appear as a convenient and palatable model to trigger a reflection around inclusion in online and hybrid delivery models, and instructors may be more receptive to the need for inclusive design in these spaces post pandemic (Fovet, 2023).

Neoliberal pressures towards institutional efficiencies

While the dominant neoliberal discourse in higher education has to date prioritized business model approaches, productivity and efficiency, and priorities of the majority, it is clear that in the highly competitive current post-secondary market, equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) have begun to be seen no longer as concerns of a marginalized minority, but as major branding features for institutions that increasingly have to position themselves attractively to a broad range of learners (Wolbring & Nguyen, 2023). In this sense, EDI has become a focus, not just in terms of social justice and fair governance, but more importantly in relation to economic growth, sustainable development, and market share (Riedel et al., 2023). This means that the search for best practices in terms of inclusion for diverse learners is no longer perceived as just a pedagogical priority for instructors; it is now a market priority for senior administration. UDL is appealing to this stakeholder group as well, as it offers a sustainable, standardized, and cost-effective model to meet the needs of a growingly diverse student population.

Overview of literature

The reframing of learner diversity

Learner diversity has thus far been defined and framed, within the post-secondary sector, as mostly related to impairment and disability (Jacobs, 2023). In the last decade, the discourse related to inclusion and diverse learners has progressively been broadened and definitions now include a wide array of sub-categories of the student population (Legusov et al., 2023). Learner diversity – when used in a higher education pedagogical context - has now come to regularly encompass cultural diversity, race and Indigeneity, sexual orientation and gender identity, socio-economic status, and the first-generation experience (Goering et al., 2022). This wider approach to learner diversity, however, has yet to permeate policies, funding envelopes, the structure of service delivery, or the reflection on pedagogy (Markey et al., 2023). These challenges are perhaps more pronounced even in online teaching where access to support services is even scarcer for these students (Huang et al., 2023), and where instructors may be less immediately aware of the challenges encountered by diverse learners (Tavares, 2023).

The inclusion of culturally diverse learners

Equity, diversity, and inclusion have become key concepts over the last ten years in the post-secondary landscape, and culturally diverse students are obviously considered within this work (USDofE, 2016). Much of the momentum, however, to date has focused on campus climate, access to services, equity in policy, as well as admission and retention (Wolbring & Nguyen, 2023). Very few examples exist of this work permeating successfully to the teaching and learning format or to the design of these experiences (Markey et al., 2023). In online pedagogy, awareness of cultural difference and its impact on the learning experience is also relatively unsophisticated and there is a phenomenon at play which tends to ‘flatten’ learner diversity since interactions are more limited than in face-to-face classes and many students are reluctant to share much about themselves (Asino et al., 2017; Dickson-Deane et al, 2018).

Universal Design for Learning

UDL has attracted much interest over the last two decades in the post-secondary sector within the Global North (Capp, 2017). It offers an innovative and radically transformative approach to the inclusion of students with disabilities. It shifts away from retrofitting and accommodations, to instead focus on inclusive design and makes a presumption that learner diversity is a given that must be proactively addressed from the blueprint stage, and not remain an afterthought (Al-Azawei et al., 2016). UDL consists of three design principles (multiple means of representation, multiple means of action and expression, and multiple means of engagement) which ensure that instructors incorporate an optimal degree of flexibility in all aspects of delivery and assessment, in order to allow learners to work from a strength-based perspective, using the strategies which they prefer and have already developed (Smith, 2012). Through the use of UDL, the focus shifts away from learner exceptionality to home in on the role of the instructor as designer. The benefits of UDL for diverse learners more broadly are beginning to emerge and be documented (Kieran & Anderson, 2019). The use of UDL to include culturally diverse learners represents a new area for research and practice development (Kieran & Anderson, 2019). The use of UDL in online pedagogy, on the other hand, has only recently created interest and curiosity (Altowairiki, 2023), as a result mostly of the COVID pandemic pivot.

