Universal Design for Learning – a Swedish programme for widening participation

Introduction

For a number of years there has been focus on welcoming a broader spectrum of students to higher education. But we sometimes leave students in the hallway. As the Eurydice Report 'Modernisation of Higher Education in Europe: Access, Retention and Employability 2014' (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2014) states:

> What we do is not enough. We have to improve our work with widening participation.

In other words, we have to give them the tools necessary to be successful students, and of course we have to give faculty the tools to be successful teachers. In March 2013 I had the privilege of attending AHEAD's international conference in Dublin,' Is Universal Design in Education Any of My Business?' We were presented with a concept that made my work as a coordinator for students with disabilities so much easier. The possibility to work proactively for and with faculty with regard to widening participation in my institution took a great leap forward.

Initial steps

During spring 2014, 2015 and 2016 I had the opportunity to teach on a course in pedagogy for lecturers working in higher education. Since the topic at hand was diversity in theory and practice, and having attended the conference in Dublin, I saw the opportunity to try to use the concept of Universal Design. I introduced the lecturers to Universal Design for Instruction (UDI), as presented by Dr Joan McGuire in her keynote at the conference in Dublin. The idea of taking the principles of Universal Design from architecture and product development and implement the concept into teaching and learning in higher education found fertile ground with the lecturers. UDI adds two principles to the original seven principles of Universal Design so that the framework consists the following nine principles, the last two added by Dr McGuire and her colleagues (Roberts et al, 2011):

1. Equitable use

2. Flexibility in use

3. Simple and intuitive

4. Perceptible information

5. Tolerance for error

6. Low physical effort

7. Size and space for approach and use

8. A community of learners

9. Instructional climate

It is difficult to learn to swim on dry land, so my task was to try to make the lecturers want to use the principles in their own courses, preferably courses they were responsible for or courses on which they were lecturers. This is the background to a project on Universal Design for Learning (UDL) on which I am writing my Master paper. For the project I chose to concentrate on CAST's model of UDL (CAST, 2011) quite simply because I found so much more material on UDL. The CAST UDL guidelines (CAST, 2011) are divided into three main principles. The first emphasises providing **multiple means of engagement.** The second focuses on providing **multiple means of representation** and the last on providing **multiple means action and expression**.

The Quality Improvement programme

In 2015 when the University of Kristianstad here in Sweden asked faculty to hand in applications for quality improvement projects I applied and got the go ahead. 10th March 2016 was the start of the first of six three hour workshops where seven (originally eight) lecturers were able to learn about UDL and also tried to adapt the framework on parts of a course.

The lecturers got 25 hours each to take part in workshops during approximately a two-month period. We met every second week for the workshops, and as part of the project, the lecturers also agreed to be interviewed individually after the workshops were done. That left six hours in all for the lecturers to study and prepare for each workshop. Most of the participants said that those six hours did not cover the amount of time they used, and it was evident to me that a lot more time was given by the participants.

Since one objective with the project was to spread the concept, the participants selected mostly teach at various programmes and departments at the university, but some of them did work on the same programme. The experience of doing a project like this together with colleagues, most of them from different programmes and departments, was one of the most beneficial factors. This was later emphasised in the interviews. That being said, I also see how it might be easy for colleagues who work in the same department to take UDL one step further, without delay, directly into the work of the next semester.

The participants applied to take part in the project with the understanding that the focus was to adapt parts of a course, a curriculum for which they were responsible, to the framework of UDL. I thought it was important for the participants to have a thorough knowledge of the course they worked with, and thus hopefully had the ability to work with details as well as the course as a whole.

My approach

The core of the project was the UDL guidelines (CAST, 2011) and the participants were asked to take a small part

of their course and analyse it using the guidelines. The next step was to develop ideas about how to meet the guidelines. During one workshop the focus was information. During another workshop the focus was a lecture and a third had the focus on examinations. We concentrated on making one part of the course or one class at a time aligned with UDL.

Just as the lecturers themselves worked with trying to build scaffolds for their students, I tried to build scaffolds for them. Just as they emphasised on engagement and motivation, that was also my priority. I did not put any demands on the participants but I had high expectations. In the beginning I left them to figure out for themselves how much they needed to adjust the curricula. We are all creative people, and UDL is a scaffold which asks us questions all the time, which in turn take us one step further to widening participation.

The guidelines themselves can perhaps seem a bit much at first, and perhaps make one reluctant to change from working the same way as yesterday. I tried to let the participants individually experience UDL as a tool, and bit by bit see the next step without me having to give them an answer. All I had to do was show them the scaffolds. They are the experts on teaching their subject matter so they are of course the experts on how to make their courses universally designed. The lecturers had to mould UDL to suit their particular class or exam.

All the good teaching and experience they brought with them flew around the room as the participants discussed their courses and UDL during workshop after workshop. At every workshop they presented ideas to one another, either in front of the whole group or in smaller groups or pairs. The reason why I chose to let the project last approximately two months was that I wanted them to have enough time between each workshop to do some work on their own, but at the same time I wanted them to meet regularly, in order to form a well-functioning group, since their discussions during workshops would be a vital part of the project.

Feedback on the programme

All participants were, to various degrees, positive about using UDL. A majority of them took action during the course of the project to continue to work with UDL and/or to implement UDL in their department. UDL was seen, for example, as a means to bridge the gap between faculty and students, as a way of improving teaching methods and creating better contact with the students. The pros and cons for the students, according to the lecturers' thoughts, were the same thing, the approach to diversity that UDL brings. When it comes to the negatives for teachers using UDL the answer was clear, UDL takes time, at least in the beginning. This being said, the results showed a very positive attitude towards the concept. Lecturers told me during the workshops that they were beginning to align other courses as well to the UDL concept.

Moving forward

What I learnt from the project is the need to be concrete as early as possible. We all have different learning styles. Some people might prefer to have the whole picture before wanting to dive into the actual work at hand. So when I tried to use learning by doing, at the end of the first workshop there were, of course, questions and feelings that they did not know enough. I then recalled an art teacher a few years back telling us to hang our coats on a chair in front of us and put our shoes on the chair, and then start to sketch and paint. I used the same technique, I gave them examples but not in excess, rather to a minimum, but in various formats such as a lecture, a text and a film. I tried not to limit them with anybody's ideas. They are the experts on what is possible and I wanted them to find

ways of their own to make their courses universally designed. Balancing a project is related to balancing a course. Leading a project such as this one might be the perfect time to try to use the UDL principles yourself.

I am very grateful that the lecturers invested so much time and effort in the project, both in their individual work learning about UDL and adopting its principles. Now there are tools for lecturers in higher education to consider how they approach students' needs. When we go into a lecture hall, we switch on the light. When we plan a course or a class it could be just as obvious to use the UDL concept. We have the concept for faculty to widen participation and become even more successful teachers. I am happy to be part of an international network cooperating in meeting our students – at the door.

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