Teaching Culturally and Linguistically Diverse International Students in Open and/or Online Learning Environments: A Research Symposium

Teaching as Coevolving: An Approach to Online Course Design

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Abstract

The growth of online learning in higher education, over the last decade and its exponential development due to COVID-19, has opened up exciting possibilities for instructors by providing access to new modes of course design not possible within the constraints of a traditional classroom. One approach to enhancing the student online learning experience is Universal Design for Learning (UDL), in which students are able to engage with the material in a manner appropriate to their current situation. By using this approach, courses can be designed in ways that allow students to take personalized paths to achieve the course outcomes. The purpose of this presentation is to outline the lessons learned for designing online courses using UDL. The courses used courses provided multiple entry points for learning, so that students, with all their diversities, can adapt activities to fit their needs, emergent abilities, and interests. UDL can be expressed in four sub-principles: 1) providing multiple means of representation, with spaces for unanticipated possibilities to emerge; 2) providing multiple means for students to express what they know and what they have learned; 3) offering ways into, and explorations beyond, planned experiences; 4) permitting and nurturing specialized interests of individuals, while enhancing possibilities for the collective.

Keywords: universal design for learning, teaching online, teaching diverse students

Introduction

Since 2016, 10 online courses have been taught (to about 200 students) at the Werklund School of Education. The experience has reshaped this author's teaching in all senses of the word. The move from face-to-face to online delivery is not one of replication, but one of transformation. This understanding has profoundly influenced current teaching philosophy, which this author frames teaching as coevolving. From this sense, it is vital to afford entry points, such that students, across all their diversities, might be able to adapt activities to fit their needs, emergent abilities, and interests. Students are not made to do the same thing. At the same time, it is not sound pedagogy to all them to do their own things. What makes this design outstanding is that it invites students to engage in a manner appropriate to their current situation, such as taking personalized paths, while achieving the course outcomes. To do this, the instructor must be attuned to the movements of the class and adapt the design as the need arises, thus: teaching is coevolving. As having choices is paramount, these teaching practices draw insights from Universal Design for Learning or UDL, and can be articulated into four sub-principles: 1) providing multiple means of representation, with spaces for unanticipated possibilities to emerge, 2) providing multiple means for students to express what they know and what they have learned, 3) offering ways into, and explorations beyond, planned experiences, and 4) permitting and nurturing specialized interests of individuals, while enhancing possibilities for the collective.

UDL Principle 1

Two strategies can be drawn from the UDL principle of providing multiple means of representation, with spaces for unanticipated possibilities to emerge. First, record captioned, (see La, Dyjur and Bair, 2018 for reasons why) personal introductory videos every week, and place them on the D2L homepage (as well as other e-authoring content). Although important course information is always provided in the course outline, these videos remind students of key dates and deadlines. It is also important to highlight student-generated content from the previous week that draws their attention to key notices in the upcoming readings. These videos can be used to create a nurturing and motivating climate, where meaningful communication thrives between the instructor and the students. The following example is an introductory video for Week 2 of this author's online course EDER 669.73 (Language Teaching and Technology). Second, record videos that highlight and summarize readings, as well as offer insights into the course design. For example, in addition to the general gist of the reading, this allows the instructor to discuss why particular material has been selected for the students, what the take-away should be, and how the assigned reading aligns with the course outcomes. Students draw upon these videos and offer their own unique interpretations of the readings, often different from that of the instructor, which opens the space for unanticipated possibilities to emerge. Note that traditionally, videos are used to offer information or to build relationships (Anderson, 2008). However, when instructors offer content while sharing personal experiences and stories, purposeful communication (synchronously and asynchronously) grows (Aragon, 2003), and affords new possibilities.

UDL Principle 2

The second UDL principle, providing multiple means for students to express what they know and what they have, is interpreted as offering choice and variety to reduce anxiety and increase engagement (Davis, 2009). Assessment should be designed so that it aligns with the learning outcomes, supports strategic and organizational abilities, and allows students to express acquired knowledge and skills in diverse ways. For example, students are offered the choice to work together on a project, or individually. It is important to avoid allocating a heavily weighted component, and, instead, offer students choices about what medium they want to use in response to the assessment activities.

UDL Principle 3

Findings from this author's research have highlighted the benefits of using videos in class (Sabbaghan, Pelgar, & Tweedie, 2019). When these findings are paired with the third UDL principle of offering ways into, and explorations beyond, planned experiences, it was found that videos not only lower affective filters, but also provide opportunities to offer multimodal feedback (or veedback). This mode of feedback is superior to other methods, as indicated by the positive responses of students. When providing video feedback to student assignments, instructors should first read/watch/listen to the response. If the response is text-based, instructors should use D2L's annotation tools, or a browser plug-in called Liner, to highlight the text they want to speak to. Instructors should then make a video, where they talk through the highlights they have made. If the response is a video or a podcast, instructors should first make note of the time indexes they want to talk about, and then make a screen-cast, where they replay the areas of interest and offer feedback.

UDL Principle 4

The final strategy drawn for the UDL principle, of permitting and nurturing specialized interests of individuals while enhancing possibilities for the collective, involves course work assignments. The idea of the non-disposable assignment came about from frustration voiced by students who were spending enormous amounts of time completing assignments that were graded and filed away, never to be looked at again, and thus, were disposable. Therefore, a non-disposable assignment policy at the design level was implemented. Wiley (2013) first introduced the idea of creating assignments that allowed students to work in any medium they prefer, which leads them to invest in what they do. A non-disposable assignment focuses on personalized learning by allowing students to work on an authentic problem in their context. They are artifacts which students value, feel connected to, and are proud to share with their peers. To implement a non-disposable assignment, instructors should provide a clear description of the assignment, and ask students to revise and remix the core instructional materials of the class with their own original work, in order to create an artifact (in any medium) on a topic. Students can then share their artifact with others on the discussion forum (instead of uploading to Dropbox). Students are then invited to review each other's work, provide constructive feedback to their peers, and revise their own artifacts.

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