Online pedagogy

The scholarship of online and hybrid teaching has been rich and wide over the last two decades (Martin et al., 2020). As distance post-secondary delivery models have integrated the use of technology, they have also redefined their objectives, shifted their key values, and attracted an entirely different clientele (Imran et al., 2023; Li & Pei, 2023). It would be incorrect and slightly narrow a view to assert that online teaching and learning has entirely failed to acknowledge the needs of culturally diverse learners thus far; any assessment of progress here needs to be more nuanced. Online pedagogy has been, as a sector, aware very early on that it required to ground itself in a complex and deep reflection related to all aspects of its goals, modus operandi, and mission (Farrell & Brunton, 2020). While this scholarship has, as a result, drawn from wide theoretical paradigms – including a powerful reliance on constructivism and social constructivism -, it can on the other hand be argued that accessibility, inclusion, and the needs of diverse learners have not played a prime role in this pedagogical rethink. This is to say that, while many scholars focus on teaching and learning in online spaces, few have a specific acumen in inclusive design. There is therefore a palpable need for online teaching and learning to urgently recognize – beyond its current pedagogical and theoretical priorities – the urgency of catering for cultural learner diversity (Dickson-Deane et al., 2017).

Post-pandemic urgency

The COVID pandemic and the online pivot have been both stimulating and disruptive experiences for the post-secondary sector (Witze, 2020). There have been many gains achieved over this period with respect to student-centered practices, but there have also been considerable crises that have impacted the learner experience (Aquino & Scott, 2023). As discussed above, awareness of inclusion and accessibility has been heightened, but there is some debate as to whether the lessons learnt about inclusive design during the pandemic have been integrated sustainably into teaching and learning practices (Barden et al., 2023; Burgstahler, 2021). When it comes to online and blended pedagogy more specifically, there is fear that while cultural diversity took a centre-stage role within the reflection on the pivot, during the periods of lockdown, there has been no fundamental or radical improvement, post-pandemic, in relation to designing inclusively for culturally diverse learners (Marmolejo & Groccia, 2022; Zhao & Watterston, 2021). Yet, student advocacy has also emerged from health crisis louder and more eloquent than ever, and one of the demands of students is for more online and blended learning, as well as pedagogical experiences that are more congenial and inclusively designed. There is therefore a degree of tension at present, post-pandemic, between student preferences in learning format and campuses' desires to return to old habits and more conventional delivery and assessment practices (McKenzie, 2021; Tosto et al., 2023).

Theoretical stance

Broad interpretivist stance

This study adopts a broad interpretivist theoretical stance. Interpretivism in social sciences focuses on the lived experiences of individuals who are encountering specific phenomena; it homes in on the meaning making of these individuals within social or professional contexts (Krmac, 2022; Thorne et al., 2022). Meaning making becomes an important focus of scientific enquiry in itself, in the sense that, though subjective in nature, it enables for the mapping, understanding, and analysis of human behaviour in these contexts. In education, and in the post-secondary sector in particular, the interpretivist paradigm is increasingly used to frame research into management of change, student affairs, and pedagogical transformation (Annamalai et al., 2022; Sabapathy, 2022).

Critical pedagogy backdrop

While the main theoretical paradigm used to frame the study is interpretivism, the paper also makes explicit references to critical pedagogy as a set of values, principles, and objectives (Giroux, 2023; Shareef1 & Sadiq, 2023). Critical pedagogy has built on the key writing of Paulo Freire (1993) and continues to examine power inequities within educational spaces. It exposes practices that are seen as dehumanizing and oppressive, as well as overly focused on compliance and subjugation - dimensions often referred to as the 'banking model' of education. It advocates for the political awakening of learners and their empowerment, through active transformation of educational practices and an erosion of classroom inequities (Mavin et al., 2023). Examining how to expand inclusive provisions for diverse learners in online pedagogy is therefore inevitably going to

involve implicit use of critical pedagogy as a backdrop.

Methodological reflection

Auto-ethnography

The methodological process adopted for this study is auto-ethnography. Auto-ethnography represents a research enquiry format where the investigator gathers data related to their own personal experiences, work context, or individual reflections, and analyzes this data using coding processes that are common in qualitative research (Gonot-Schoupinsky, 2023). Auto-ethnography is increasingly popular in the field of education, as it allows practitioners to document, analyze, and showcase intricate professional experiences (Ibrahim et al., 2023). In higher education, auto-ethnography allows professionals with broad and rich scope in their work mandate and professional objectives to use these institutional experiences as the basis for groundbreaking analyses that can support transformative change in the sector (Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2021). Auto-ethnography has gained credibility as a unique window into the analysis of organizational challenges that would otherwise remain unexplored, under-researched, and under-documented (Higgins, 2023).

