Universal Design in First-Year Composition – Why Do We Need It, How Can We Do It?

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Ensuring that all students can access information, demonstrate mastery, and feel comfortable in the classroom is important, yet first-year composition (FYC) faculty may find reaching the diverse populations in their classrooms daunting. Learning styles, comfort levels with writing and English language skills, disabilities, and family responsibilities impact all students, leaving us to wonder how best to facilitate student success. Though students in all classrooms are affected by these concerns, those enrolled in first-year writing classrooms are new to the post-secondary school setting, returning to school after a leave of absence, or having taken developmental English courses. These additional identity markers can make the FYC classroom a more difficult pedagogical environment. In the composition classroom, traditional and non-traditional first-year students alike must determine how to navigate the university and develop their own academic identity. Melanie Kill explains the importance of considering one's classroom identity, especially for first-year students:

> Whether or not identity issues are addressed explicitly in a first-year writing classroom, they are nevertheless in play. The fact of the matter is that for most, if not all, students, familiar ways of reading, writing, and thinking are challenged to some degree as they first encounter the particular academic reading, writing and thinking practices of college classrooms. (216)

Composition classrooms are often one of the first spaces where student "reading, writing, and thinking practices" are interrogated by teachers and peers alike. Student learning styles and skills are brought to the fore during classroom discussions, peer review sessions, and individual conferences with instructors. In every activity, students consider who they are in the classroom, on the page, and on the screen. Stephanie Kerschbaum reminds us that when we read others' work and respond to it (both familiar experiences in FYC), we necessarily grapple with identity: "To read and respond to others involves making sense of the locations individuals occupy in relation to others, and doing such work requires ways of asking and answering questions about how people are different from one another and what those differences mean" (623). The personal growth that happens in the composition classroom as students consider their own identities in relation to self and others can position students for success in other classes and the workforce, but if students can neither access the information nor participate fully, the possibility for growth is stunted.

This essay takes up the question of fostering independent student identities and universal student success by exploring Universal Design for Learning (UDL) in the first-year composition classroom. To do so, I first define Universal Design for Learning and then attend briefly to contemporary English studies research on UDL. I analyze different ways I integrate it in my FYC course; then, I discuss some of the complications instructors may encounter trying to implement these strategies. I argue that though UDL cannot ensure universal student success, the

pedagogical practice fosters an inclusive classroom that makes it more likely that higher numbers

of students will not only succeed, but also learn in ways that best suit them.[1]

Defining Universal Design; UDL in Composition Research

Universal Design for Learning is not new, though it has largely been ignored outside of

education and instructional design programs. In the 1990s, the Center for Applied Special

Technology (CAST) used Universal Design's framework, which attended to architecture and

engineering, to develop a similar concept for classrooms. The Center's goal was to make

education accessible without singling out students or requiring teachers to "retrofit" their

courses. Jay Dolmage defines "retrofit" as a required addition that makes an object more

"usable," but at the same time, keeps those who access the retrofit invisible. For instance,

wheelchair ramps placed to the side or in the back of buildings render those in wheelchairs

invisible and remove them from the public space of the steps ("Mapping" 20-23). In contrast, a

classroom that employs UDL allows students to "re-map, re-create and re-write the world in

which they learn," a process through which each student becomes visible (Dolmage, "Mapping"

23). In UDL teachers apply flexible strategies that allow students to learn, demonstrate

competency, and become interested in learning in different ways ("About"). For instance,

students may prove their ability to understand narratives by writing a story or by filming a silent

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[1] While some composition scholars recommend integrating digital writing as part of UDL, student skill levels and the technology available limit the production of digital texts in my own classroom. My own experiences may be helpful to instructors who teach in programs that require a set number of pages, privilege the written over the digital word, or follow a universal syllabus that does not include digital media. Additionally, some may find that the school's and students' technology access do not allow for the production of digital texts or that they as instructors feel uncomfortable teaching and assessing these artifacts. I do encourage digital texts, but the suggestions I outline here allow students to decide whether they want to produce digital, oral, or written texts while at the same time providing different avenues to show what they have learned. This choice is a hallmark of Universal Design.

