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Universal Instructional Design: Tools for Creating an Inclusive Educational Experience

Stacey Banfield-Hardaway

The number of students with disabilities on college campuses in the United States is growing. To address the needs of these students, all campus community members must evaluate the degree to which the campus environment and social climate are welcoming to students with disabilities. The barriers students with disabilities face can be seen in the classroom, academic and administrative buildings, and in relationships among campus community members. Universal instructional design is an approach to address the needs of students with disabilities and deconstruct prejudice against them.

College and university students around the United States have diverse needs and social identities. The many cultures and identities represented on a college campus signal the responsibility of faculty, administrators, student affairs educators, and students to identify the necessary skills and knowledge to enhance and support the educational experience. Faculty, staff, and administrators must evaluate the social climate of the community and the ways in which the tensions between students with differences affect their learning. The many differences among students include learning styles as well as physical, developmental, and psychological abilities. Recently, policies implemented by the federal government have opened the doors of the university to an increasing number of students with learning, physical, and mental disabilities.

Students with disabilities are frequent targets of discrimination because they are seen as abnormal or deficient (Myers, 2008). The combination of this discrimination and classroom stress affects their graduation rate (Johnson & Fox, 2003). Universal instructional design (UID) is a strategy that makes the educational experience more inclusive and supportive of students with all learning needs and ability levels (Evans, 2008). UID provides campus officials with instructions for creating equitable access and deepen the communal connection to assist students

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through the learning experience, regardless of their ability level. Furthermore, implementation of UID can create learning environments that are more multicultural and socially just (Myers).

Disability

According to the World Health Organization, a disability is “any restriction or lack of ability to perform an activity in the manner or within range considered normal for a human being” (Livingston, 2000, p. 184). The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) upholds the parameters of the term *disability* and was signed into law in 1990 to end discrimination of individuals with disabilities in the workplace. The act enforced “public buildings, work environments,” and other institutions be made accessible to people with “physical, visual, and hearing impairments” (Livingston, p. 183). The ADA recently expanded the legal definition of a disability to include any individual who is prohibited from performing any major life activity (Blank & Gage, 2009). This adjustment means that millions of people in the United States “will be added to the ranks of those considered ‘individuals with a disability’” (Blank & Gage, p. 5). With the passage of the most recent iteration of ADA, higher education institutions have a greater responsibility to cultivate a barrier-free learning environment.

Over the past 20 years, the number of students on college campuses who have a disability has tripled (Myers, 2008). Despite their increased presence on campus, however, students with disabilities are still less likely to complete their education than their peers without disabilities (Johnson & Fox, 2003). As the growth of this student group continues, faculty and staff must learn about the needs, rights, and expectations of students with disabilities in order to fulfill their educational goals. One way to ensure this achievement is to tend to disability issues with the diligence that other multicultural issues receive (Myers, p. 292).

Ableism

Although universities incorporate multiple social identities into their work promoting socially-just campus climates, ability level is often at the bottom of the list or left out completely (Myers, 2008). The omission of ability from identity-based multicultural education can be explained by the long-established perspective that to possess a disability is to be deficient, particularly in academic environments. The perspective described here is founded upon ableism: a prejudice or form of discrimination against individuals with physical, mental, or developmental disabilities (Livingston, 2000), “characterized by the belief that these individuals need to be fixed or cannot function as full members of society” (Castaneda & Peters, 2000; Smith, Foley, & Cheney, 2008, p. 304).

Ableism is a multifaceted phenomenon and one can see very real examples of it on a college campus. It is perpetuated by the invisibility of students with disabilities in the public sphere. When examining campus offices, one can see the narrow spaces between walls and furniture, which are difficult to navigate for an individual in a wheelchair or with a walker. Campus transportation systems are frequently cited as another structural example of ableism because they require certain physical abilities and, by so doing, exclude or single out those who “cannot meet those demands” (Livingston, 2000, p. 184). Other examples include course syllabi; many professors instruct students with learning disabilities to take tests in another location. The able-bodied assume that the person with the disability constantly needs help in relationships among faculty, staff, and students with disabilities (Johnson, 2006). These four examples illustrate the degree to which students with disabilities are “singled out” (Johnson & Fox, 2003, p. 4), creating an opportunity for stigmas. Stigmas such as: “Students with disabilities are admitted because of special accommodations,” or, “Students with disabilities are less deserving of their place in the community” are present among stakeholders around campus. In addition to causing further separation, these attitudes epitomize the focus on individuals with disabilities as abnormal.

Understanding Models and Perspectives of Ableism

The negative, accusatory sentiments described above exist, in part, because the literature and practice about disabilities are based on the medical model. This model defines a disability as an impairment that can be treated and cured with medical interventions or surgery (Evans, 2008, p. 13). In the educational context, the medical model suggests that college level education is not realistic for individuals with disabilities, implying that they are incapable of meeting the academic standards. Although medication or surgery may enhance the quality of life for a student with a disability, it will not necessarily dismantle the barriers to their learning experience. To accomplish that task, the spotlight must turn to the interaction between the individual and the environment where learning takes place (Evans).

Models Addressing Students With Disabilities

There are two models that take the individual and the environment into consideration—the social justice perspective and social construction model. Taken together, these models explain the source of the disability and address the systems in place that obstruct student learning.

