Using Universal Design for Instruction to Make Library Instruction Accessible

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Accessibility is of fundamental importance in all classrooms, including the library classroom. In this article, two disability advocates in libraries, JJ Pionke and Lorelei Rutledge, discuss the importance of taking a universal design approach to library instruction. They argue that library instructors should have accessibility in mind at the beginning of the lesson planning process, rather than retrofitting lessons and activities to make them accessible. They also outline the key steps that every library instructor should take before walking into the classroom in order to make their instruction accessible to all learners.—*Editor*

Although libraries are increasingly working to incorporate diversity and inclusion principles into instruction, people with disabilities are often overlooked. As Pionke notes, even though people with disabilities make up 15 percent of the global population, "this [is a] . . . significantly sized population that is understudied and not well understood within the library profession."[1] As a result, many libraries' strategies for supporting patrons with disabilities are limited to requiring the patron with a disability to ask for an accommodation. This strategy rests on the flawed premise of the average student, an assumption which underlies the design of many traditional educational environments. Meyer, Rose, and Gordon point out that much educational practice is based on, "the vision of the normal curve, where 'average students' can be counted upon to experience curriculum and act in an 'average' way."[2] The problem with this premise is that, for many people, disabilities emerge within a specific context that often impedes learning. In other words, the "average student" is a myth. Society generally sees disabilities as singular features of the individual. This article will suggest an alternative view championed by proponents of Universal Design educational models, which is that variation between learners should be expected and that curriculum should be developed with this variation in mind.[3]

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and Universal Design of Instruction (UDI) are models that are designed to make instruction and learning more effective for all students by eliminating unnecessary challenges or barriers.[4] UDL is a set of principles designed to guide the development of curriculum and instructional materials to better support all students and their individual learning styles and preferences, not only those students labelled as having disabilities. The core principles of UDL are that education should include multiple ways to teach or share information, multiple ways for students to express what they learn and know, and

multiple ways for students to connect to the topic in order to engage in the learning process.[5] This framework can be helpful in improving library instruction because of the multivariate nature of engagement that UDL uses. UDI is very similar to UDL but differs in that the principles are specifically aimed at instructors and how they develop materials.

BACKGROUND

Several articles have addressed the provision of library support to students with specific kinds of disabilities, such as Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)[6] and visual impairment.[7] Although these strategies are helpful in improving patron experiences in the library, many of them are reactive. In most libraries, patrons with disabilities don't get assistance unless they either specifically ask for an accommodation of some kind through their school's disability office or talk to a library administrator directly about their needs. In many cases, it can be hard for librarians to meet these needs because they may not be aware of them before an instruction session begins. Even if the teacher has been asked by the librarian whether students in the class have disabilities, the teacher may not think they can disclose that information to the librarian or the student might not have disclosed to the teacher. In addition, some students may face barriers in navigating the university or college to receive official accommodations as well. This often leaves the librarian in the dark about what educational methods will work best in a classroom.

In a study of patrons with a variety of functional differences, Pionke found that patrons had multiple frustrations during their library experiences and that these frustrations were often disability specific but had overlap between disabilities. He recommended that libraries work on "developing more empathy for the functionally diverse, empowering the functionally diverse to come forward and speak up, and incorporating universal design techniques to develop better spaces, buildings, and services."[8] Meeting these goals requires proactively integrating educational strategies to support learners who are functionally diverse, before the learners ask for accommodations or even make themselves known as needing accommodation. This is a critical idea because it puts the concept of accessibility front and center during the development of lesson plans, service designs, or building/space (re)development. Many people treat accessibility as an add-on after the initial design phase. UDL and Pionke both advocate for planning with a variety of learners and users in mind when constructing any kind of learning activity, space, or service.

WHAT IS UDI?

To place accessibility at the forefront of instruction, educators can implement Universal Design for Instruction (UDI),

which focuses specifically on designing instructional tools and experiences from which all learners can benefit.[9] Rather than being a prescriptive formula for how to design instruction, UDI is a series of principles to consider to design instruction "to be usable by all students, without the need for adaptation or specialized design."[10] These principles include:

1. Equitable use: Instruction is accessible to all learners equally, use equivalency only if there is no other alternative
2. Flexibility in use: Instruction can be used by all learners of varying abilities
3. Simple and intuitive: Instruction that eliminates complexity and scaffolds learning based on what students already know
4. Perceptible information: Information is communicated to the student in a simple and easy to understand way
5. Tolerance for error: Instruction allows for differences in how students learn
6. Low physical effort: Keep the focus on learning by minimizing physical effort
7. Size and space for approach and use: Spaces and tools should be accessible and useful to all students, no matter what their needs or abilities
8. A community of learners: Fosters engagement and communication between learners
9. Instruction climate: Welcoming and inclusive[11]

Since these principles are appropriate for multiple educational scenarios, they are also easily adaptable to library instruction. For instance, Chodock and Dolinger suggested multiple ways to apply the major UDI principles to information literacy, such as creating web-based course guides to supplement materials delivered in class in order to meet the principle of equitable use, which means making instruction useful to and meaningful for students of diverse abilities.[12]

USING UDI TOWARDS ACCESSIBLE INSTRUCTION

Integrating UDI into library instruction sessions can allow librarians to plan ahead of time to support students with a wide range of abilities and learning styles. In particular, using these principles can enable librarians to be responsive to student needs regardless of whether they are providing library instruction. Below are some ways that UDI principles can be used in library instruction:

1. Equitable use: When possible, provide multiple ways to access information in the classroom. Create handouts, LibGuides, or session recordings for students to refer to when they are working on their own. More importantly, provide those materials in accessible formats. For example, if there is a session recording, make sure it is captioned or described depending on the format.

