
Book Review by Alan Hurst

Creating Inclusive Learning Opportunities in Higher Education: A Universal Design Toolkit

Author: Sheryl E. Burgstahler, Harvard Education Press ISBN 978-1-68253-540-0 paperback edition, pp227.

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Opening comments

Four years ago, I was invited to review Sheryl Burgstahler's previous book '**Universal Design in Higher Education: From Principles to Practice**' which was a collection of writings about universal design in higher education (see AHEAD Journal Number 4). I found that book stimulating, interesting and directly relevant to developing, supporting and sustaining the inclusion of disabled students in higher education. So when I was asked to read and review this latest book, I relished the opportunity. Perhaps too, it was appropriate for me to undertake this task since the new book is being marketed as a sequel and a complement to the earlier book. In her foreword Ana Mari Cauce, President of the University of Washington, comments thus:

Through stories, examples and first-person accounts, Dr. Burgstahler presents a pragmatic picture of how to take specific and realistic steps to make institutions more accessible and inclusive.

This is quite an ambitious assertion to make but how far is it valid and justified? I hope that my observations will help you to make up your own mind about the validity of the claim.

Preface, Chapters One and Two: Definitions, Considerations and Developing a Framework for Measuring Progress

The book opens with a preface in which Burgstahler outlines the work of the DO-IT centre (Disabilities, Opportunities – Internetworking and Technology) and this is mentioned in all the chapters which follow. There are useful tables which indicate a career path for disabled students of Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM), the stakeholders who can promote inclusion, and a list of thirty questions about universal design which the book tries to answer and indicates the chapters where the answers can be found.

Chapter One 'Diversity, Disability and Civil Rights' puts the development of UDHE in its broader context and covers terminology, models of disability, challenges faced by students with a range of impairments and the limitations of the accommodations model.

I need to consider the next chapter - **Chapter Two 'A Framework for Inclusive Practices'** in greater detail since

this is the foundation for the remainder of the book. As she did in her previous book, Burgstahler reminds us of the origins of universal design and the work of the international architect Ronald Mace who saw it as

the design of products and environments to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialised design” (page 30).

This definition is then applied to the development of a Framework for Universal Design in Higher Education (UDHE). The items in it have been drawn from three different sources: from **Universal Design come seven principles** identified with its implementation: equitable use, flexibility of use, simple and intuitive, perceptible information, tolerance for error, low physical effort, size and space for approach and use; **three come from Universal Design for Learning (UDL)** namely multiple means of representation, multiple means of action and expression and multiple means of engagement; **the remaining four come from the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG)** which focus on the extent to which web content is perceivable, operable, robust, and understandable.

The Framework itself consists of six components: **scope, definition, principles, guidelines, practices, processes**. What is important to grasp is that all but the final chapter follow a similar structure. After presenting a list of objectives each chapter uses the components of the Framework to explore specific aspects of higher education starting with the physical environment and moving on through educational technology to learning, teaching and academic assessment, and support services.

I fear that my attempt to summarise the chapter might have resulted in the Framework looking more complicated than it really is. What I need to add is that Bergstahler makes the text more interesting and lively through her use of “Did You Know” boxes alongside the main text, diagrams, tables, simple line drawings (for example on page 28 there is the badly designed coffee pot where the handle is directly below the spout), personal stories, specific examples, and touches of humour to facilitate understanding (Her approach is a good example of using multiple means of representation within the confines of a printed paper approach to learning about UD!)

At the end of each chapter, there is an extremely useful section asking readers to reflect, apply and act on what they have learnt. This serves to emphasise the author’s intention to be practical and for the book to live up to its title **‘A Universal Design Toolkit’**.

Chapters Three to Eight: Applying the Framework to Higher Education

Physical Spaces

Chapter Three is called ‘Physical Spaces’ and is based on the idea that those who apply UDHE

anticipate the wide variety of abilities and other characteristics potential users might have, and make design decisions that both serve the needs of the broadest audience and are reasonable under given circumstances. (page 59).

