

Pathways 6 Conference 2002
**Universal Design in Practice: Shooting For the Moon or One
Small Step.**

A Training Program in Course Design and Delivery.

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ABSTRACT

Research has confirmed that numbers of students with a disability are increasing; resources are relatively shrinking and despite a desire to be flexible and inclusive, tertiary education as a whole, is far from it. On a positive note, academics in both the university and TAFE sectors that were recently surveyed recognised they have a responsibility toward meeting the needs of students with a disability and wished to design and provide courses which were more flexible and inclusive, but did not know how. To partially address this, a training program in course design and delivery utilising Universal Design as the conceptual framework was developed. The course is presented as a best practice approach to flexible and inclusive teaching for all students and has been enthusiastically embraced by academics and course designers.

This paper describes the background to, and development of, the course. Information is provided on the key factors in the way the course is presented as they relate to UD. Feedback from the participants after attendance is discussed together with changes in teaching practice and the future of the programme.

The course was developed by the State Disability Liaison Officer for Western Australia which is part of the National Regional Disability Liaison Initiative (NRDLO) of the Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Technology.

1. BACKGROUND

For many years disability service providers in tertiary institutions in Australia have reported increasing numbers of students with a disability and with that, increasing demands to provide more services with little or no increase in resources. This was confirmed by a Demographic Study of Students with a Disability in Western Australia (Johnson, 2000). More importantly, this study identified that this trend would continue with the possibility of a further 27% increase in students with a disability or medical condition over at least the next decade to 2008. The current situation is therefore unsustainable

The author recommended the sector review the way services were structured and delivered and identify ways this could be improved to better meet existing and future needs.

Within the context of this trend, a project into flexible and inclusive learning was conducted (Edwards, 2002). The project focused on the issue of flexibility within mainstream, on-campus educational and training programmes. Survey results found that both teaching staff and disability staff recognise the potential benefits that flexible teaching and learning methods hold for meeting the learning needs of students with disabilities. However, teaching staff do not take disability issues into consideration when planning and designing the delivery methods for their programmes.

The project has identified a number of steps which disability staff can take to support the movement towards the accessible and flexible delivery of educational and training programmes. These included the development of resources that might assist teaching staff.

This training programme compliments a website and other materials developed as an outcome of this project.

2. WHY TRAINING PROGRAMME?

Print, interactive CD and on-line learning can provide information on the subject of flexible inclusive learning, universal design and disability but the nature of applying a universal design approach is best done in practice. The training programme in itself is an interactive example of the subject matter. It is designed and presented using a Universal Design framework.

Ongoing professional development is an accepted part of the culture in tertiary workplaces. For many it is a requirement and/or contributes to consideration for professional advancement. The ultimate aim in the development of the programme is that it becomes integrated into the institution's existing structure and function of Professional Development Centres and conducted under their auspices as best practice in teaching reinforcing that it is about academic's core business – teaching.

Initially the concept was for a single workshop but following observation of, and feedback from, the first pilot workshop it became evident there was a need for additional workshops addressing differing levels of need. For those more involved in actual course design, further sessions enable more in depth exploration of UD application.

3. WHY A UNIVERSAL DESIGN APPROACH?

Universal Design (UD) is a concept that advocates 'all products and environments and communications should be designed to consider the needs of the widest possible array of users' (Connell et al, 2002). Essentially it is an approach that not only meets the needs of people with a disability, but all people i.e. not only the needs of students with a disability but all students in the learning environment. It ensures an approach that reinforces teaching and learning in the context of diversity within the student body and that diversity is 'normal' and to be 'expected'. It eliminates the thinking, or attempts to, that consideration of the needs of a student with a disability is something 'extra', an 'afterthought', somehow 'different'.

Universal Design provides a conceptual framework for flexible and inclusive teaching and learning.

Whilst Universal Design was originally framed around physical environments and products it lends itself readily to communications and provision of any service.

Jaye Johnson applied this approach with staff from the School of Architecture at the University of Western Australia in a creative design studio for students in lieu of lectures on Australian Standards, Building Code of Australia and DDA. Not only was it far more interesting, it had a genuine impact on future thinking on design in a more global sense for participants. Similarly, this approach for staff that design and deliver education and training provides a conceptual framework that disability awareness oriented approaches to thinking about flexible and inclusive learning does not. It is not dependent on the academic being aware of a student in a particular class with a particular disability. Flexibility and inclusivity is built in at the beginning - the design of the course as a natural part of the process of best practice benefiting all students.