movie, a less traditional method that requires more visual acumen than written expression. Both choices enable students to prove they understand narrative development, however. Additionally, students may show they have mastered material through group work, presentations, portfolios, or community projects (Bowe 5). Not only do these diverse assessment methods allow students to move away from or supplement written work if those assessments do not accurately reflect competency, but they also provide students with a choice that best fits their learning style and are regularly accepted as successful teaching methods in composition classrooms today, specifically through the adoption of portfolios, service-learning projects, and group work such as peer reviews and other in-class activities.

Universal Design has often been understood as a classroom practice for people with disabilities. The number of scholars who write about the intersections between disabilities and UDL further that preconception. As a praxis, however, UDL attempts to address all students' needs, not just those with disabilities, and suggests that rather than focusing on specific disabilities and interventions, teachers should ensure information is accessible in many different ways. Spaces, including classrooms, that employ UDL strive for "equitable use, flexibility in use, simple and intuitive use, perceptible information, tolerance for error, low physical effort, and size and space for approach and use" (King-Sears 199). As noted above, these tenets typically address architectural and engineering design some examples include light switches that do not require fine motor skills; large-print numbers on telephones; and door levers rather than knobs. Most of us, whether disabled or not, can use light switches, large-print telephones, and door levers. These design changes do not exclude users, but rather they make everyone's actions less taxing and allow for use in a number of different situations.

Universal Design for Learning similarly encourages designs that address diversity rather than particular student-users. The Ohio State University's "Fast Facts for Faculty: Universal Design for Learning" defines UDL as

> an approach to designing course instruction, materials, and content to benefit people of all learning styles without adaptation or retrofitting. Universal Design provides equal access to learning, not simply equal access to information. Universal Design allows the student to control the method of accessing information while the teacher monitors the learning process and initiates any beneficial methods….Universal Design does not remove academic challenges: it removes barriers to access. (1)

UDL requires students to take control of the available tools and information. In many ways, the pedagogy encourages greater student participation because students choose how to learn, access information, and demonstrate success. Instructors interested in developing UDL-appropriate course content should ensure that their "content maintains varied skill levels, preferences, and interests by allowing for options." When teachers use "flexible teaching strategies and course content, students can choose methods that support their interest and skill levels" ("Fast Facts" 4). Through these "varied skill levels, preferences, and interests," students are not only empowered to make choices and take more responsibility for their own learning (an important part of college education), but they also, regardless of their learning preferences, are included in the classroom.

As "Fast Facts" explains, these different teaching methods do not "remove academic challenges": content and expectations are not less rigorous, and the amount of student work does not decrease. In many instances, because students choose how they are going to learn, the intellectual effort required increases. The students not only learn the material taught in the

course, but through the choices they make, they learn more about themselves and how they can best approach other course material. UDL encourages life-long learning. When students take responsibility, developing a better understanding of what type of access leads to success, they are more likely to carry that knowledge to their careers, adapting the way they receive information so that they can perform their jobs successfully. First-year composition courses present an ideal space for students to experiment with learning styles. Not only are students creating and exploring their academic identities, but because FYC is taken early in one's college career, students may be able to determine how best to learn in other courses. They learn not only writing skills but also critical thinking and problem solving skills. Moreover, the contemporary composition classroom's emphasis on experimentation and revision provides students a safe space with fewer negative impacts if some experimentation proves unsuccessful.

