
Universal Design for Learning in Dublin City University

Introduction

Dublin City University (DCU) is committed to the ongoing improvement of the quality of the teaching and the learning experience of our students and this is a core goal of DCU Strategic Plan '[Talent, Discovery and Transformation](#)' (2017-2022). We recognise that over the lifetime of this strategy and beyond, our learners will be drawn from increasingly more diverse life stages, cultures, abilities, and circumstances. This diverse learning community challenges us to reflect on and re-imagine the student learning experience for all. DCU recognises that learning is a partnership between learners and educators, and we will employ student-centred learning design where the student voice is heard and informs the design and implementation of the learning experience. To enhance the inclusivity of the learning experience, we will promote the principles of Universal Design in the design and delivery of all our programmes. The expected changing demographics of our student body will require that we design our programmes to allow for a more flexible delivery. We will seek collaborative contributions from staff and students in the design of all learning spaces, both physical and virtual. To fulfil this commitment, we have drawn on the expertise and best practice across DCU Faculties and beyond, to implement a Universal Design for Learning (UDL) pedagogic framework to underpin our institutional approach to teaching, learning and assessment.

It is well documented that the principles of UDL have enormous potential to positively impact on the learning experience of all students, not exclusively those with disabilities or diverse learning needs. Specifically, UDL promotes the use of multiple approaches to ensure that teaching, learning and assessment is accessible to all. UDL encompasses three main principles: Multiple Means of Representation, Multiple Means of Student Engagement and Multiple Means of Action and Expression' (Meyer, Rose and Gordon, 2014).

Developing a UDL Culture

In 2017, The Teaching Enhancement Unit collaborated with Student Support & Development and Disability & Learning Support Services to engage staff and students in a dialogue about UDL, from which an agreed definition of UDL in DCU has emerged, the development of a UDL policy and establishment of a working group to build a UDL culture among staff and students. This project sought to develop, enhance and promote high quality internal communication practices between staff, faculty and learners, aligned to DCU's 2017-2022 Strategic Plan. The principles and practices of UDL allow for effective communication with all learners through the promotion of practices such as:

- **Ensuring that communication methods are accessible to all [e.g. effective teaching techniques, text materials are appropriate for text-reading software]**
- **Use of multiple, accessible instructional methods, accessible to all learners [e.g. avoidance of jargon, use of visual aids]**
- **Ensuring that course materials, notes and other resources are engaging, flexible and accessible for all students [e.g. providing material in multiple formats] (University of Washington, n.)**

This is further supported by research conducted with staff and students in 2018 to document existing levels of expertise and engagement with the principles of UDL in DCU followed by a series of initiatives which enhanced

staff awareness of UDL and provide guidance and support for the application of UDL principles to practice.

The UDL Steering group presented this research on UDL practices among staff to the [Sipping Point](#) professional development event in November 2018. This allowed for recruitment of a UDL Working Group, made up of 15 staff and a student representative from DCU. The working group devised a clear remit through the development of a Terms of Reference Agreement which outlined objectives, quorum agreement and membership. This working group has been a key driver in achieving the ambitious objectives set out by the UDL Steering Group and is the anchor for the enhancement of practices across teaching, learning and assessment for all students in DCU.

Consultation with the DCU Community

The first task of the UDL steering group was to engage in purposeful dialogue and consultation with key stakeholder groups (students, staff and faculty in DCU); research into current levels of awareness of UDL principles and if/how they are being implemented across all campuses. Consultative workshops around UDL with staff and students commenced in 2017 to develop and articulate a shared vision for UDL. Research was conducted through the design and dissemination of an online self-reporting survey and was distributed across DCU. The findings of this survey were analysed and used to inform the development of a UDL vision for DCU. The establishment of a UDL working group aimed to provide strategic direction and leadership to:

- **Design and development of a UDL policy for DCU**
- **Create tools, protocols and guidelines for staff and students to implement the principles of UDL**
- **Create awareness and understanding of UDL in practice, and disseminate across DCU**

The success of the working group was demonstrated by the achievement of these objectives in 12 months, through attendance at regular lunchtime meetings; individuals and groups collaborated on tasks, often on top of their busy work schedules. It was evident from the outset, that UDL has captured the imagination of staff in DCU. Much of the teaching, learning and assessment methods employed by staff in DCU, across all faculties, encompasses the principles of UDL. Often, this is simply described as 'good practice' and the steering group were encouraged to hear of the efforts that staff have made to ensure their teaching materials were accessible to all learners, not exclusively those with a declared disability.

Supporting Staff Development

Staff development to implement UDL principles in practice was influenced by the research findings of the scoping survey and the main areas for staff development were identified as:

- **Interactive Staff Development Workshops to enhance knowledge, skill and capacity in UDL**
- **Implementing UDL on Loop (DCUs Virtual Learning Environment)**
- **Curation and design of useful resources (e.g. infographics, guidelines, "top tips", videos) promoting best practice in UDL for staff**
- **Development of best practice UDL guidelines (online/print)**

[The National Forum Seminar Series](#), funded by the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, gives those working in higher education the opportunity to connect with colleagues and to focus on shared interests in both the research and practice of teaching and learning enhancement. The series also

creates opportunities to hear from national and international experts in different areas of teaching and learning. These seminars represent a valuable opportunity for those who learn, teach and lead in Irish Higher Education to connect with colleagues, share examples of good practice, hear about developments within their own and other institutions, and hold focused discussions on topics related to teaching and learning enhancement.

