

Universal design for learning can help those in online classes

Universal design for learning is often thought of as something that strictly benefits students with disabilities in brick-and-mortar classes. However, it can also help students, and not just those with disabilities, in online classes.

That's according to Nancy Swenson and Amy Sugar, two instructional designers at the University of Central Florida's Center for Distributed Learning. The two presented at the Sloan Consortium conference in Orlando last fall.

If you're looking for ways to boost academic success among the students you serve, their approach could help.

In just a few years, the number of UCF students registered with disability services doubled. And many of those students were enrolled in online classes.

"Universal design has been a way for us to meet the varied learning needs of our students," Swenson said.

Sugar provided the following strategies for incorporating UDL into online courses. Share them with your curriculum designers and online instructors to ensure students with disabilities can succeed.

Instructional strategies

- Present information in a variety of ways. Use text, images, diagrams and video to convey ideas.
- Chunk information so that students aren't overwhelmed by too much reading.
- Use plain language. Short sentences with common words are easier to digest.
- Establish a routine. For example, make assignments due on the last day each week.
- Provide consistent course design. For instance, pages should be structured the same way. Use the same fonts and colors for all class pages and modules.
- Simplify navigation of the course. Remove tools that students will never use from the interface they see.
- Use advanced organizers or graphic organizers, such as those provided by your learning management system to help students stay on task.

Delivering content

- Present content in HTML format, which is easiest for readers and other assistive technology to read.
- Provide contrast between background images and text or images.
- Avoid using color alone to convey meaning.
- Allow students to make adjustments such as to enlarge text or increase audio.
- Use bulleted or numbered lists.
- Make sure videos used in class are captioned.
- Provide text transcripts for audio recordings.
- Use consistent heading styles to provide greater

content structure and organization.

- Provide meaningful alternative text or captions for images.
- Use descriptive link text instead of just saying "Click here."

Interaction

- Provide a variety of interactions, such as between students and instructors, students and their classmates, and students and the content.
- Use accessible communication methods such as video and audio.
- Provide flexibility with communication tools.

Assessment

- Allow students choice in how they demonstrate knowledge. Consider different types of assessments (e.g., group projects, self-assessments and reflections).
- Provide clear expectations and rubrics for assignments.
- Use scaffolding for long-term projects.
- Provide students with opportunities for practice and review.

Feedback

- Give students frequent and timely feedback.
- Offer students the chance to complete practice tests.
- Use surveys to provide students the opportunity to provide feedback regarding course activities.

Syllabus

- Include a disability statement.
- Provide information about available supports.
- Inform students when and how they should ask for help.
- Provide students with protocols and expectations for online courses.
- Give students information about all the technology requirements of courses.
- Use a UDL syllabus rubric such as the one available at <http://enact.sonoma.edu/content.php?pid=218878&sid=2032318>.

Class climate

- Foster collaboration through group work and community discussions.
- Address individual needs in an inclusive manner.
- Create a welcoming environment by sending students a welcome email before a class begins.
- Provide an online course orientation or a "Getting Started" module.

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