Author's positionality

The author is in a unique position to examine the adoption and integration of UDL in the post-secondary sector, as he has held positions both as accessibility services manager and as faculty; in both of these roles he has been able to document his experiences, reflection, and strategic thinking. He also provides consultancy services, both domestically and internationally, in relation to UDL implementation. Over 2020 and 2021, he has offered a significant amount of professional development events focused on UDL integration across campuses, particularly in relation to online and blended delivery and assessment in the context of the COVID pandemic. He has led sixteen events with content that relates to this paper, and this series of workshops has served as the basis for the collection of the auto-ethnographic data examined and analyzed in this paper. The author has been able to record and archive his preparation work for the workshops, to journal his reflection around delivery, and to evidence the modifications and improvements he carried out to the material in response to participant feedback. This represents a significant body of written notes, as well as multiple evolving versions of workshop content.

Coding process

The paper adopts an inductive coding process (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006; Vears & Gillam, 2022). An initial set of auto-ethnographic notes and records related to three of the workshops offered on UDL adoption were coded manually. Eight initial codes were extracted from the manual coding of the sample of data. These eight initial inductive codes were used to continue categorizing the rest of the data available, related to the other 13 UDL workshops offered to higher education campuses. Six of the eight codes appeared highly pertinent and are used to shape, formulate, and showcase the findings below; the other two were abandoned because the frequency at which they appeared in the whole of the data set was low.

Assertions

The six codes which were effective in the categorization and analysis of data appear below. Each sub-heading summarizes the key findings emerging in relation to each respective theme.

Broadening pertinence of UDL in relation to learner diversity

There is urgency in the post-secondary sector around the need to broaden UDL, UDL resources, and UDL professional development so that the framework may benefit all diverse learners widely – and more specifically culturally diverse learners. This urgency is immediately palpable and is expressed by several stakeholder groups as they interact with the author as a consultant: instructional designers, faculty, student services personnel, senior administration, and teaching and learning support. The sector, as a whole, is seeking solutions that are palatable, user-friendly, concise, and sustainable in order to develop inclusive provisions for diverse learners, and particularly culturally diverse learners. In Canada, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report and the Calls for Action (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015) create an urgency around ethnicity and cultural diversity. Across North America, the percentage of international students

continues to rise and these learners experience very specific barriers in the lecture hall, very similar to those encountered by students with disabilities. For all these reasons, stakeholder groups across the campuses the author has collaborated with feel the pressing need to reshape teaching and learning through the lens of culturally responsive pedagogy. UDL appears an appealing and simple framework that supports this inclusive design mindset and leads to immediate transformation in the classroom. This said, it is also apparent, through the data, that the UDL discourse is currently unable to welcome in practitioners who focus mostly on cultural diversity; this scholarship and its language need to be widened to allow for their use in the context of cultural diversity.

Impact of the pandemic years

Throughout the analysis of auto-ethnographic data collected, it becomes apparent that a certain dichotomy envelops all experiences related to the pandemic and the online pivot, when it comes to inclusion and particularly the inclusion of culturally diverse learners. There is evidence of considerable gains and powerful experimentation; the collective discourse, however, also echoes concerns related to the lack of sustainable reflection with regards to the lessons learnt during the pandemic. In all interactions with stakeholders, the author has become focused on exploring (i) how best practices were developed in relation to cultural diversity during the pandemic pivot, (ii) to what extent these innovative practices can be retained, particularly in online and hybrid delivery formats, (iii) the extent to which these best practices can be successfully integrated into professional development for online faculty, and (iv) the role of UDL in supporting this process of sustainable development. Again, this is a landscape that is currently kept dynamic and everchanging by renewed and explicit demands of the student body – and culturally diverse learners more specifically - which does not desire a return to traditional, fully face-to-face practices.

