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## **Implementing High Impact Practices to Address DFW Rates: Universal Design for Learning and Multiple Means of Expression**

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# Implementing High Impact Practices to Address DFW Rates: Universal Design for Learning and Multiple Means of Expression

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Universal Design for Learning (UDL) suggests creating lessons and classroom materials that can accommodate all learning styles and educational barriers. UDL does not necessarily mean high-tech solutions to creating accessible lessons, although technology is useful in order to increase accessibility. UDL philosophy argues that a course should provide students with a variety of methods to teach and assess students and encourage students' participation. UDL focuses on three main interconnected UDL principles. I have attempted to implement all three but the second principle has been my most recent focus and of which this paper is about.

- Principle I: Multiple means of representation to give learners various ways of acquiring information and knowledge
- Principle II: Multiple means of action and expression to provide learners alternatives for demonstrating what they know
- Principle III: Multiple means of engagement to tap into learners' interests, challenge them appropriately, and motivate them to learn

## Principle II: Multiple Means of Action and Expression:



Figure 1: Word Cloud of UDL Multiple Means of Action and Expression

According to the National Center on Universal Design for Learning:

Learners differ in the ways that they can navigate a learning environment and express what they know. For example, individuals with significant movement impairments (e.g., cerebral palsy), those who struggle with strategic and organizational abilities (executive function disorders), those who have language barriers, and so forth approach learning tasks very differently. Some may be able to express themselves well in written text but not speech, and vice versa. It should also be recognized that action and expression require a great deal of strategy, practice, and organization, and this is another area in which learners can differ. In reality, there is not one means of action and expression that will be optimal for all learners; providing options for action and expression is essential.<sup>1</sup>

Keeping this in mind, in an attempt to address high DFW rates in my courses, I have attempted to offer my students options in not only showing what they have learned, but also ensuring my support along the way. Some of the tactics I have used have been:

1. Helping students understand their learning styles using [www.vark.com](http://www.vark.com)
2. Holding regular as well as virtual office hours using DimDim – students “chat” to me, talk online like a telephone, videoconference and we can use a whiteboard and I can also show them how to do things on my computer etc. Many students who normally were unable to come to my office hours or who felt intimidated used the virtual office hours a lot.
3. Peer editing/evaluation – which helped those with different learning styles to organize and present their work in as accessible format as possible.
4. Offering flexible assignments with varying due dates, different formats and options for presentation. For example, instead of the traditional research paper, book review and presentation, I give students the option to complete:
  - Lesson Plans (see attached assignment instructions)
  - Project Proposals (see attached assignment instructions)
  - Online presentations, posters, group presentations, student-made films etc.
  - Weekly Journals (instead of reading summaries)
5. Allow students to use various multimedia to present their work, e.g. Blackboard, [www.WordPress.com](http://www.WordPress.com), PowerPoint, [www.prezi.com](http://www.prezi.com) etc.

### **Lessons Learned:**

- Giving students options can sometimes be overwhelming for them. Therefore it is important to have explicit instructions, examples, grading rubrics and be

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.udlcenter.org/aboutudl/udlguidelines/principle2>

easily available for questions. Giving students too many options does not work, but being open to options proposed by students is good.

- Explaining the reasoning behind UDL becomes vital in order for students to become engaged and to buy in to the course structure.
- Give students time to learn the appropriate technology, and allow students to hand in paper copies of their assignments if possible so that those students without access to technology are not penalized.
- Presentations are especially difficult for many students and the online option became very popular. The challenge was to get students to actually go online and visit other students' online sites. Therefore giving a grade for commenting/evaluating students presentations was helpful.
- In general, students responded very well to the alternative assignments as long as I was very clear upfront about expectations. Some at first were very suspect of me giving them so much leeway, but became very supportive by the end of the course.

### **Example of Lesson Plan Assignment**

Each student had to choose one autobiography on which to create a lesson plan and meet strict criteria for the assignment. The criteria was as follows:

1. A single-spaced title page, containing:
  - List of contents.
  - Name of work being taught and if relevant, the title of class being taught (i.e. the theme/topic/issue/question of the class).
  - Description of type and level of the class. This assignments assumes that this is a 2 hour class for university students, but decide which year the students are in, the format of your class (seminar, lecture, a combination of both, or any other format deemed appropriate). This has consequences for the type of teaching and background preparation required.
  - Goals for your course/class (this can be skills and knowledge students will gain – make sure your lesson ultimately meets these goals).
2. A double-spaced one page summary of the autobiography.
3. One to two page (double-spaced) description of two seminal supplementary texts pertaining to the book containing:
  - One text from the HIST387 course readings that would best supplement this text.
  - One further text in correct bibliographic form. This is a book chapter/article that students must read that will develop the theme addressed in your class or in the book. This should prepare students for further debate in your class. They should not duplicate any readings currently assigned for HIST387, but can be primary sources, journal articles or books.

- Two paragraphs describing these seminal texts (one per text). Also show why these three texts are useful to students and to the goals of the class. These texts do not have to be interpretations of the autobiography you chose.
4. Breakdown of your approach, containing:
    - Minute by minute description of your class/classes (i.e. say how many minutes you intend to spend on each activity. This will be different depending on whether you decide to break up the 2 hours into lecture/seminar format etc.).
    - Main points you would like to cover.
    - Suggested discussion questions and description of activities.
    - Any lecture (in an understandable point form).
    - Clear description where any of the number 5 and 6 below would appear.
  5. Description of the use of other media containing:
    - A description of how you would use at least one other medium. Please, do not just suggest showing a film. Do a scene, or explain the relevance and significance of a film. You also might try visual arts, or transposing a text into another medium, such as staging a section of it.
    - An analysis of why this media is useful and how it fits in with your goals for your lesson plan.
  6. List of potential assignments on the autobiography, containing:
    - One paper topic with suggested length and a brief analysis of how the assignment contributes to your classroom goals.
    - Exam essay question, including a brief synopsis of points to be included in an answer.
  7. A bibliography of all sources consulted
    - Include all sources used and any other sources that you used that you did not mention in any of the above items (i.e. such as websites, teaching manuals, background readings etc).

A grading rubric was used to grade the assignment and given out to students with the assignment instructions.

## **Example of Development Aid Proposal Instructions**

You are a development aid organization that is applying for a \$100,000 grant for five years (for a total of \$500,000) to address a particular disease that is prevalent in Africa. The choice of diseases are given out in class. You will need to put together a development proposal that includes the following information.

1. Title (your title should indicate which disease you are doing and your focus)
2. Part I: Disease History and Profile (basic explanation of disease, statistics. You should also mention its causes, treatments and anything else you think is pertinent) (approx 1-2 pages).
3. Part II: Studies conducted on the Disease (i.e. literature review of past and present research on the disease) (approx 3 pages)
4. Part III: Project Proposal (which should include a project overview, goals, resources needed, phases of the project – i.e. a yearly breakdown of your seven year plan (approx 5 pages)
5. Part IV: Seven-Year budget breakdown of your proposal (there can be many things to consider when doing your budget, depending on your plan. Think of things such as salaries, set-up costs, drug or goods costs, office space, postage, bank interest earned, transportation costs etc). Remember often the best solutions are the most simplest. (approx. 1 page)

\*\*\*An example of a development proposal is made available for students on the Blackboard site. This is just a guide and students can of course waver from the format.\*\*\*