Though educational research and specifically those journals that address teaching students with disabilities discuss UDL, few composition scholars discuss its benefits in college-level composition classrooms under that name even though contemporary composition pedagogies embrace many aspects of UDL.[2]

Articles in the *Journal of Basic Writing*, *Basic Writing E-Journal*, and *Teaching English in Two-Year Colleges* that discuss UDL are pedagogically focused and include information for shaping lessons and the classroom experience, but they also tend to discuss specific types of student disability or analyze the needs of writers in developmental writing courses. These articles

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[2] A quick search of CompPile for the keywords "universal design" generates a return of five results; a search for "disability" in CompPile yields over 800, and many of these results fall under the category of critical theory rather than pedagogy. Between 1950 and 2009, *College Composition and Communication* published no articles with the keyword "universal design" and only one article actually uses those words. The MLA Bibliography returns 12 results when one searches for "universal design." Three articles are focused on ELL or foreign language learners, and two are from the *Basic Writing E-Journal*, marginalizing UDL and students who benefit from the pedagogy.

push students with disabilities to the margins, and their learning needs are addressed only as developmental needs. In "Toward an Accessible Pedagogy: Dis/ability, Multimodality, and Universal Design in the Technical Communication Classroom," Shannon Walters reminds us of the dangers of disability-specific pedagogies. Walters explains that these

> approaches focus primarily on visible disabilities, neglecting the wide range of invisible disabilities that users and students might possess, including attention deficit disorder and a variety of psychological and cognitive disabilities. Pedagogically, these efforts may encourage educators to continue addressing students with disabilities on an individualized basis rather than comprehensively changing pedagogical practices. (429)

"Visible disabilities" might include blindness, the use of a wheelchair, or even a student who self-discloses a learning, psychological, or cognitive disability, further forcing that student to the margins. When instructors focus accommodations on particular students, other students who may not be willing to discuss a disability, who do not know they have a disability, or who learn best through different learning styles are not only ignored, but they also fail to receive the best education possible. When pedagogies attend to the class as a whole, classrooms not only serve more students, but they also serve them better.

While much of the UDL scholarship focuses on teaching to/for specific disabilities, there is a small collection of work that helps English and composition scholars see how UDL might be meted out in the classroom. Patricia Dunn's *Talking, Sketching, Moving: Multiple Literacies in the Teaching of Writing* (2001); Dunn and Kathleen Dunn De Mers' "Reversing Notions of Disability and Accommodation: Embracing Universal Design in Writing Pedagogy and Web Space" (2002); Jean Kiedaisch and Sue Dinitz's "Changing Notions of Difference in the Writing

Center: The Possibilities of Universal Design" (2007); and, Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson and

Brenda Jo Brueggemann's edited collection *Disability and the Teaching of Writing: A Critical*

Sourcebook (2007) which includes Jay Dolmage's article "Mapping Composition: Inviting

Disability in the Front Door" and an annotated bibliography of online resources for UDL all

address UDL in English studies, though not always in the composition classroom.[3] This article

looks to add to this list of English studies' pedagogies, specifically in relation to first-year

composition.

Implementing UDL in the Composition Classroom

Mina Shaugnessy "believed that our pedagogy had to change drastically and continually to

accommodate the diverse range of experiences, goals, and proclivities of students in our

classrooms" (Lewiecki-Wilson and Dolmage 316). My goal in designing my FYC course was to

reflect on my teaching and classroom environment and to determine what was disabling, required

a "retrofit" that made students and their experiences invisible, or simply did not enable student

success. The desire to adapt classroom practices for all students rather than individuals follows

McAlexander's recommendations in "Using Principles of Universal Design in College

Composition Courses" in which she dissuades faculty from devising individualized plans for

particular students; McAlexander advocates, instead, engaging the whole class to determine

common interests and preferred learning methods. UDL allows instructors to create a classroom

that highlights usability, and as Dolmage explains "UD, registered as action, is a way *to move*"

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[3] See also Chapter 2 of Margaret Price *Mad at School* (2011); Danielle Cordaro "Composition, Deafness, and Access in the Mainstream: Rhetoric and One Student's Reality" (2009); Dolmage "Disability Studies Pedagogy, Usability and Universal Design" (2005); and Patricia McAlexander "Using Principles of Universal Design in College Composition Courses" (2003).

("Mapping" 24, my emphasis). Design includes not only proactive, deliberate choice, but it also includes teacher-student experiences, interactions, and reactions that continually adapt.