There are many resources available to make sure that tools are accessible; the open web has great examples of how to make sure YouTube captions are correct, how to add alt-text to online images and graphics, or how to make Word documents more easily readable by screen readers.

2. Flexibility in use: Use multiple ways to engage students, such as lecture, question and answer, think-pair-share, videos, and in class activities. Using multiple methods of engagement presents material to students in multiple ways, which increases the chance that at least one of the methods will be compatible with their learning styles and preferences. For example, aim to include at least one portion of every lesson that involves individual work and one section that includes working with other students.

3. Simple and intuitive: Decide ahead of time the specific skill(s) that you and/or the teacher expect the students to learn and avoid including extra hurdles or activities that don't directly lead to students meeting these goals. For example, when teaching students how organize and format citations, do not force students to use a citation manager unless learning to use one is a key learning goal. Instead, demonstrate multiple citation tools and websites and then allow students to pick one that works best for an in-class assignment. If they do not want to use a citation manager and learning to use one is not a required goal of the lesson, do not make them do so. This gives the students choice and clearly adheres to the goals for the session.

4. Perceptible information: Minimize or eliminate jargon where possible and teach concepts in an easy-to-understand way. For example, be wary of using terms like "Boolean logic" without explaining what they mean. When possible, accompany descriptions with demonstrations of how to use tools, which can help make the meaning of the concepts you describe easier to understand.

5. Tolerance for error: Instruction should consider the wide range of student skills, knowledge, and abilities. Build in time for easy and complex questions and provide students who need more help with an opportunity to meet with you or the teacher outside of class.

6. Low physical effort: Allow students to complete assignments or participate in the way that works best for them. For kinesthetic learners, this might mean coming up and writing an answer on the board but for oral learners it might mean talking out an answer. Both ways of providing the answer are correct and should be encouraged rather than discouraged.

7. Size and space for approach and use: Check out the teaching space before you teach and adjust your lesson plan accordingly. For instance, if there are fifty students in a classroom designed to hold fifty, there won't be much room to move around so any activities that require people to move around the room should be eliminated. If students need to work together for the lesson, make sure it is possible for them to adjust the seating so that they can interact. Check out the space so you don't design a lesson that necessitates making people move up and down stairs or to different seats that may not be appropriate for their needs. When possible, make institutional changes that can solve space problems, such as making sure that the classroom furniture can accommodate all types of bodies.

8. A community of learners: Be supportive of questions, comments, and concerns. Encourage students to answer each other's questions and not just rely on the librarian or teacher for information.

9. Instructional climate: Be welcoming and inclusive. Be educated on cultural competencies, GLBTQ+ issues, and disability. Understand what boundaries are, how to set them, and how to enforce them. Boundaries are often discussed in therapeutic contexts in terms of what a person will and will not allow regarding how they are treated. In the context of libraries, an example of setting a boundary might be stating firmly to a patron that shouting is not acceptable behavior and, if they continue, they will be asked to leave. Don't allow or tolerate poor behavior in class because this shuts down conversation and alienates marginalized students.

SHORT CHECKLIST

If integrating all nine elements of UDI into library instruction feels overwhelming, librarians providing information literacy instruction can start small; even implementing these principles slowly can make a big difference to students. Below are some starting points for beginning to work on each of the UDI principles.

1. Make any objects you create (PowerPoints, handouts, videos, etc.) accessible.
2. Eliminate jargon where possible and communicate concepts in bite sized pieces. Don't assume that students understand higher order ideas, even if they are in graduate school. It might be their first time being exposed to concepts like Boolean operators.
3. Become educated about the width and breadth of humanity. Understand the issues and hurdles that students face, being sure to include first generation students, students who identify as GLBTQ+, students with disabilities, and those of differing ethnicities, races, classes, and religions.
4. Be empathetic and compassionate in the classroom.
5. Be creative and don't be afraid to experiment with how you convey information.
6. Assess your efforts so you understand what works and what doesn't. The one-minute paper is an especially easy and useful assessment. One-minute papers usually revolve around two questions: 1. What was something

new that you learned today? 2. What was something you still have questions about? It is an ideal assessment because it is short, to the point, and doesn't take much time.

7. Make your instruction accessible from the beginning rather than trying to retrofit your lesson plans.

CONCLUSION

Accessible instruction doesn't have to be scary or an onerous duty. Thinking about accessibility, especially by using an educational model like Universal Design for Instruction, can help make your instruction more effective for all learners, not just students with disabilities. Using UDI is only one tool in a whole accessibility toolbox. Perhaps the most important thing to consider is that truly accessible instruction does take forethought and being intentional in the design of lesson plans and assignments. As librarians who reach students in many different classes, we can be the gold standard of accessibility and reach all learners where they are.

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