4. THE TRAINING PROGRAMME

Full details of the training program including presenter's outline and the participant's manual are available in full on the Universal Design for Learning website which is detailed in another paper by the authors. At the time of writing this paper, June, 2002, the site was undergoing final construction and testing. Address details will be available to Pathways participants or from the authors.

Module1: A Best Practice Approach to Flexible and Inclusive Teaching, Applying the Universal Design Framework.

Module2: A Best Practice Approach to Flexible and Inclusive Teaching, Universal Design in Curriculum Development. (conducted over two sessions)

Module 1 comprises of one three hour session and Module 2 of two three hour sessions. Participants' feedback strongly supports three hour blocks rather than a full day as is the option for Module 2.

4.1 Advertising the Programme

The programme was advertised through the usual channels by staff development centres. In keeping with the principals of UD the promotion was clear as to the intended audience, content and objectives of the workshop. The focus was on best practice in flexible and inclusive teaching to meet the learning needs of all students. This was to avoid the experience the authors have had with academic staff tending to perceive staff development session on disability issues as less relevant or less a priority for them.

Interestingly, in the first pilot workshop the staff development centre did include disability in the context of inclusivity and yet feedback from participants strongly supported their greater understanding of the needs of all students 'including' students with a disability. This was the intent of the approach i.e. focus on teaching a diverse student population which includes students with a disability. Further advertising confirmed that with this emphasis workshops filled within days of advertising which had not been the experience of the authors in past 'disability awareness' workshops. The first pilot was conducted at Edith Cowan University and within two days of it being advertised it was filled with a waiting list at the metropolitan campuses and with a request from the country campus for the workshop to be conducted there. A copy of the staff development notice is on the UDL website.

4.2 Venue

Usual staff development facilities are used where they are equipped with computers for participants, computer projection, overhead, electronic whiteboard and suitable for small group activities or with break out facilities. None of the rooms we encountered had audio loops so a portable system was used together with sound amplification and audio taping equipment. Presenters also need to make adjustments if lighting inadequate. Essentially, whilst using venue familiar to participants it needs to reflect requirements of accessibility and flexibility.

4.3 Presentation of the Workshops

Module1: A Best Practice Approach to Flexible and Inclusive Teaching, Applying the Universal Design Framework.

At the time of writing this paper for inclusion in the Pathways proceedings, Module 1 had been fully trialled and evaluated and will be used as the example herein. The conference presentation will include information on module 2 and a copy of the final presentation paper with module 2 outcomes will be available on the UDT website.

The workshops are presented utilising/reinforcing UD principals. Whilst initially participants in Module 1 will not realise this, it is discussed at the conclusion. This was found to have a significant impact and was positively highlighted in feedback.

Content details are on the UDL website. The following points illustrate how the UD framework was developed throughout the session and response of the participants.

Introduction. Participants are introduced to the session highlighting the objectives, the way the session will be conducted and requirements of them. An example is that they are provided with a full set of participant information in an accessible print format (including copies of overheads and PowerPoint slides) and advised a replicated set is available on disk (which was available from the presenter at the end of the session) and that it was on the web. They were advised the session would be taped and the tape available in the resource room following the session and additional copies could be obtained from the A/V department the following day. Participants were advised that if they wished to take notes of the presentation component their information pack included copies of slides with key points and with space to add their comments if they wished.

The response to this was most interesting. Almost all participants were surprised they did not have to take notes and later discussion proved this did not result in a lack of participation or involvement or 'learning'. A comment in the survey of academics in the Flexible and Inclusive Learning Project (Edwards, 2002), was that providing students with full sets of notes would hamper attention, involvement and learning.