In the next section, I discuss my design choices for FYC, the negotiations that took place during the first semester I started to consciously use UDL principles, and recommendations from other scholars. In many ways, the negotiations I participated in are not unusual to contemporary composition practices, and as Price reminds us, "Universal design is not for a few 'special' students, but rather a way to move forward with all our learners (and ourselves) in as accessible a way as possible" (88). I offer these practices here to show different ways "to move," in both Price's and Dolmage's words, to make FYC more accessible to the students we teach, to illustrate the different ways students show agency and take responsibility for their own learning, and to remind faculty who may feel overwhelmed by course redesigns that these changes can be made fairly painlessly, with benefits to both students and instructors.

Distributing Information: Readings, Assignments, and Announcements

The first changes I made occurred in the *design* of my course, as I *moved* and determined course objectives. I reviewed my syllabus, assignment sequence, textbook, and supplemental readings. I chose a text available electronically, so that students who wanted to use screen readers could access it without contacting Disability Services for a readable e-copy. I also began to upload all supplemental texts into our university's course management system in Word documents or OCR scannable PDFs. Word not only works with screen readers, but it also allows students to change the font (size, type, and style) and contrast and to print the document on any color of paper. The students adjust the assignment sheets and syllabus in ways that complement their needs. Posting

the documents online also makes them accessible wherever the students have Internet access. Unlike a physical, printed handout that can be lost or accidentally thrown away, students have little reason *not* to have access to the reading or assignment if they have Internet access. For students who have smart phones, posting assignments and supplementary readings means they almost always have access to it. I provide students who want a hard copy with time at the end of class to print from lab computers, increasing access: they choose to find it on our course management site, print it out, and put it where they can find it. When these students physically find the documents themselves, they are also more likely to feel comfortable navigating the system outside of class if they lose their paper copies. This distribution method not only makes information more accessible, but it also increases students' responsibility for their own learning.

In addition to providing e-copies, I show the assignment using the overhead projector. I reinforce its location in the course management system, explain the assignment's purpose and its relation to course material, and highlight requirements. I ask students for immediate questions. Students have now heard the assignment, providing those who are more auditory learners the ability to listen to my explanation, and I give visual learners the opportunity to read the requirements before asking questions. I also ask for questions at the beginning of the following class period after students have had the chance to re-read the assignment.

This presentation of written and spoken information falls in line with UD guidelines for communication. To make communication accessible communicators should "[b]e prepared to give … the same information more than once in different ways" (McCormick 5). Presenting the same information, multiple times, in different ways benefits not just students with cognitive disabilities, but also helps any student whose comprehension improves when they hear or read

something multiple times. These distribution methods also give the students more agency and responsibility; they choose how to access the information, with the knowledge of how they best understand it.

In addition to ensuring formal assignments, resource handouts, and announcements are both spoken in class and available electronically, I verbally give instructions and write them on the board before students begin group or individual work during class. I assign partners, ask them to sit next to one another, wait for silence, give instructions, and then write or project those directions on the board. Taking a cue from technical writing and successful instruction sets, I break tasks up into small steps, number the steps, and use short, imperative sentences. By both announcing and writing instructions in short steps, students follow along better. They check the board, making sure that they've completed one step before moving to the next. Written and verbal instructions lead to less confusion, and students are more likely to take initiative during group work because they do not have to struggle to remember directions. Students who cannot read the board have heard the instructions, and they may ask their classmates to repeat those that are written down.

Interacting with Students: Conferences and Office Hours

Making sure students feel comfortable, or more comfortable, in the classroom should be a concern for all of us as we develop relationships, discover students' strengths and weaknesses, and help them grow as writers. One way composition pedagogy encourages relationship building is through individual conferencing. Universal Design proponents similarly encourage instructors to "invite students to meet/contact the course instructor with any questions/concerns" ("Fast

Facts" 1). Not only do I encourage students to come and see me during the semester, but I also require students to set up two individual conferences with me: one at approximately week six and one during week sixteen. These individual conferences, whether voluntary or required, also give students the opportunity to speak privately with me. Some students do not feel comfortable speaking up in class, but have important questions, ideas, and concerns about class. When they can use email to contact me or speak to me privately, their own communication needs are met without the fear of losing face with their peers.

