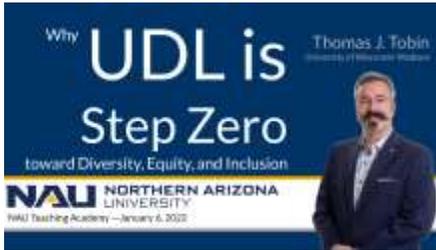


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## Why UDL is Step Zero toward Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

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It's been a rough year for everyone. On your screen are images representing three big challenges: wild fires in the west of North America (a car drives through a burning landscape), protests in support of the #BlackLivesMatters and #MeToo movements (protesters march in Los Angeles), and the profound impact of the social distancing and disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic (a man in a coffee shop wears a mask and looks wearily at the camera).

Those of us who, for years, have been calling for more inclusive online design practices in higher education found ourselves suddenly in the forefront of rushed efforts to shift in-person interactions to remote, hybrid, and online modalities. And we had to settle for “good enough” changes that allowed the bare essentials of teaching and learning to continue, writ broadly.

But the rapid shift to remote instruction left a lot of people behind and uncovered biases and “gatekeeper” beliefs that many of our colleagues cling to as markers of control or normality in a time that is anything but.

So let's get beyond the advice in the books, and beyond the “my students must have their cameras turned on” arguments. In this session, we'll construct ways to advocate for systemic accessibility changes that pay us all back in terms of reduced learner stress and anxiety, reduced instructor grading loads and worry over cheating, and increased institutional metrics like tuition income, student retention, and graduation rates.

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Here's an opening thought exercise. On the screen is an image of a graduation scene: in a crowd of graduates in caps and gowns, a college president in academic regalia gives a fist bump to a smiling graduate.

Most of us know that universal design for learning (UDL) is a way to lower access barriers to all types of learning interactions for a broad range of learners. Most campus leaders, though, continue to mistake UDL for a subset of legal accessibility requirements for serving learners with disabilities.

So, if you had five minutes with one of the leaders of your college, what message would you want to share about accessible online design or UDL?

We'll put 2 minutes on the clock for your responses; if you'd like to mute the audio while you are thinking and then turn it back on once the music is over, I will post a message in the **Chat** feature about when the music will stop. Remote friends, please share your response via the **Chat** feature; colleagues in the room, write down your response for yourself, and we'll pass the microphone. When the 2 minutes are up, we'll give voice to your responses and try to find some common themes.

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On the screen is an image of actress Shareena Clanton speaking into a megaphone during a protest organized by Aboriginal rights activists in Melbourne, Australia.

As you experienced with our thought exercise, one goal of our session today is to provide you with language, models, and practices to situate UDL within programs that your campus leaders already support: diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts, as well as bottom-line budget arguments.

In order to advocate effectively for adopting inclusive practices across our online programs, instructors, staff members, department chairs, and directors need to be able to change the mindset among our senior-leader colleagues, so that UDL is perceived as an “always fund,” mission-critical set of practices for the entire campus. Go from “it’s the right thing to do, but we don’t have time/funds/people” to “we must do this.”

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On the screen is an image of students studying together in a classroom. One student has hands on a keyboard, everyone has a laptop, and one student is pointing to an off-camera screen where another student is projecting his computer desktop.

When we say “universal design for learning,” this is what we mean: the familiar multiple means of engagement, representation, and action & expression. But when we say “UDL” to campus leaders, they end up making an essential mental mistake: they think about disability accommodations, because our methods and our concepts overlap between UDL and accommodation supports.

And if our leaders are thinking about all of the work that goes into meeting the legal requirements of making one change, one time, for one learner, when we say “everyone should adopt UDL practices,” it’s a losing argument. Why would we put in all of that “extra” work just to address barriers for what campus leaders guess is one to two percent of the students at their colleges and universities (yes, we know it’s closer to a third of learners).

So, coming with the “multiple means” argument is often seen as being a niche request from a narrow field that serves a tiny number of students.

We have to get UDL, as a concept, into the larger DEI argument.

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It’s hard to get ability-based arguments into those larger DEI conversations, too. On the screen is an image of six students, smiling for the camera. There are three men and three women, with white, black, Latina, and Asian students represented. This is the sort of diversity that comes to mind for most campus leaders—acceptance of learners from varying racial and gender-identity backgrounds.

We don’t yet collectively think of the ability spectrum as yet another top-level way of thinking about diversity (although that’s changing, thanks to autistic advocates, people in Deaf culture, and others who argue that having a separate “disabilities” office is a way of othering learners with atypical bodies and brains).

The secret sauce for getting UDL traction in our campus DEI conversations is counter-intuitive. Stop talking about disabilities—at least not first and not exclusively.

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On the screen is the image of the students studying in a classroom group again, this time with a red slashed-circle over the “multiple means of” definition of UDL. Now, as an advocate for the educational rights of people with disabilities, I have to be careful when I say “stop talking about disability.” At least stop talking about disability as the first or only framework within which we perform our advocacy.

If our campus leaders perceive us as advocating, though, for a small group of students and in a narrowly applicable sense, of course they will say “it’s the right thing to do, and it’s a low priority.”