A framework to tackle broader challenging theoretical objectives

At the heart of the discourse on the inclusion of diverse learners - culturally diverse learners in particular – reside key elements of critical pedagogy (Tessaro & Restoule, 2022; Guo-Brennan, 2022). Critical pedagogy is a paradigm which combines post-modern approaches to education and aspects of critical theory. The post-modern facet leads instructors to deconstruct the public discourse on teaching and learning, in order to unearth mechanical, hegemonic, dehumanizing dimensions of the power dynamics of the classroom. The critical theory elements encourage instructors to seek transformative action and to embolden learners to challenge the power inequities they encounter in learning spaces. As a whole, critical pedagogy in online pedagogies will seek to undo business model and market preoccupations to instead create authentic learning experiences for culturally diverse learners – opportunities to actively re-empower themselves by transforming the classroom (Joseph Jeyaraj, 2020). Critical pedagogy, however, can appear overly complex, ambitious, political, and challenging for most faculty. They may feel daunted by a model that currently creates so much public resistance (Giroux, 2012). It is clear, from the analysis of the auto-ethnographic data emerging out of the professional development reflection examined here, that UDL is less concerning for instructors and allows them to tackle many of the key tenets of critical pedagogy from a more palatable design angle (Sanger, 2020).

Academic freedom and flexibility

Another strong and consistent theme which emerges from the analysis of the data in this paper relates to the concerns that are perpetuated around academic freedom, in the context of the inclusion of culturally diverse – in relation to any reflection focused on inclusion and accessibility, in fact. Many models for inclusion are seen as inadequate and burdensome in the post-secondary sector because they are prescriptive. Academic freedom is a cornerstone of tertiary sector pedagogy, and faculty wish to be able to adapt solutions of their own that are suited to their personal philosophies, theoretical stances, and career objectives (Gary, 2023). The inclusion of culturally diverse learners in online pedagogy raises preoccupations in this regard, and there may exist resistance among instructors when it comes to some of the more top-down, directive EDI mandates. Instead, UDL has shown, through the analysis of the data in this study, to come to be perceived as sufficiently flexible as a set of design principles, to allow faculty to develop design solutions that are authentic, personalized, nuanced, and context specific. UDL, in the thematic analysis, appears consistently, through professional development events and professional interactions journaled here, as a lens on practice that offers clear accessibility and inclusion guidelines when dealing with culturally diverse learners, but that also fully respects the independent choices of instructors and their academic freedom. It guides faculty towards the inclusion of diverse learners in online learning spaces but does so through the use of design principles which fully respect faculty autonomy.

Osmosis with key pedagogical scholarship

When examining and targeting accessibility and inclusion – particularly the inclusion of diverse learners – there can be an inherent and explicit danger of becoming siloed within one specific pedagogical and philosophical lens, and of ignoring other important writing. One of the significant and powerful themes that emerges from the analysis of the data is the realization that no single scholarship can exhaustively serve as unique lens for the inclusion of culturally diverse learners in online post-secondary pedagogy. Some practitioners will be drawing from constructivism (Gurjar & Bai, 2023), others from social constructivism (Donelan & Kear, 2023). Critical pedagogy (Collier & Lohnes Watulak, 2023) will be an essential go to. Even experiential learning can at times be a useful paradigm (O'Connor et al., 2023). There is there an equally large body of literature focusing on accessible design within online post-secondary teaching and learning (Asino et al., 2017; Dickson-Deane et al., 2018; Romero-Hall, 2022). UDL appears as a particularly useful and effective framework to bring together these divergent pedagogical philosophies. It allows instructors to blend these teaching and learning perspectives rather than silo themselves into one unique facet. As UDL is not a pedagogical theory in itself, but rather simply offers a set of design tools, it has the capacity to tie these scholarships together and to blend them for faculty in a user-friendly way.

Missing component of inclusive online pedagogy

The author himself has been an advocate for online and hybrid teaching for many years; he has been a member of multiple communities of practice in relation to this scholarship and practice. He has also been an active advocate for accessibility and inclusion, and this has placed him at odds at times with colleagues, while he has attempted to advance both these priorities simultaneously. Many progressive and groundbreaking colleagues working towards transformative student-centred pedagogy lack a tangible awareness of accessibility and inclusion. Many of these change agents in the field of critical online pedagogy ignore the issue of cultural diversity and focus mostly on a homogeneous domestic student body. The author has felt this ongoing tension throughout the sixteen workshops and professional development events analyzed for this paper. One of the key concerns emerging from the data analysis therefore centers on possible ways to create an overlap between the scholarship on transformative online and hybrid pedagogy, and the literature on accessibility, inclusion, and learner diversity – particularly cultural diversity. It is argued that UDL is uniquely positioned to create this overlap and to support instructors navigating this dichotomy and tension.

Outcomes and discussion

While the benefits of implementing UDL to create inclusive provisions for culturally diverse learners is immediately apparent and has been articulated above, it would be naïve to assume that - as a process of management of change – this is simple, instantaneous, or organizationally seamless process. There are organizational implications to this reflection which must be documented and addressed explicitly.