With regard to physical spaces, they need to be accessible, usable and inclusive. Examples include automatically opening and closing doors, and non-fixed furniture in rooms. The chapter considers seven areas: planning policies, appearance and design, entrances and routes of travel, fixtures/furniture/equipment, Information/resources/technology, safety, and accommodations, (There is a useful table giving examples on page 63.) Attention is drawn to the checklists and other information available on the DO-IT website, the address for which is given towards the end of this review. (See my section on What I Like About the Book)

Technology

The following chapter explores technology. It notes that today, the focus has shifted from disabled students having things done for them to doing it for themselves. They can access Information Technology (IT) using Assistive Technology (AT). The creator of the worldwide web, Tim Berners-Lee, commented that

the power of the web is in its universality. Access by everyone regardless of disability is an essential aspect (page 81).

The types of limitations likely to be experienced by students with different impairments and possible solutions are explored. I liked the story about the US government's Federal Plain Language Guidelines' which were published in 2011 and which emphasised the need to be concise...in its 118 pages! This chapter includes a plethora of real-life examples of problems and their solutions. **An example which caught my attention is about the use of emojis** which at the time of writing this review are quite fashionable but as Burgstahler points out, they can impede effective communication for people with visual impairments. Adding a voiceover to describe the emoji is not all that helpful since it interrupts the actual reading and flow of the text. Towards the end of the chapter, there is a list of those who might act as advocates for accessible technology including policymakers, people with disabilities, staff in disability services offices, IT staff, procurement staff, academic staff, and publishing companies.

Teaching and Learning

Chapter Five is about teaching and learning. Like the other chapters, it opens with a line drawing and a quotation that is very relevant to the chapter's content. The one which starts this chapter is my favourite and is a quotation from a Buddhist monk – **'When you plant lettuce, if it does not grow well, you don't blame the lettuce. You look for reasons it is not doing well. It may need fertilizer, more water, less sun.'** For 'lettuce' read 'student'. I also liked the links shown between a range of 'philosophies of teaching' and UDL (page 115). UDL is also demonstrated in relation to syllabus design, and on-line courses. Concerning the latter, Burgstahler describes the negative reactions of others when a tutor was asked to say how many disabled students were following the course. His answer was that he didn't know and that his approach to learning and teaching was sufficiently inclusive to make disclosure un-necessary and irrelevant.

Teaching and Learning Services

Moving on quickly to the next two chapters, both of which are shorter than the preceding ones, **Chapter Six** looks at services supporting teaching and learning which includes admissions and recruitment, libraries, administration,

careers, housing, staff development, IT support, and student organisations and how each can be the focus of a UDHE Framework approach.

Including Accessibility and UD in Study Programmes

The focus of **Chapter Seven** is teaching about universal design. I found it interesting that when discussing the inclusion of the concept in the curriculum of many study programmes, reference is made to an organisation in the USA called '**Teach Access**' whose members include some well-known names – Facebook, Google, and Microsoft for example – all of whom are keen for the graduates they recruit to have knowledge of accessibility as it relates to their own particular specialisms in order to secure a bigger share of the market and gain increased profits for their goods and services. Products originally developed perhaps with disabled people in mind have been adopted as mainstream features; examples include texting, speech synthesising, voice recognition, movement sensors, and automatic door openers. There is also a long list of examples of the ways in which disability and access can be incorporated into the curricula of many study courses (see the tables on pages 165/66/69).

A Model for an Inclusive Campus

Chapter Eight opens with a quotation from Walt Disney '**The way to get started is to quit talking and start doing.**' This is a useful comment to begin the consideration of what an inclusive campus would look like if it is built upon the foundation provided by a UDHE approach. This involves shifting from a reactive to a proactive philosophy. A very telling anecdote concerns the potential ways of responding to the presence of a quadriplegic in a class. Some might see this as a formidable challenge whilst others would see it as an opportunity to explore knowledge and information and skills from a new angle. Following on from this, promoters and inhibitors of change are identified. Burgstahler concludes by saying,

UDHE practices alone cannot dismantle all institutional inequities, but they can contribute to a powerful movement towards change when combined with other diversity efforts on a campus.

In the very short closing chapter (four pages) Burgstahler uses a list of items identified by Oprah Winfrey around the notion of 'What I know for sure' to prompt her own thoughts – a very original and very thought-provoking end to the book. Here is just one example: '**It is good to celebrate progress, no matter how small and no matter how much remains to be done.**'

What I Like About the Book

There are **eight qualities** which stand out for me. **Firstly**, there is the logical sequence, and the structure and organisation of the chapters which make use of the Framework for UDHE as set out at the start of the book and the five-stage process of applying the model which are to:

- identify the course/service,
- consider the diverse characteristics of potential students/service users,
- integrate UDI/UDHE with evidence-based best practices,

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- plan for accommodations,
 - evaluate.