In addition to face-to-face meetings, I encourage my students to use chat or email to contact me. For those who teach online courses, email and discussion boards are the most common ways to interact with students, and chat provides one way for instructors to speak synchronously with students. For face-to-face courses, encouraging students to contact me through chat or email often makes it more likely that they will ask questions. Price explains that holding virtual conferences allows her to have two or three conversations at one time, or ask students to "wait online" where they can do other work until it is their turn, rather than wait outside the office door (97). If students feel like they are not wasting their time when they go to "see" a professor, whether virtually or in-person, the likelihood of talking to the instructor increases. The email system our school uses has a built-in chat function, and I make sure that during my office hours I am "available," but it would be just as easy to use AOL, Yahoo!, Skype, or another IM system. An instructor's availability in many forms appeals to a variety of student needs, whether the student works during the school day, but can still send a quick message, finds face-to-face interaction uncomfortable or distracting, or does not process aural information well.

Being open to communicating with students in different ways increases the likelihood of student success.

Assessing Student Mastery: Formal and Informal Assignments

In FYC, students are expected to write, and in many instances, they must write traditional essays that summarize, analyze, and synthesize. Our program, for instance, asks that each student completes 25 pages of "formal written work" and each instructor includes assignments in which students practice the three skills noted. We do not, however, work from a common syllabus or text, and thus, we have the freedom to decide how we measure mastery.

As part of my course redesign, I created assignments within program requirements that also enabled student choice. For instance, one assignment asks students to create a public service announcement. The students show their PSAs to an audience and analyze the success of their own rhetoric. I encourage students to create their PSAs in whatever medium they choose—print, sound, video, PowerPoint, Prezi, audio, or multimedia. Students whose learning styles do not privilege written language may not feel entirely comfortable with their analysis, but they have the opportunity to show their understanding of argument and persuasion (a main learning objective of the class) through their PSAs in the medium of their choice. Many students' rhetorical success reasserts their communicative skills and reaffirms that they

> already have their own purposes and motivations as well as a repertoire of more or less
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> practiced means of realizing them….Rather than being passive interlocutors, because
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> students are practiced and accomplished users of languages in other contexts, they have

substantial discursive resources on which to draw as they approach the myriad rhetorical

situations of the university. (Kill 219)

The students may have made a video before, they may have used spoken language to convince

their parents to let them go out, or persuaded friends and neighbors to join a campaign or donate

to the school's band. Because students draw on their own experiences and choose to work within

a literacy in which they feel comfortable or want to experiment, the assignment increases student

agency. It also provides them with alternative ways to represent knowledge and allows me to

assess their progress in ways that a rhetorical analysis of a printed essay or professional

advertisement might not.

Allowing students to choose how they will learn and prove mastery is a keystone of UDL

because "Universally designed course content provides alternative representations of essential

concepts" ("Fast Facts" 4). In my class, argument and persuasion are "essential concepts," and I

provide "alternative representations" and examples of rhetorical skills. In addition to reading

and/or listening to their textbook, students learn about rhetoric by examining print and digital

advertisements and listening to political speeches and television clips. They see, hear, and read

about these concepts on a daily basis through their assignments, class discussion, group projects,

and formal writing, and they have the opportunity to work alone and with peers.

In addition to designing a classroom where students learn and demonstrate mastery in

different ways, I also gather information about the students, their attitudes toward writing, and

their course expectations in their first formal assignment, a literacy narrative. This low stakes,

short assignment (2 double-spaced pages) asks students to talk about when, where, and how they

read and write, whether with a pen and paper, a screen reader, texting on their cell phones, in

Facebook, or through other digital means. As students enrolled in a composition class, it is not unusual for them to talk about writing and reading, but they may not be used to talking about non-academic reading and writing in the classroom. In conjunction with the assignment, we discuss speech communities, and students start to recognize that they already navigate different spaces and discourses. For this assignment, the most successful students are those who move past what they believe is the expected academic narrative and into the "truth" of their literacies, even if that truth is "I don't read or write unless I am forced to." As a focused personal narrative, students are familiar with the subject matter, and I encourage honesty. In this assignment, students "control the method of accessing information while the teacher monitors the learning process."