Creating multidisciplinary collaborations

It is rapidly apparent that if UDL is to be used widely for the inclusion of diverse learners, it must be adopted and used more widely by a large array of campus stakeholders who may not yet be familiar with the framework. At present momentum around UDL integration is driven mostly by teaching and learning units, or accessibility services. It will be important to find ways to create multidisciplinary collaborations, involving the services who support international students, racialized students, culturally diverse learners, Indigenous students, first generation students, and socio-economically challenged students. At present, it would be fair to say that none of these collaborative efforts or opportunities exist on campuses in Canada. There is evidence in the literature to suggest that this state of affair is no different in the United States. Multidisciplinary work can be challenging to achieve in student affairs, senior management or across departments in higher education institutions which are inherently multilayered, stratified, siloed, and highly politicized. There is little precedent when it comes to breaking these siloes or to creating genuinely collaborative and non-territorial ownership over management of change processes.

Widening the UDL discourse

There are several challenges to authentic multidisciplinary collaboration around UDL integration on

campuses. Some are strategic and require a shift in mindset, but one specific hurdle is of a different order. The very discourse on UDL has emerged from the field of post-secondary accessibility services. It is a scholarship and a discourse on practice that focuses solely on impairment and disability (Alqarni, 2022). This discourse will not be immediately palatable or even pertinent to support staff who address the needs of students who do not identify as having a disability. Instructional designers are another group of stakeholders who will be crucial in supporting the use of UDL in online and hybrid pedagogy, but as a community they do not currently feel invited into this field of practice and scholarship, even if they understand its objectives. There therefore needs to be a proactive effort to widen the current scholarship and discourse on UDL in order to explicitly make its language relevant and clear to stakeholders who have to date been excluded from it. A process of osmosis must be triggered to invite into this discourse the key communities that have been omitted or dismissed thus far.

Enriching the reflection on online pedagogy

The COVID pandemic has been an exciting and disruptive time for the post-secondary sector. On a balance of negative and positive outcomes in terms of inclusion, one clear gain emerges: instructors are finally accepting and embracing their role as designers (Fovet, 2021). Interest for UDL and inclusive design has therefore never been higher, and it would be fair to assert that receptiveness for UDL implementation is at an all-time high. This has important implications for online pedagogy, as a sector which to date has been dynamically focused on some aspects of student-centered pedagogy, but not necessarily on accessibility or on the inclusion of diverse learners. The development and growth of online pedagogy is, in this post-pandemic landscape, now irretrievably connected to and merged into the wider adoption and implementation of UDL principles to cater for the needs of the full array of diverse learners. While this radical readjustment has already taken place (Gamage et al., 2023), important questions remain as to how to now sustainably anchor issues of accessibility and learner diversity into the scholarship and research related to online and blended pedagogy (Kumi-Yeboah et al., 2020).

Strategic implementation challenges

While the benefits of using UDL as a framework for the inclusion of culturally diverse learners may be immediately apparent, the process of integrating UDL into online pedagogy is strategically complex. In fact, the scaling up of UDL projects across any campus – face-to-face or online – is a delicate process which requires planning and organizational acumen. Ecological mapping has proven pertinent in this respect (Fovet, 2021b) and it will be important within each campus to assess with nuance the stakeholders which are best positioned to create momentum around UDL implementation and to drive the push for growth. To an extent, management of change in online teaching and learning can be further challenging, as the physical remoteness of the various collaborators can add to the silo phenomenon or the territoriality of the various units. Careful and proactive planning is required and the management of change dimension of UDL implementation is emerging as an area of scholarship in its own right (Fovet, 2023b).

Funding implications

Current funding models for inclusion in the post-secondary sector are grounded in a deficit model approach that perpetuates bio-medical constructs of diversity (Saltes, 2020). This is challenging and hinders most current efforts to widen provisions for inclusion. Most funding envelopes still targets individual support interventions and require clinical documentation (Smith et al., 2021). This limits the resources available for UDL implementation; it also excludes culturally diverse learners from efforts and services available to diverse learners with disabilities generally. A broad reflection around the urgent need for the transformation of funding models for inclusion is required in most Global North jurisdictions and represents a pre-condition to any significant evolution in the inclusion of culturally diverse learners.

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