Making Learning Accessible: The UDL Task Force at Vanier

The Universal Design for Learning (UDL) Task Force had its first official meeting in January 2017. Our members came together from different departments and disciplines throughout the college, aiming to work as a collective. Our mission is to develop a deep understanding of UDL; to determine how best to implement UDL principles and practices into our own teaching; and to make tools and resources available for all Vanier faculty to facilitate the integration of UDL into their courses. As a diverse group of teachers, we each bring our own disciplinary understanding and experience to the UDL Task Force, along with a shared desire to make our teaching accessible to all Vanier students.

Members of the Task Force are currently working on a UDL Toolkit that will be available to all Vanier faculty members. This toolkit will have articles, classroom exercises, how-to suggestions, and examples of UDL that have already been successfully implemented. It will also have links to different UDL-centred publications, as well as UDL organizations that promote an accessible learning classroom environment. Making learning accessible to all students is the primary focus of UDL. To accomplish this objective, we need to recognize the variety of learning styles our students have, and determine what we can do to change or modify our own teaching to best reach the students in our classes.

Changes in the student population, in terms of ability and experience, have been observed over the years. These observations have created the need for a UDL-centered classroom environment (Edyburn, 2010). The purpose of a UDL-centred curriculum is to help students master their learning, becoming expert learners within their areas of study. A UDL focus in the classroom is also meant to encourage students to take ownership and responsibility for their learning (CAST, 2011). Putting students at the center of course design will ensure that we have incorporated some of the fundamental elements of UDL. These elements are the guiding principles of UDL ideology. They are:

1. To provide multiple means of Representation – the 'What'
2. To provide multiple means of Action and Expression – the 'How'
3. To provide multiple means of Engagement – the 'Why' (CAST, 2011).

The toolkit that the UDL Task Force is currently curating will offer an abundance of tools to faculty. Teachers will be able to peruse, assess, and implement within their classrooms. The following examples from members of our Task Force offer practical, tangible, UDL-centred practices that have been tested within our own classrooms. We encourage you to transfer them to your classroom experience, and experience for yourselves the impact on student engagement.

In Tamara Brown's Animal Health Technology class, students are given the opportunity to submit the introduction and thesis statement for their final project for a small summative evaluation as well as for a deeper, more extensive, formative assessment. This enables students to get timely feedback from their teacher, determine if they are on the right track for their larger project, and have the opportunity to revise their work based on comments from the teacher. These factors contribute to a UDL classroom climate that encourages open and accessible dialogue with the teacher, and they offer students multiple opportunities for assessment –in this case both formative and summative – and a resubmission if desired.

At the beginning of the semester, Tamara uploads detailed rubrics for all assignments and projects along with her course outline. These rubrics ensure that students are aware of the grading scheme for their assignments. This knowledge helps reduce stress and anxiety and clarifies teacher and student expectations. Moreover, students use the

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rubric while working on assignments. Clear, guided instructions and explicit expectations are fundamental to accessible learning.

In Psychology, Shelley McColl has shown students how to use PowerPoint's Outline view, which offers a summary of every slide. It is a helpful reminder for students when they want to review, study, or follow along during class. The Outline view is found under the View heading in the PowerPoint toolbar. It is also useful for designing review sessions to activate students' prior knowledge, as well as for providing an outline for the class so that students know what will be covered that day.

Another UDL strategy employed by Shelley is to engage students kinesthetically. To demonstrate the connectivity of neural synapses, she asks everyone to stand up and form a human chain around the classroom. The students stand shoulder to shoulder, each representing a neuron. A message is then passed from "neuron" to "neuron," until the last student in the line performs an action. This level of physical engagement is an important UDL principle. Not all students are able to master learning while sitting at a desk, passively listening to a lecture. Building connections and deepening learning happens when we engage students through various means of representation of our course content.