My organization of daily class sessions also demonstrates UDL as the students complete group work, individual work, and class discussions. Not all students excel at each type of interaction, yet almost all students excel in at least one of the areas. For instance, when I teach ethos, logos, and pathos, we may spend one day in discussion, clarifying the reading, looking at specific examples of each appeal, and answering questions. The next day students work in groups in which each set discusses one short text's appeals and reports their findings. They then have the opportunity to show their knowledge in a more formal assignment, like the rhetorical analysis discussed above. Students not only have the opportunity to learn the content multiple times, but they do so through different means: they hear it, they talk about it, they see it, they apply it.

Through these different exercises, my expectations for the course do not change. My solutions are not necessarily creative—group work, class discussion, and individual writing are a

part of most composition courses—but I take careful consideration of how students perform in

all three areas and make sure that I do not fault students for not being able to "prove" themselves

at a high level in all three areas, or only in one area, specifically formal written work. Moreover,

I serve the entire learning community through pedagogical diversity: all students benefit because

they can draw on their strengths. These different teaching strategies and the success that students

find in them emphasize "that with universal design, only a small minority of students will need

'special' accommodations – those who cannot use even universally designed instruction" (Bowe

2). If students can find a way to successfully complete their assignments—and by "successfully"

I mean attend to the assignment and course objectives in a way that show they understand and

can use the material—without accommodations, then UDL has worked.

This success, however, does not always come easily for the students because it is

important to remember that "Universal Design does not remove academic challenges: it removes

barriers to access" ("Fast Facts" 1). Students must still work, they must do the homework, and

many of them will still struggle with the material. For instance, though we may not have pop

quizzes in my class, I do assign daily reading questions, allowing students to work at their own

pace and at the same time encouraging annotation and summary skills. Kill reminds us that the

first-year composition classroom is necessarily fraught with these growing pains: "As students

are exposed to the genres of the first-year composition classroom, they learn about the 'mood,

attitude, and actional possibilities' available through the subject positions they are offered, but,

as has long been acknowledged, the acquisition of these new ways of being and communicating

is neither easy nor unproblematic" (217). The genres we ask them to compose, the reading and

listening we ask them to complete, and the discussions we ask them to have are often unfamiliar

and sometimes uncomfortable. Universal Design will never be able to take away the challenge of academic work, but it can make success more likely.

Complications and Limitations

Though UDL benefits students and ultimately writing faculty as well, complications and limitations do exist. Below, I address both practical concerns including available technology, time, program requirements, student resistance, and more theoretical concerns such as the limitations of some UDL concepts, especially digital genres.

Arguments Against Digitization: Practical and Theoretical

As we move, teach, and learn in an increasingly digital and digitized world, "multimodal," when used in discussions of writing is most often synonymous with "multimedia" and "digital." Patricia Dunn advocates using multimodal writing in the composition classroom—oral, visual, and digital communication in addition to print. Indeed, these different media, as afforded in the PSA assignment, allow students greater choice and freedom to demonstrate their knowledge. Multimodal assignments, especially those that involve digital technologies, however, can prove to be difficult in composition classrooms for two reasons: technology and buy-in from stakeholders.

Though most cell phones now allow users to record video, and the Internet is awash with open source editing and digital media tools (Eyespot, Jumpcut, VideoEgg, and YouTube Remixer, for instance), not all students and instructors can access the technology. Schools' and students' technology budgets do not always enable access to the tools needed to compose digitally; the students may not have a home computer or laptop, or they may not be able to

download or use free software on school computers. Even when or if computer labs are available, students who commute, have extensive family responsibilities, or attend classes online, may not be able to use the technology on campus.

