

## **Building UDL into summative assessment in a large class: Challenges and possibilities**

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### ***Abstract***

*The focus of this paper is on the use of the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework to inform the teaching and learning environment in a large class (400 students). Specifically, this paper focuses using the UDL principle of 'multiple means of action and expression' to design the continuous assessment of the module so that students could demonstrate their understanding in a variety of ways, with provision of choice built in throughout. Challenges include the time required to manage the choices students made; ensuring equity across assignment; and, creating new assignments each year to reduce the risk of plagiarism. However, there are many advantages to this work including, greatly enhanced student participation and engagement; application of concepts by student; and, increased satisfaction and sense of reward on the part of the teacher/professor.*

***Keywords:*** Large class; Universal Design for Learning; assessment.

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## **1. Description of Teaching and Learning Context**

The focus of this paper is on a final year module in a four-year BEd primary teaching programme which is one of many teacher education programmes in a large faculty of education in an Irish university. The module explores the concept of inclusion through two distinct lenses (strands): social inclusion and poverty and, inclusion of pupils with special educational needs (SEN). It is the latter strand which is the focus of this paper. This year, there were 400 students in this class. The students engage with the strand through large plenary sessions primarily as well as some workshops whereby the large class is broken down into twelve groups comprising between 25 and 40 students depending on timetabling restrictions.

The scale of the large class size presents challenges which can translate into a restricted, narrow range of assumptions on the part of the teacher resulting in the rejection of teaching approaches that may commonly be utilised in smaller class settings in favour of a more didactic approach to teaching. Some years ago, I stopped saying “*I can’t do that with a large class*” in favour of “*How can I do that with a large class?*”. I have tried to align teaching, learning and assessment to promote student engagement, participation and attendance to maximise student learning and to take account the inevitable diversity in such a large group of students. The Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework has informed how I have designed the teaching, learning and assessment environment of this strand. There are three key motivations and beliefs underpinning my approach:

1. As a teacher educator, I want to model the teaching approaches I would like to see utilised by my students.
2. The module is about inclusion and that has to be explicit in my own practices as a university teacher.
3. Enhancing the engagement and participation of my students will enhance their understanding and philosophy of inclusion as well as their skills and aptitude to enact inclusive practices.

Inclusion of pupils with SEN is explored using a ‘funnelled’ content design whereby the contesting debates and philosophies of inclusion are examined firstly at a systemic level, then at school level and finally, at classroom level. Throughout, the policy/practice nexus provides a foundation to the teaching and learning. I use the UDL principles of multiple means of representation and engagement to inform my teaching. However, it is the UDL principle of *multiple means of action and expression* which informs the assessment design which will be explored in more depth here.

I was anxious that the breadth and depth of learning in class be captured in the assessment design while simultaneously recognising that learners may wish to represent their learning in different ways. Therefore, I have tried to embed the summative assessment throughout

the module, supported by formative assessment and feedback and explicitly aligned to the content of the module. The intention is that all learners have an opportunity to represent their understanding in multiple modes (one of the principles of UDL), some of which are prescribed while others incorporate a wide range of choices for students. The following is an overview of the summative assessment design:

- Students use *Peerwise* to engage with policy and legislation. I proscribe specific documents with which they engage, supported by plenary lectures which highlight key aspects of the policy in question. Students are expected to choose one or more policies and to (a) create two multiple choice questions for other students to answer, (b) answer five questions created by other students and, (c) evaluate or comment on two of the questions they answered. Feedback is peer-to-peer. Students are anonymous to each other but I can identify them. Marks are awarded for engagement with the task (5%).
- Many of the plenary sessions include guest speakers and/or engagement with formative assessment tasks which cannot be replicated online and therefore, I value attendance at these sessions. Hence, I collect a roll at each and record the names of those who have attended and follow-up with those who did not and/or were signed in by others in their absence. Attendance at the plenary sessions is awarded 5% for at least 80% attendance and a sliding scale operates for those who have attended 70% or less.
- Students engage in three workshops (12 groups in total). The students in each group are enrolled in a *google doc* before the commencement of the workshops i.e. one *google doc* for each of the twelve groups. A detailed case study is used by each workshop group, which describes the learning profile of a primary aged pupil with SEN. The case is real and the profile developed arising from an in-depth diagnostic assessment across a number of domains. The students use the case to develop an individualised plan for the pupil. Each of the twelve workshop groups is further divided into five sub-groups (i.e. 60 sub-groups in total), each of which focus on one domain of learning of the pupil's learning profile. The individualised plan is developed in three key stages; each stage is reached by the end of the weekly 50-minute workshop. Students work on the plan in-class while I provide feedback to the smaller sub-groups and the larger workshop group when necessary based on my evaluation of the students' work on the *google doc* during the class. Following each of the first two workshops, I provide written feedback on the *google doc* for each of the 60 sub-groups and therefore, they can begin work immediately when they come to the workshop the following week. The task is completed by the end of the third week; the members of each sub-group are awarded a mark up to 10%.