Secondly, the style of presentation is varied with the inclusion of text boxes, line drawings, personal anecdotes, and verbatim comments from a range of stakeholders. Two anecdotes come to mind immediately – the campaign known as ‘potty parity’ which was set up to address the unequal provision of lavatories for males and for females at the University of Washington, and also the dream the author had of becoming a school-crossing officer, in the USA a role normally undertaken by male pupils but eventually occupied by Burgstahler at a considerably later age and with the support of her son.

Thirdly, the many tables provide a succinct way to make information accessible easily and speedily.

Fourthly, Burgstahler’s use of humour captures interest and serves to demonstrate one of the fundamental principles underpinning effective learning, namely that learning can be fun.

Fifthly, there is the book’s flexibility of use – it can be read from cover to cover, it can be used selectively on a chapter-by-chapter basis by those with clearly-defined and specific interests for example those working in particular departments and services.

Sixthly, the book is very practice-oriented, most clearly through the reflect/learn/apply sections which close each chapter but there are also useful checklists within the text itself.

Seventhly, there are the links to other sources and resources, especially those on the DO-IT website (www.uw.edu/doiit/programs/center-universal-design-education).

Finally, in these days of increased cost-consciousness, the book is excellent value-for-money.

How the Book Might Be Improved

Without doubt, I think this book is of a very high quality and outstandingly useful and practical. However, there appear to be five aspects which need to be addressed more obviously and in greater depth.

First, the subject of formal academic assessment is relatively neglected and really could do to be developed further for example by listing possible methods of assessment and commenting on their possibilities for inclusion in UDHE. (In my own development programmes for academic staff I used a list of over thirty methods based on the Teachability programme developed in Scotland in 2000.)

Secondly, many study programmes include a period of placement/practicum/work experience/internship which needs consideration when applying the UDHE Framework.

Thirdly, I would have welcomed discussion of the consequences of study programmes which have basic, core, non-negotiable requirements which students must complete successfully in order to qualify. These are often linked to courses and study programmes which lead to access to a range of professions. Often, too, these professions have significant control over the structure, syllabus content and pedagogic approach. This is the fourth aspect which

deserves more consideration in discussions about UDHE.

Finally, although it is not surprising that much (most?) of the content derives from experiences at the University of Washington, I was rather surprised that more references were not made to others working in the same field, for example, the work of David Rose and the CAST resource. It would have been even better if the search for sources and supporting evidence had been extended to include work from outside the USA – which might have given the book greater and more immediate appeal to a wider readership and thereby increase sales in other parts of the world. (Incidentally, there is a passing mention of the Centre for Excellence in Universal Design Dublin on page 32.)

Final Comments

This is an important book and should be in the library collection of every senior manager, teacher trainer, professional developer and disability service provider. It is a further indicator of the need to look afresh at how the needs of disabled students in higher education are addressed which, itself, continues to have implications for the recruitment, roles and responsibilities of disability advisers/officers. It emphasises being proactive rather than reactive and offers a way to embed, firmly, genuinely inclusive policies, provision and practices. At the start of this review, I mentioned the claims made for the book by the President of the University of Washington. Without hesitation, I can say that they were valid. I will close my review with another quotation, this one taken from the publicity on the back cover of the book.

Sheryl Burgstahler provides a practical step-by-step guide for putting the principles of universal design into action..... Filled with applications, examples, recommendations and, above all, a framework in which to conceptualise Universal Design in Higher Education, this volume will help educators meet the design needs of all students and honour the principles of diversity and inclusivity.”

Yes, certainly, it does this. Go and buy a copy for yourself as soon as you can!



Prof Alan Hurst

Alan Hurst was Professor of Education at the University of Central Lancashire. He has published books and articles, lectured and led workshops throughout the UK and in many countries overseas, been a member of several significant and influential policy groups, chaired consultative groups for a number of research studies and projects, and been the recipient of a number of awards for his work on the creation of inclusive education for disabled students in universities. He was also a member and subsequently a trustee of Skill: National Bureau for Students with Disabilities until its closure in 2011. He continues to be a member of the Editorial Boards of the journal ‘Disability and Society’ and is a free-lance consultant contributing to conferences and staff development programmes in a number of institutions.