Even if universities provide adequate access to resources, not all students and instructors know how to use them. Instructors must carefully consider whether helping students develop technological literacies, in addition to communication literacies, is part of the purpose of FYC, and these instructors must recognize the balance between the time spent, and ultimate overlap of, teaching students how to use the technologies that help them to compose and teaching them how to prepare their ideas. One way I address this problem is to let students choose which technologies they want to use. I do not require digital texts if students do not know how to use the required technology (though I do encourage them to search for ways to learn about that technology on their own if they wish). We discuss different persuasive implications of diverse media, but students are responsible for locating, learning, and using technology. This approach to the problem gives students ownership of their education, the opportunity to explore different interests, and follows UDL guidelines that encourage "varied skill levels, preferences, and interests by allowing for options." The different ways students complete assignments demonstrate "flexible teaching strategies and course content" so "students can choose methods that support their interest and skill levels" ("Fast Facts" 4). The wide range of possibilities and the requirement of student responsibility for learning technologies removes some, though not all, of the barriers.[4]

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[4] This question of technology instruction is particularly important for online classes, which will necessarily use some sort of technology. The 2013 "Position Statement of Principles and Example Effective Practices for Online Writing

In addition to the availability of technology and technological literacies, some instructors

may have problems convincing fellow instructors, students, or administrators that these types of

digital writing assignments and activities are appropriate. Dunn addresses this question in

Talking, as does other contemporary composition scholarship that does not directly address

UDL. The rise of digital media both provides instructors with one way that they can advocate for

multiple literacies—including oral, visual, and written—as well as argue that digital literacies are

necessary if students are to be successful in the workforce. Secondary and post-secondary

education's emphasis on "workforce readiness" may benefit teachers who want to integrate this

type of writing into their classroom: increasingly, employees are required to read, interpret, and

produce information that is appropriate for digital consumption, and instructors who want to

integrate these assignments into their classrooms can argue for these new literacies as necessary

to career success.[5]

Multimedia, digital texts in particular, may also pose accessibility problems for students

who may not "think" the way the system does or who cannot access the system. In "Disability,

Universal Design, and the Digital Humanities," digital humanist George Williams reminds us

Instruction" published by the Conference on College Composition and Communication Committee for Best Practices in Online Writing Instruction lists its second principle as "An online writing course should focus on writing and not on technology orientation or teaching students how to use learning and other technologies" (2).
[5] Using computers in the composition classroom is not new. In 1983, John Bean's "Computerized Word Processing as an Aid to Revision" was published in *College Composition and Communication*, and in the same year the journal *Computers and Composition* was established. Though this article addresses word processing and more traditional genres and essays, it does address the introduction of computers to the classroom. For other studies on integrating multimedia into composition classrooms see: Gail Hawisher and Cynthia Selfe's *Passions, Pedagogies, and 21st Century Technologies* (1999), Sibylle Gruber's edited collection *Weaving a Virtual Web: Practical Approaches to New Information Technologies* (2000), Mike Palmquist, Kate Kiefer, James Hartvigsen, and Barbra Goodlew's collection *Transitions: Teaching Writing in Computer-Supported and Traditional Classrooms* (2000), Ann Wysocki's *Writing New Media: Theory and Applications for Expanding the Teaching of Composition* (2004), Michelle Sidler, Richard Morris, and Elizabeth Overman Smith's sourcebook *Computers in the Composition Classroom* (2007), Jason Palmeri's *Remixing Composition: A History of Multimodal Writing Pedagogy* (2012).

that "Digital knowledge tools that assume everyone approaches information with the same abilities and using the same methods risk excluding a large percentage of people. In fact, such tools actually do the work of disabling people by preventing them from using digital resources altogether." One of the loudest calls for UDL is digitization. For many students, digitization *enhances* accessibility. There are, however, those students for whom digitization does not ensure accessibility; the digital environment, just like the written environment can disable students. For instance, because of the way our CMS was developed, a student with vision impairment had a difficult time navigating it and finding the appropriate links. It was much easier for him to receive emailed documents.

