

# THE TEACHING EXCHANGE

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## *Teaching to Variation in Learning: Universal Instructional Design*

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Many faculty and graduate students are aware of and sensitive to the many variations in learning styles manifested by their students. In order to respond appropriately to their needs with effective accommodations, faculty must often re-design their traditional approaches to teaching. In order to help faculty reflect upon how to do this, Susan Pliner (now of Columbia University) and Associate Dean of the College Robert Shaw hosted a workshop at Brown on "Universal Instructional Design (UID): Teaching a Diverse Student Body". Organized through a Columbia University grant "Universal Access <sup>1</sup> Dumbing Down: Stigma, Pedagogy and Elitism" and supported by a grant from the US Department of Education (Office of Post-Secondary Education), it was held on June 5th and 6th. Twenty-one faculty and graduate students attended this 2-day event. This workshop was the first in a series to be offered over the next three years at several Ivy League institutions.

The first day of the workshop consisted of oral and visual presentations by professionals in the field of disability support services. The second day featured small-group discussions including case-studies designed to highlight specific issues and encourage collaborative solutions utilizing the principles of UID.

### **What is Universal Instructional Design (UID)?**

The term "Universal Instructional Design" is derived from the concept of "universal design", an architectural term for the physical construction and utilization of space which insures accessibility to all people, regardless of their physical limitations or abilities. This is the philosophy behind the relatively recent emphasis on creating handicapped accessible buildings.

In instructional terms, Universal Instructional Design is a philosophy of curriculum design whose principle tenant requires that courses be designed to be accessible to all people, especially including those with non-visible disabilities.

This category can include people with a variety of learning disabilities or cognitive learning styles, as well as people suffering from temporary emotional/psychological impairments, or more permanent physical or psychological disabilities. Many instructors presently design ad-hoc curriculum specifications when made aware of someone in their class who suffers from a specific disability. UID renders this ad-hoc method of course modification obsolete. A UID course will suit the needs of most people with non-visible disabilities, even if the person him/herself is not aware of the disability.

### **Key Elements of Universal Instructional Design**

- Establish the goals of the course
- Define the essential components
- Identify the skill sets needed
- Identify the technology required to support the established skill-sets
- Determine specific barriers to UID
- Determine available resources

The objective of the workshop was to introduce participants to the concept of UID and to help them begin to incorporate it into their courses. Universal Instructional Design moves away from traditional methods of accommodating the particular needs of students with non-visible disabilities. Traditional approaches often modify student assessments, such as: providing extra/unlimited time on tests, and offering alternate environments for test taking. Many faculty feel that these accommodations are unfair to other students, who would also benefit from more time to take the exam, while others fear that the accommodations being offered may not really be what the student needs, but merely, what is automatically and traditionally done for students with learning disabilities.

Universal Instructional Design avoids many of these "accommodation" issues. A UID courses can be designed to present the material in a variety of ways to all students (visually, orally, with opportunity for "hands-on" experiences, small group discussions) and a variety of methods are utilized for assessment of student learning (limited and unlimited time exams, take-home tests, short and long writing assignments, group work, oral presentations). These "up-front" design changes can eliminate or minimize the need for specific accommodations of individual students.

While most participants were willing and motivated to modify their curricula to appeal to a wider set of cognitive abilities, many expressed concern over the issue of technology and how to incorporate it into their courses to make them more universally accessible. The

infusion of technology into courses to facilitate a variety of learning styles and abilities, while of great interest, provoked great anxiety in many of the participants.

Regardless of their knowledge and experience with instructional technology, participants felt that university-based support of the use of technology in the classroom is critical if it is to be used to enhance learning for students with non-visible disabilities.

### **Faculty Seminar**

To follow up on this excellent workshop, the Sheridan Center is planning a Faculty seminar on applications of UID and teaching to cognitive diversity for November 15th from 4:00-5:30 p.m. at the Sheridan Center office. The Center's on-line web-based, interactive, diagnostic on cognitive learning styles is available at: (<http://sheridan-center.stg.brown.edu/CognitionWorkshop/>).