Social Justice Perspective

The social justice perspective addresses the environmental and individual compo-

nents of disability. Through this perspective the environment creates “the source of the disability” and is the focus for the interventions that enable equitable education for the learners in the environment (Evans, 2008, p. 16). The social justice perspective goes beyond acknowledging the barriers in the external environment by ensuring that students themselves are valued. According to Evans, “[k]nowing how to create an inclusive environment is a necessary but not sufficient condition for working effectively with students with disabilities. Educators must also understand the students themselves” (p. 11).

Social Construction Model

This model dictates that disability is defined by how others react to bodies that do not fit the expectations of the environment (Livingston, 2000). By recognizing the oppression present within the environment, student affairs educators can begin modifying it to suit all learners in the community. Therefore, the model places the responsibility for change in the hands of the people who control the external environment (Johnson & Fox, 2003), not those adversely affected by an environment that does not meet their needs.

Both the social justice and social construction models suggest that change needs to occur in the structural and relational ways campus stakeholders build learning environments. In working to eliminate ableism on college campuses, ability, as an identity type, needs to be incorporated into the work of multicultural education (Smith et al., 2008).

Hackman (2008) stated that students with disabilities are experiencing educational barriers depriving them of educational opportunities to which their peers have access. UID is a philosophy that works to engage students in the learning process, regardless of their ability level, age, gender identity or expression, race, religion, ethnic origin, language, social class or sexual orientation (Barajas & Higbee, 2003).

Application of Universal Instructional Design

UID was born out of a concept in the field of architecture called universal design. The Center for Universal Design describes it as the “design of products and environments to be usable by all people to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptable or specialized design” (Center for Universal Design, 1997, p. 1 as cited in Myers, 2008). Universally designed environments are increasingly present in the public and private sphere. Some examples are “curb cuts on sidewalks, closed caption text on television screens, [and] electronic doors for entryways to buildings” (Scott, McGuire, & Embry, 2002). In the academic setting, universal design principles are applied under the name UID with the intention to

create inclusive and flexible curricula and programs that are welcoming to all students (Myers). UID promotes the planning for and delivery of instruction while keeping in mind the diversity of the learners “without compromising academic standards” (Scott, et al.). The principles of UID are:

- a. Creating welcoming environments,
- b. Identifying essential components [of curricula and programs],
- c. Communicating clear expectations,
- d. Providing constructive feedback,
- e. Exploring learning supports,
- f. Designing service methods that consider diversity,
- g. Creating multiple ways for students to demonstrate understanding, and
- h. Promoting interaction among faculty, staff, and students. (Cunningham, Souma, & Holman, 2008, p. 338)

The principles of UID can be applied to teaching in the classroom as well as in student support services, such as academic advising. In either setting, integrating the principles of UID into everyday practice normalizes the discussion and acknowledgement of individual needs and developmental readiness. Shaw, Kampsen, Broad, and Albecker (2008) believed that UID will enhance student engagement, as well.

As previously mentioned, UID can be applied in multiple ways. Advising services, however, epitomize the capabilities of UID. When an advisor practices universal design, it fosters a tightly knit network of student support that is more inclusive (Shaw et al., 2008). Because advising entails a hub of resources, increasing access and inclusion in advising expands a student’s access to campus services. To use UID to its fullest capacity, advisors also need to understand student development theory, multiculturalism, and disabilities (p. 233). Furthermore, advisors need to be attentive to the physical space in their offices, their web space and the alternative and flexible technologies available. In keeping with the first principle of UID, advisors need to create a welcoming space in their office that is well-lit, centrally located, accessible for a walker or wheelchair, private and comfortable (Cunningham et al., 2008). The second principle of UID can be implemented by developing a document with the student that clarifies expectations and responsibilities of both the student and advisor. While this is just one example of the context in which UID can be applied, it illustrates the holistic focus on the well-being of the student and his, her, or hir learning while creating an inclusive environment.

Critiques of Universal Instructional Design

Although there are clear benefits, some scholar-practitioners are unsettled with UID as a tool. Hackman (2008) suggested that UID accomplishes the goal of

sending the message that educational accessibility is a significant undertaking. It does not, however, “do a good enough job of providing a systemic critique of issues of power and privilege within which those accessibility issues arise” (p. 35). To accomplish this, there needs to be a focus on the community’s knowledge about and dedication to understanding those issues and working to debunk the privilege Hackman mentioned. On a structural level, UID needs to be modeled at all levels of the administrative hierarchy by creating a place at the table for employees with disabilities so their voices may be heard.

A second critique is that many of the practitioners who carry out UID on campus may not have confronted their own ableism (Smith et al., 2008). Smith et al. cited an example of a “counselor with minimal training in this area [who] assumes that a client with a disability is likely to have a low quality of life” (p. 306) due to their condition. This is a realistic critique and requires immediate action and reflection on the part of the practitioner so as not to stifle the development of the student with whom they are working.

Moving Forward with Increased Focus on Universal Instructional Design

The number of students with disabilities on campus is growing due to increased access to education for students with disabilities as well as the expanding definition of a disability. Faculty, student affairs educators, and students have a responsibility to construct a welcoming campus environment and foster a community for students with disabilities. The process of creating an inclusive community includes recognizing the power and privilege that comes with being able-bodied in the campus environment and working to adapt the campus structure and educational processes to meet the needs of all students. This should be the case whether or not these students possess a disability.

UID provides practitioners with guidance on how to make the campus more inclusive and the learning process more accessible. Although critics raise questions about the degree to which UID addresses the root of ableism, practitioners can utilize UID to address the needs of the whole student. As ableism is often perpetuated by the invisibility of students with disabilities throughout campus, implementing UID is one way to create a place for these students and send the message that their educational experience is valuable.

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