- The bulk of the marks (80%) are awarded for a terminal task, which students work on independently, although I do allow at least two teaching hours to be ‘returned’ to the students which they can use to meet with their group and work on the task. Students are provided with a range of choices for this task. Firstly, they have a choice of three assignments, (a) creation of a handbook, (b) analysis of a case study and (c) construction of a lesson plan based on a detailed class of twenty students. Students have choices regarding the structure of the task also; they can choose who to work with and how many (up to five in a group). There are also choices of focus built into each of the three assignments. Each assignment must evidence understanding of policy and best practice; clear reference to the literature; justification for the inclusion of content and choice of focus; and, deep understanding of the issues, tensions and possibilities.

## **2. Literature Review**

The increasing numbers of and diversity in student cohorts in HE contexts implies a diversity of learners (Allais, 2014) regardless of the programme in which they are enrolled. Tailoring the learning experience to take that diversity into account requires a belief that all should be included as well as willingness and ability to enact that belief in a meaningful manner. Florian (2008) and Florian and Rouse (2009) identify three key assumptions about teaching children: teachers need to understand and account for difference as a normal aspect of the conceptualisation of learning; they need to overcome the notion that they are not capable of teaching all children; but, in doing so, they need to understand how to incorporate helpful information about difference in their practice and to learn new strategies for working with and through others when necessary. It is possible to assume that these three assumptions are relevant to HE also, however, this is arguably more complex in the HE context partly because of the manner in which academics view their identity. The university context is a contested space which often pits teaching and research against each other (Cartney, 2015). The role of teacher represents only part of academics’ identity and competes with their identity as researchers and administrators (Trautwein, 2018). This, coupled with the fact that HE academics are usually employed as a result of their expertise in a particular discipline rather than their teaching expertise means that the art, craft and science of teaching (Nind, Curtin & Hall, 2016) may not be understood or valued.

Two broad conceptions of HE teaching dominate. Firstly, teaching which is viewed as the job of imparting information is considered to be ‘teacher-focused’, while focusing on student experiences and learning is considered to be ‘student-focused’ (Akerlind, 2003;

Barnett & Guzman-Valenzuela, 2016). However, there may be an unhelpful binary here; it could be argued that taking student learning experience into consideration in a meaningful and effective manner requires even *more* focus on the teacher and his/her actions than is the case when an academic lectures at a class. When a class is perceived to be ‘large’ it often results in the assumption that a traditional, didactic, ‘talk-at-them’, lecture approach is the only feasible way to teach (Hornsby & Osman, 2014). Of course size matters but only insofar as it is taken into account by the teacher when designing the teaching/learning context. And, this is true of any class of any size, not just large classes.

Universal Design (UD) is a conceptual framework developed by Ron Mace in the 1980s for the design of buildings which would make them accessible to all (Rose, 2000). UDL is an adaptation of the framework for the teaching/learning context, developed by David Rose and his colleagues in the Centre for Special Technology (CAST) ([www.cast.org](http://www.cast.org)) to enable teachers to address diversity in their classrooms. It provides a blueprint for teaching which focuses on the learning experience of all students aligned with consideration of the actions of the teacher.

The principles of UDL are (Rose, Gravel & Gordon, 2014):

1. Multiple means of representation (the ‘what’ of learning). Here the focus is on the communication of key concepts and ideas of the curriculum.
2. Multiple means of action and expression (the ‘how’ of learning). This refers to the ways in which learners demonstrate their learning and understanding.
3. Multiple means of engagement (the ‘why’ of learning). Here, the motivation to learn and persistence to stay on task is considered.

Underpinning each of these principles is the provision of choice. Effectively implementing UDL is challenging in any teaching context but perhaps more so in the HE large class because of the number of students and the requirement to understand the pedagogical possibilities in that setting where many academics may not have a background or expertise in teaching. While all three principles of UDL have influenced my teaching, the focus of this paper is on the provision of *multiple means of action and expression* underpinned by provision of choice.

### **3. Reflection on practice**

Having taught this module for two years and using UDL to frame my work, particularly in relation to assessment design, the following are my reflections on the challenges and possibilities of my practice:

#### **3.1. Challenges**

- Ensuring equity of workload across assignments

*Building UDL into summative assessment in a large class: Challenges and possibilities*

- Managing my time – recording attendance; dealing with student queries; provision of formative feedback; managing elements of choice
- Upskilling on technology to enhance teaching, learning and assessment is an ongoing task.
- Balancing alignment of assessment with module content and learning outcomes.
- Ensuring fair engagement in groups determined by the teacher.
- Developing new ideas for assessment tasks each year to reduce the risk of ‘in-house’ plagiarism.

**3.2 Possibilities**

- Greatly enhanced student engagement, participation and motivation.
- Provision of choice allowed those who wanted to invest greater effort and creativity to do so, resulting in some student producing outstanding work.
- Reduces risk of plagiarism.
- Allows for explicit links to be made between discrete elements of the module.
- Greatly enhanced my motivation as a teacher and expanded the possibilities of the impact of my teaching in this module and others.
- Allows for authentic assessment aligned with development of professional teaching skills as well as academic writing and research skills.
- In the teacher education context, it allows the teacher educator to model good practice in relation to UDL and assessment design.

Explicitly building UDL into my teaching in the large class context has been invigorating, exciting and motivating for me as a teacher. In this academic year, one group of these students published their assignment supported by the university and by a not-for-profit organisation (Bolger et al., 2018). I believe their work reached this standard because the provision of choice allowed them push themselves to produce work which was creative, scholarly, relevant, original and completed to the very best of their abilities.

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