
Universal Design for Learning offers strategies to develop assessments and feedback that addresses the needs of all learners

Introduction

In Issue #11 of the AHEAD Journal, I wrote an article entitled '[Universal Design for Learning is a great way to develop online content that addresses to needs of all learners](#)' to outline some basic ways to develop content that is more universally accessible. The two key points I emphasised were, first, that of the philosophy of **divide-and-explain**, where you look at the content you have, and then look at ways you can '**chunk**' it into smaller parts, and from there to make sure each chunk is fully explained. The second is to remember that you don't need to try to do everything at once, just start off with what you have already, and '**add one on**' - one more perspective on the topic, one more alternative explanation, one more alternative assessment format, or one more video. Universal Design researcher Thomas J. Tobin gives this idea a better name, he calls it '**Plus One**' but the concept is the same, just add one more alternative onto what you are already doing (Tobin, 2014).

When developing these ideas into my own work I found the following a manageable approach.

Assessment Design

When designing assessments for your students, please consider within your institution two things:

- The range of challenges (including disabilities) that students have in your class.
- The range of tools and resources that are available to assist you.

To help the students understand the purpose of each lesson (and what they will be assessed on), it can help to start each lesson by stating 3-6 learning outcomes you want the students to achieve in the lesson, and if you can link these outcomes to material they have already covered in previous lessons, all the better. In the assessments, you can then mention which learning outcome each part of the assessment is evaluating.

Consider adding the following text to each of your assessments: '**NOTE: In this assessment, I have endeavoured to ensure that both the format and the content is equally understandable and accessible to everyone, but if you are having any issues with either the format or content, please contact me**'.

To help the students with their assessments make sure you present the content in a form that will make it easy for the students to change the font type and size (so try to avoid PDF format)

Assessment Ideas

Here are a few things to consider when setting an assessment, although I don't recommend you try to do them all at once:

-
- Instead of having a single large assessment, consider breaking it down into parts, and in this way, you can provide some quick feedback after each part to help the students understand what you are looking for in more detail in your assessments.
 - Consider giving your students marks for participation in class, particularly if there is some element of that class that is on-line, this is very easy to do with discussion boards.
 - Consider giving the students a simplified sample assessment at the start of the semester, and provide a sample solution with annotations that includes advice on answering the questions and some study tips as well, that could help them a lot (and if you like this idea, you could do this with the sample exam paper as well).
 - Once a semester do an activity that gives the students some choice in the activity (it could be, for example, in terms of doing the activity individually or in groups; on-line or paper-based; in the classroom or as fieldwork; or some combination of these).
 - Give assessment instructions both orally and in written format, and remind the students frequently about deadlines and delivery dates (Consider creating a class calendar also, with lecture times, assessments, lab times, and other class activities on it).

I think it can also be a lot of fun to offer the students the opportunity to submit their work in different formats, e.g. as a document, a presentation, a video, a podcast, or an infographic, but I do think it's important that the first time you do this to start with a small assessment and build your way up to a larger assessment. This is really for the students' benefit more than for your own, a lot of them will assume that they will be able to put together a podcast (for example) a lot faster than a written assessment, but in practice, it may take them a lot more time to script and record a podcast than it would take them to type a written assignment. They also need to be reminded to focus on the marking criteria for the format they have selected, and be aware that different formats get marks for different types of activities.

Feedback Advice

In terms of feedback, it is generally agreed that if it's a choice between giving detailed responses or giving fast responses; the fast responses are better (because it's good to give feedback to the students while the assessment is still fresh in their minds). Obviously, if you can do both detailed and fast, that is the best alternative, but that is not always possible. And for very large class sizes it is worth considering if you can incorporate a peer-reviewing element into the assessments, but if you do this, you may have to teach students how to be supportive and respectful of each other and their work.

To encourage feedback to you, I would recommend creating either a real-world anonymous comments box or use a surveying tool like SurveyMonkey with one question called **'I wish my lecturer knew that I...'**, with the following description: **"Tell me anything you want, this is completely anonymous. You can say whatever you want, it can be about you, it can be about me, it can be about a module, just start with 'I wish my lecturer knew that I...'** and say what you want." These anonymous comments boxes can give you really invaluable feedback and can help make your content more open and accessible to everyone.

Accessibility Checks

If you are using pre-existing videos or audio files in your teaching or assessments, try to include a transcript, if possible. If it's pre-existing content normally if you google a distinctive phrase from the video/audio, there's usually

a transcript of it somewhere to be found on the web. If you can't find a transcript, google the phrase '**free transcription software**' and see what you get, some typical tools include: OTranscribe, Otter.ai, Sonix (sonix.ai), Trint, and Express Scribe

Finally, please consider checking your teaching and assessment materials using an accessibility tool checker where applicable. Some tools like Excel and PowerPoint offer an accessibility check, so if you select **Review** (or **View**) and **Check Accessibility** you will get feedback. For Word, select **File**, then **Check**, and finally **Check Accessibility**. For webpages, WebAIM's WAVE is excellent.

References

Gordon, D. (June 2020) "Universal Design for Learning is a great way to develop online content that addresses to needs of all learners", **AHEAD Journal 11** (ISSN 2009-8286).

Tobin, T. J. (2014). "Increase Online Student Retention with Universal Design for Learning", **Quarterly Review of Distance Education**, 15(3).

Links

Centre for Excellence in Universal Design (CEUD) <http://universaldesign.ie/>

Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST) <http://www.cast.org/>

AHEAD: 10 Ways to Ensure Online Assessment is Accessible and Inclusive <https://ahead.ie/top-10-tips-online-assessment>

Damian's Top 10 UDL Tips <http://taliessinthroughlogres.blogspot.com/p/universal-design-for-learning.html>



Damian Gordon

Lecturer, Technological University of Dublin

[@damiantgordon](#)

Damian Gordon is a lecturer in the School of Computer Science, Technological University of Dublin, and serves on the board of the National Disability Authority. His interests include Universal Design and Accessibility, Digital Ethics and Data Analytics, Instructional Design and eAuthoring. As a researcher, he has authored over 50 research papers and has contributed to several books on computer science education. Before starting as a lecturer, he worked in the computer industry; he was employed variously in the roles of Software Developer, Business Systems Analyst, Technical Team Leader and Implementation Consultant.

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