

The Alphabet Soup of Universal Design

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The term universal design (UD) is becoming familiar to those involved in post-secondary education, including the Dawson community. But which universal design are we talking about? Is it just plain UD, or is it UDI, UDL or even UDE? Do all universal design approaches share the same principles, or even respond to the same needs? Let's take a look at the various jumbles of letters and what they mean.

Universal Design (UD)

The term universal design was first coined in the mid-1980s by the architect Ronald L. Mace. He defined universal design as “the design of products and environments to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design.”

https://www.ncsu.edu/ncsu/design/cud/about_ud/about_ud.htm A key feature was designing products to be accessible from their inception, without the need for retrofitting later.

A familiar example of one of his seven UD principles, “equitable use”, is a door that slides open as an individual approaches. This is not quite the same as the automatic door opener, located at Dawson's de Maisonneuve Street entrance.



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Those working in Plant and Facilities, or teaching in the Interior Design program, may find this discussion about architecture interesting but the rest of you must be wondering what any of this has to do with teaching, so here is the link to education.

Universal Design for Instruction® (UDI)

UDI (not to be confused with the contraceptive device, the IUD), developed at the University of Connecticut in the early 2000's, added two additional principles to Mace's model, to provide a framework for college faculty to use when designing or revising their courses to allow accessibility for all students, including students with disabilities, and to minimize the need for accommodations and retrofitted changes.

<http://www.udi.uconn.edu/index.php?q=content/universal-design-instruction-module>

From a UDI perspective, the principle of "equitable use" means that instruction is designed to be useful to and accessible by people with diverse abilities. There was a time when the AccessAbility Centre at Dawson would request that teachers assist students with disabilities in identifying a note-taker who could provide them with a copy of their course notes. Several faculty went so far as to provide their own course notes upon request. Much like the door opener on de Maisonneuve, this note-taking accommodation was not intended for everyone, and it often made the recipients visibly different from their peers. Analogous to the automatic sliding door of UD, more recently faculty have begun to post lecture notes, before or after class, on Léa or Moodle. Making the notes available in the same form to all students, including those with disabilities, students whose primary language is not English, and students wanting to preview the upcoming class if notes are posted ahead of time is but one example of what is already being done at Dawson to support inclusion of diverse learners.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL)

"UDL provides a blueprint for creating instructional goals, methods, materials, and assessments that work for everyone--not a single, one-size-fits-all solution but rather flexible approaches that can be customized and adjusted for individual needs." <http://www.udlcenter.org/aboutudl/whatisudl> UDL primarily differs from UDI in that it focuses on pedagogy and learning. In the past several years, UDL has gained momentum in postsecondary institutions in Quebec, as can be seen by Dawson's UDL Community of Practice and the Chantier 3 project described in the most recent Dawson News Digest.

Respecting UDL principles facilitates flexibility in: the ways information is presented, how students demonstrate knowledge and skills, and in the ways they are engaged. Returning to the example of the online posting of lecture notes by faculty, and keeping in mind the variability of learners, a teacher could enhance student learning by including information in a variety of formats (text, images, and multimedia) in their notes.

However, let's not forget about the principles of UDI and the need for accessibility for all students, including students with disabilities. When notes are posted online, it is a good idea to make these available online in several formats, including Microsoft Word, allowing for access through screen readers and other technologies.

So Which One Should It Be?

Any variation of UD has the notion of accessibility as a principal element. The discussion should no longer be about disability but about learner variability. Integration and providing reasonable accommodation are no longer the primary goals; rather we are striving for the inclusion of all students. To best achieve this at Dawson College we need to turn towards a universal design paradigm, one that incorporates the best of UD, UDI, UDL and whatever other UD model one may come across and feel comfortable implementing in their teaching.