The Teaching Enhancement Unit in DCU secured funding to deliver a National Forum seminar on 22nd February 2019 on Universal Design for Learning. The aim of the seminar was to promote and implement an inclusive teaching and learning environment using principles of UDL for staff, faculty and learners in Higher Education Institutions across Ireland. The objectives of the seminar were:

- **Identify the principles and best practice approaches of Universal Design for Learning (UDL)**
- **Discuss key issues around inclusivity and UDL in Higher Education Institutions**
- **Apply the principles of UDL to promote and implement an inclusive teaching and learning environment across a range of settings – Evaluate the benefits of UDL interventions over time**
- **Establish a Community of Practice (CoP) to promote a UDL culture**

Dr Abigail Moriarty, former University Director of Teaching and Learning at De Montfort University (DMU) in Leicester accepted our invitation to present her experiences of implementing UDL at her institution over the past 4 years. This provided huge value to participants at this seminar, who used the opportunity to delve deep into their own practices while learning from the lived experience at DMU and beyond. The National Forum Seminar was attended by 38 participants, 18 of those were academics and professional staff from outside DCU, which added a richness to the conversations around the themes of the day. Participants discussed a number of issues around the implementation of UDL in their own practice, and at the institutional level which included:

- **The application of UDL principles in Higher Education pedagogy**
- **Key considerations for UDL in Higher Education**
- **The identification of UDL ‘best’ practice for educators**
- **Evaluation of the benefits of UDL for staff and learners**

Embedding UDL practices has been a huge success in DMU, Abi shared the highs and lows of implementing institutional change during her illuminating presentation. Abi’s presentation and delivery were commended by the participants on the day. One participant commented on the ‘grounded’ discussion, presented with clarity allowed for lively engagement around the room” which has inspired staff in DCU to design, deliver and lead with UDL framework for teaching and learning.

Following on from the success of this seminar, other collaborations have emerged to support staff in applying the principles of UDL in their practice. In October 2019, the Teaching Enhancement Unit was invited to present at the Autism Awareness Training for DCU staff. This was a collaborative seminar for staff to learn about initiatives and supports available through the [Autism Friendly University](#) and the [Disability and Learning Support Service](#) while using a UDL pedagogic framework to cater for all learners.

Supporting UDL in DCU

The UDL Toolkit Project was developed by the Teaching Enhancement Unit to support staff in the adoption of the three key principles of UDL within the design, development and delivery of learning materials to support students.

One aim of the TEU is to support academic staff to engage with learning technologies for teaching and learning and a central aspect of that remit is to support staff engagement with the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), namely Loop. The principal researchers are testing a toolkit to support the process of translating the UDL policy into practice with regards to the Loop learning environment. This toolkit includes:

- **An introductory text and video around UDL and how it relates to creating and managing Loop pages, resources and activities**
- **3 sample templates for Loop pages grounded in UDL principles in terms of both design and learning activities**
- **A UDL checklist for Loop**
- **An accessibility test which allows users to automatically check if a Loop page complies with digital accessibility standards**

The UDL toolkit was developed through consultation with staff in two faculties/units in DCU who informed the design of the toolkit. These units are currently testing the application of the UDL Toolkit to their practice and the researchers are preparing for a University-wide roll out to all staff in early 2020.

In October 2019, a number of staff in DCU have commenced the newly launched online delivery of the Digital Badge for Universal Design in Teaching and Learning which has been developed by AHEAD and University College Dublin Access & Lifelong Learning. This short course allows for DCU staff to establish a grounding in the principles of UDL and provide opportunities to implement UDL practices within the teaching activities they are currently undertaking to support learners. This is further supported through the use of peer triad groups, which have been purposefully designed to allow for collaboration of participants with colleagues from other institutions with various levels of UDL knowledge. Participants from DCU have committed to becoming future facilitators of this digital badge, which will allow for the dissemination of UDL practices to a wider audience within faculties and schools.

Next steps

DCU has developed a range of initiatives supported by the Office of the Vice-President for Academic Affairs, Quality Promotion Office, Student Support & Development and Disability & Learning Support and the Teaching Enhancement Unit to support staff to implement UDL in their practice to enhance the learner experience. UDL creates inclusive pedagogy by encouraging a curriculum design, delivery and assessment tailored to address the needs of all learners. By acknowledging that there is no average, UDL focuses on the needs of the individual and supports students through the variety of transitions that define their experience of higher education. UDL acknowledges the diversity in experience, culture and personality among learners and provides educators with the tools to reach out to all learners. UDL is firmly on the agenda in DCU; supported by the University Strategic vision, prioritised by University leadership and championed by staff across all faculties, the future goal is to maintain momentum and continue to support local and institutional efforts to fully embed the principles of UDL in all teaching, learning and assessment.

References

Meyer, A., Rose, D.H., & Gordon, D. (2014) **Universal design for learning: Theory and practice**, Wakefield MA: CAST

University of Washington (n.d.) [‘Universal Design’ Access College: The Faculty Room \[online\]](#) (Accessed 7th October).

[National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education](#)

[Digital Badge](#)



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Karen Buckley is an assistant professor in the School of Inclusive and Special Education at the Institute of Education at Dublin City University. With particular research interest in inclusive pedagogy, Karen is an advocate for inclusive practice to improve and optimise teaching, learning and assessment in Higher Education. She is a doctoral candidate in Maynooth University where she is exploring professional development in Higher Education.



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Dr Mark Glynn currently leads a team charged with enhancing the learning experience of students within DCU. As such Mark has direct involvement with cutting edge innovative teaching techniques and learning technologies that are being implemented throughout the University. Furthermore, Mark plays a key role in both local and national strategically important teaching initiatives. Mark has organised a range of national and international teaching and learning conferences for higher education. The main aim of his current role is to encourage and enable staff in DCU to increase their capacity to offer flexible learning.

This article appeared in the AHEAD Journal. Visit www.ahead.ie/journal for more information