Setting the scene. Prior to introducing the Universal Design concept and its application as a framework, it was important to spend time on why it is good practice to be flexible and inclusive. Activities highlighted diversity within an assumed homogenous group with regard particularly to different learning styles. A mini lecture was conducted utilising all the 'often used' excluding practice. In the first pilot workshop this was done by further disadvantaging some participant's vision, hearing or dexterity but was found not to add to the appreciation that some students in a class were additionally disadvantaged/excluded because of the mode of delivery e.g. students with a disability. Participants were very open regarding their presentation styles and how they might make it difficult for some students.

Introducing UDL. The principals of UD were introduced in the context of the educational setting. As they formally are written to reflect a physical access oriented setting they are too difficult for someone unfamiliar with UD to interpret meaning as applied to a classroom setting. For this reason they have been reworded to some extent. The information provided in the participant pack explains this more fully so if they see the original principals they will not be confused. Participants then worked to develop these using examples, as they apply to flexible and inclusive in the classroom. These are then discussed as a group, summarised and a copy of this provided at that time from the electronic whiteboard (and photocopier) and made available in the resource room (closed reserve) or in their case the staff development centre. This highlights an approach that does not disadvantage a student who cannot take notes in a discussion session.

UDL in practice. At time of the workshop many issues arose that reflected the Flexible and Inclusive Learning project academic survey comments of perceived barriers to being more inclusive. The interesting outcome was the group itself answered these concerns by applying the information provided in the workshop on how to overcome many of the perceived barriers.

5. OUTCOMES

The workshops are evaluated using a standard format developed by the Staff Development Centre (SDC) of Edith Cowan University which provides quantitative and qualitative data for the presenters and for the SDC. Some additional questions were asked specific to information we wanted.

Of the initial pilots only 81% of participants said they felt they could apply the workshop information to work independently in this area; however 80% requested a further workshop. This question has been rephrased. Written comments supported participants felt they needed more information.

Of the session feedback the workshop received an overall rating of 4.5 out of 5.0 the highest individual score being that of the value of the supporting resource materials provided – 4.75. The lowest score was 4.0 related to satisfying participants' professional needs in the area and is reflected in comments for a further session. Such a high rating of all areas was unexpected.

The most positive outcome was the number of academics who identified students with a disability or difficulty they wished to discuss with regard to the most helpful approach in the context of UDL they could apply to that class. Comments were to the effect they did not want to single out particular students and if they did 'so and so' would that help. I considered this indicated an understanding of the whole of class approach to improving the delivery of the course – the basis of UD.

A survey conducted of the participants in the initial pilot some months later indicated they had incorporated more flexible and inclusive practices but felt they wanted more 'how to' sessions.

Module 2 has been developed to address this need and at the time of writing this paper July, 2002, is being prepared to be piloted with those who completed Module 1.

6. CONCLUSION

Research has shown that disability services in the tertiary sector are facing increasing demands without equally increasing resources. Both Disability Officers and Academics believe a more flexible and inclusive approach in the learning environment is the direction in which they wish to go. Despite this, services are currently predominantly provided in an individual way to students with a disability for reasons often related to the barriers incurred because of the way education is delivered. Academic staff, in particular, recognised they have a responsibility to meeting the learning needs of students with a disability but cite a number of reasons for not being more flexible and inclusive in their teaching. These include information on how to be more inclusive and resources to assist them.

To address this, a training program has been developed: A Best Practice Approach to Flexible and Inclusive Teaching. Applying the Universal Design Framework.

Universal Design provides a conceptual framework for academics and course developers which, by nature, is inclusive of all students to the greatest extent possible. In practice, it benefits all students and removes the need for many of the individual accommodations provided to students with a disability.

The design of the training has been toward a focus on best practice in teaching and it is presented in a way to demonstrate simple strategies that can be applied in the classroom itself. This is intended to dispel some of the myths that accommodating students with a disability is costly, time consuming, difficult in the context of the way they teach, and for some, a feeling they need to know all about disability. It focuses on the fact diversity in the student population is to be expected and is normal.

Academics participating in the workshops rate it very highly and have made changes in their teaching practice. They have requested further workshops on this subject. The response to the UDL approach to achieving best practice in teaching has been very positive.

Disability service providers can readily introduce this training for academic staff and course developers with very little use of time or resources and the outcome, a freeing up of resources they currently devote on an individual student basis which can be further directed to activities which introduce more flexible and inclusive practices throughout the institution.

7. REFERENCES

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