The problems this student encountered were a question of usability. In technical writing, usability studies show designers and writers how well something works. Universal Design, a "user-centered practice," does not call for usability testing, though. In "Disability, Usability, and Universal Design," Dolmage reminds us that "UD focuses on students' multiple literacies and intelligences," which is a good thing (181). What UD does not do, however, is ask students for feedback: it does not encourage usability testing. We cannot adapt "continually" to our students' needs unless we ask them whether what we do works—is the material accessible? Are they being heard? Can they access information in the most effective way possible? Dolmage and the students he interviewed call for more thorough usability studies about pedagogy.

Finding the Time to Implement UDL

A significant practical limitation in all classrooms is time—planning time and classroom time are both limited. The suggestions outlined in this essay may seem overwhelming and time intensive, especially if a classroom is currently lecture-based or if students do not have easy access to

electronic materials (for instance, if there's no e-edition of the textbook or if you do not regularly use a course management system). When I redesigned the course, I planned new group activities that more explicitly reinforced what we were learning in class, constructed new assessment measures that addressed group work, discussion, individual work, and different writing strategies, and created new assignments that provided students with more options. Additionally, I determined how to use our limited class time so that students could complete activities, ask questions, and feel comfortable with the material we discussed and that they would use in their formal, graded projects. Because I included more group activities that linked directly to class discussions, fewer individual topics were covered during the semester. Topic selection became an important consideration as I planned and revised the course.

Though revisions seem many, they include the same things that any class revision or new class preparation requires. Because I now evaluate group work, class discussion, and formal writing, I have a better sense of which students are prepared and understand the material, and students who struggle with the formal writing assignments can show their improvement in other ways.

Programmatic concerns, which range from the use of a required textbook or assignment sequence to specific genres written or number of final draft pages, seem to limit assignments in particular, but very rarely should these concerns derail all efforts. Even if a universal syllabus or textbook is required, instructors can consider integrating outside material. For instance, students may be asked to bring in digital media for examples, perform group work, or present informal presentations. Most syllabi, textbooks, and assignment sequences accommodate these activities. Through these activities, students may show their comprehension through different means, even

though they may still be required to hand in traditional, written essays. While not ideal, the diversity of assignments and activities presents the multiple means of learning that is foundational in UDL.

Conclusion

Universal Design for Learning provides both students and instructors with the ability to use diverse learning styles, demonstrate the knowledge they have in multiple ways, and improve access to learning. Whether the student has a disability does not matter. The tenets of UDL make it less likely that classrooms or expectations will need to be adjusted for specific students. With diversity in teaching and assessment styles, students learn that even though they may not excel at each assignment, there will be those through which they demonstrate competence and in many cases mastery.

Though much UDL research in English, composition, and education focuses on teaching students with disabilities, the pedagogy seeks to ensure success for all learners. As I have shown, the UDL principles encourage faculty to:

- Identify the essential course content.
- Clearly express the essential content and any feedback given to the student. Integrate natural supports for learning.
- Use a variety of instructional methods when presenting material.
- Allow for multiple methods of demonstrating understanding of essential course content.
- Use technology to increase accessibility.
- Invite students to meet/contact the course instructor with any questions/concerns. ("Fast Facts")

All of these steps improve student learning, and many of them are already built into composition classrooms and pedagogies. Instructors often use electronic course management systems to distribute information; one-on-one conferences during the semester give students the opportunities to talk about concerns they may have, and encouraging students to use office hours allows for more student questions as well; and, with hope, students have a good understanding from the syllabus and daily discussion what the "essential course content" is. My recommendations address most clearly the use of "a variety of instructional methods" and "multiple methods of demonstrating understanding." First-year composition classes are so heavily focused on reading and writing, important skills for college students, that it is easy to forget *why* students do not enjoy the class: some do not like the class because it is a requirement, and they would rather be somewhere else, or it is "boring." Other students, however, may not enjoy class because they struggle with the literacies, reading and writing, that make up so much of our pedagogy. They see composition classrooms as places of failure and frustration with no way out. UDL will not make class easier for students, but if given multiple ways to prove they are learning, students may find it less detestable and look for ways not only to succeed but also to use those skills in other classes that are reading/writing intensive.

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