For one of her Biology classes, Lissiene Neiva asked students to find a seed in their kitchen. This project began as a brainstorming session in class, as students discussed various foods that start from seed. They then planted the seed and took pictures as the seed grew, thus documenting the development of their seedlings. The written component of the project required students to reflect on how course content connected to their observations of plant growth. This kind of project, where learning includes a tangible component, is of great value to all students.

Nathalie Seguin, a Nursing teacher, is likewise applying UDL practices in her classroom. The Nursing department uses a variety of simulation-based activities to facilitate students' integration of course content. Such activities include the use of patient simulators (mannequins), standardized patients (actors), lifelike virtual environments, task trainers and role-playing. With the recent acquisition of high fidelity mannequins and two simulation suites, students have the opportunity to be immersed in realistic clinical experiences within a safe learning environment. The focus of these simulated experiences is the transfer and application of knowledge, not formal evaluation.

In simulation, the teacher's role is that of a facilitator, guiding the students to achieve their learning objectives. This is done by creating a comfortable environment where participants are encouraged to self-reflect, self-correct and search for evidence-based solutions. Making mistakes in this type of learning environment is seen as an opportunity to learn and grow, and not ever seen as a failure.

Mastery of learning through multiple means of representation, engagement, and expression is the goal of a UDL-centered learning environment. The examples shared in this article are meant to encourage and promote the implementation of ideas and activities that can lead to greater student success in all of our classrooms.

For more information about the work of the UDL Task Force, please visit http://www.vaniercollege.qc.ca/psi/pedagogy/universal-design-for-learning-task-force/

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References

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Edyburn, Dave. (2010). Would you recognize universal design for learning if you saw it? Ten propositions for new directions for the second decade of UDL. Learning Disability Quarterly, 33(1), 33-41. https://doi.org/10.1177/073194871003300103

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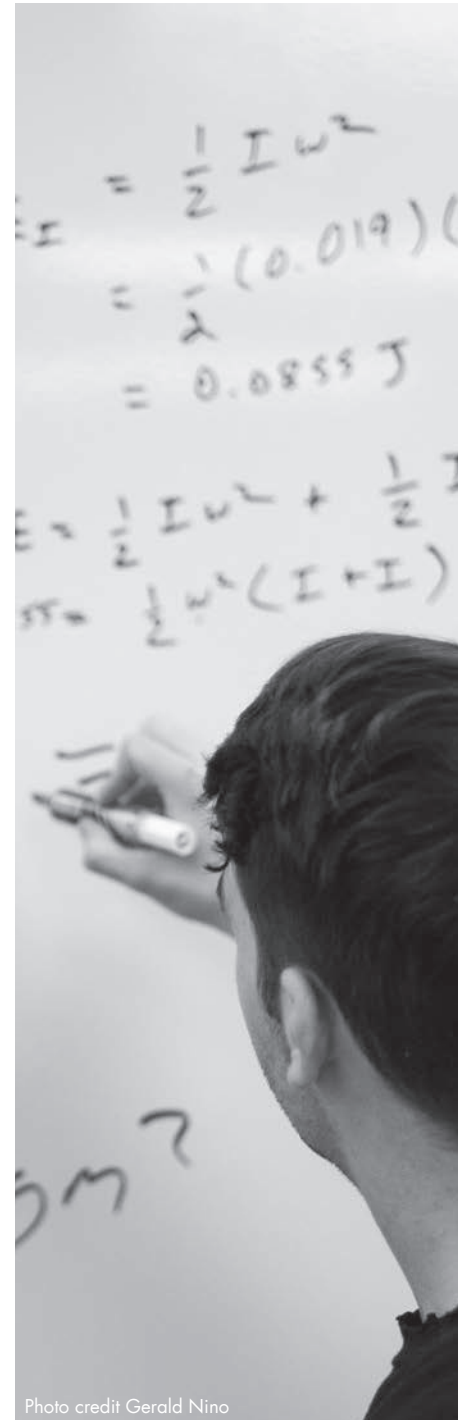was until recently the Coordinator of Commerce and a member of the UDL Task Force. As of January 2018, she is the Coordinator of Pedagogical Support & Innovation.