So, how do we frame our DEI arguments to include UDL and other inclusive design principles, without erasing the visibility of groups who have been traditionally marginalized or excluded from strategic conversations?

We learn how campus leaders make decisions.

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On the screen are graduating college students in caps and gowns, throwing their caps into the air.

And this is what our senior leaders pay attention to: success stories that show our colleges and universities as places where people achieve their goals and dreams. The reason that diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts are such buzzwords right now is that inclusive language and practices help with the bottom-line budget issues that most leaders focus on first:

- **Persistence:** we want more students who are there on the first day of class to still be there to take the final exam.
- **Retention:** we want more students who take a course with me now to come back and take a course with you later, and eventually to complete their programs of study.
- **Satisfaction:** we want students to report that their experience of being learners was a supportive, positive, and meaningful one—and to tell their friends to come study with us, as well.

So, why isn’t UDL part of this argument already, in the minds of many campus leaders?

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In other words, the DEI argument that resonates most strongly with campus leaders is that none of the diversity efforts that they champion now will work unless students have access to the information, services, and people who can support them.

Access is the “step zero” that makes all of the other DEI principles actually work.

Notice, too, that we’re moving away from “accessibility” (which carries those overtones of individual disability accommodations), and we’re starting to use the language of “access”—access in terms of content, interactions, support, and people.

On the screen is a more inclusive image of college diversity: a group of 16 people from various racial, gender, and ability-based profiles: one person has a service dog, and one person uses a wheelchair. What do they all have in common? Needing access to the parts of their education that help them to feel “a part of” rather than “apart from.”

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On the screen is the type of diversity where UDL can echo our existing DEI statements. A mother sits on her couch, doing class work. She has her backpack near, a textbook open, and she is writing in a notebook. Her young son is asleep on her lap, hugging a stuffed animal to his chest.

This is the sort of student whom campus leaders focus on intently: people who could be successful learners with us, if only they were able better to balance their studies against their work, family, caregiving, and military commitments.

So, how do we frame UDL in these kinds of terms? Focus on four must-have-access types of interactions that learners engage in as part of their overall success.

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We've already talked about shifting from an "accessibility" framework to an "access" framework: one that encompasses all of our learners and the various barriers that they have in their lives: mobile-device ownership, time crunches, family and work commitments.

Talk with your campus leaders about how inclusive design practices like UDL help all of our online and technology-mediated learners to find more time for studying by giving them options for interacting with

- **Content:** This is what everyone thinks about when we talk about accessibility. This is making captions for videos, doing transcripts for audio podcasts, putting alternative text descriptions on still images.
- **Each Other:** How do learners connect with one another outside of formal course interactions? What spaces does the institution provide for collaboration, studying, and interaction?
- **The Institution:** Our colleges and universities are much more than just instructors. How do students know about and get multiple ways for access to support staff, librarians, mental-health counselors, the financial aid office, tutoring, academic advising, and extracurricular opportunities?
- **The Community:** It sounds counterintuitive, but the more we can get students away from their computers and devices, the more engaged they are likely to be. Get them connecting with colleagues in your field, people in your community who work with your concepts. Get students working on real projects, real problems, or at least communicating and hearing the stories of those using the skills and knowledge you teach. The less your online courses and interactions are a self-contained box, the better.

The image on the screen shows all four of these online-learner access interactions at once: a group of three students sits at an outdoor café table. One is working on a laptop, another is on her phone, and a third has a book in front of him.

By the way, we'll focus on these interactions and how you can apply them in our workshop session following this keynote.

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On the screen now are five faculty senate members sitting at a table with microphones. One man is speaking and gesturing.

Let's take time to do a little role-playing, using the ideas we've talked about so far. In the next three minutes, draft one of three conversations:

- In your current role, describe a UDL implementation in language that your leaders would recognize and follow.
- Assume the role of a campus leader and draft a request for an inclusive-design project to a department or unit.
- Describe a current diversity, equity, or inclusion goal at your college that would benefit from broader access.

We'll put 3 minutes on the clock for your responses; if you'd like to mute the audio while you are thinking and then turn it back on once the music is over, we will post a message in the **Chat** feature about when the music will stop. Remote friends, please share your response via the **Chat** feature; colleagues in the room, write down your response for yourself, and we'll pass the microphone. When the 3 minutes are up, we'll give voice to your responses and try to find some common themes.

[Music playing: "Sardana" © Kevin MacLeod (incompetech.com), used under CC BY 4.0 license]

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On the screen is a table laden with food. There are tortilla chips, guacamole, various salsas, roasted corn, tortillas, black beans, and a "litre margarita" in a glass jar. This is take-away food that, I hope, puts you in mind of what you'll take away from this session.

Now that you have been part of our conversation, what is one thing that you will take away and try out, whether it's an idea or a practice?

We won't play any music for this lightning-round wrap-up. Remote participants, please share *one* thing in the **Chat** feature that you will take away from our time together. Folks in the room, shout out your one thing and I'll repeat as many of them as I can.