

Covid-19 - An unlikely ally of progressive teaching and learning

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Serendipitous. Not the word one would normally use to describe the arrival of Covid-19 in 2019. Yet, were it not for the speed with which the Covid-19 pandemic propelled the Higher Education sector into the digital classroom, False Bay TVET College might not have reached the current levels of application of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) in its teaching and learning. And, thanks to the expert knowledge and support of the Higher Education Disability Services Association (HEDSA), the national HEI disability support network, we were ready when the opportunity came.



What is UDL? – A brief background

Essentially, Universal Design is the idea that all built environments should be designed to allow all people equal access, regardless of disability or any other constraint. In the 1990s, a team of experts at North Carolina State University released a guide on 'Principles of Universal Design'. With the advent of personal computing and the internet, researchers and educators started applying these Principles of Universal Design to the inability of the traditional mode of education – the teacher-centric, formal classroom, instructional mind-set that many adults today still view as synonymous with education – to effectively educate people with different learning needs. And thus Universal Design for Learning (UDL) was born.

From the outset, this change in thinking involved more than just incorporating computers, data and software but breaking away from traditional learning modes. This meant that students and educators had to adapt to a significantly different way of learning and a new approach to both the learning content and the mode of delivery that allowed for individual student personalities and diverse learning styles.

UDL in principle

An internationally recognised, research-based approach to learning that has been implemented across Europe, America and Australia, UDL is a way of thinking about teaching and learning that aims to give all students an equal opportunity to

succeed. It offers flexibility in the way's students access material, engage with it and demonstrate what they know. This approach may be especially helpful for students with different learning and thinking abilities, different learning styles as well as English language barriers. By recognising that individuals learn differently and being open to including all ways that humans learn, a UDL framework "guides the design of instructional goals, assessments, methods and materials that can be customised and adjusted to meet individual needs" (Center for Applied Special Technology – CAST, no date. See <https://www.cast.org/impact/universal-design-for-learning-udl> for more information about UDL).

In short, UDL provides multiple ways of engagement, representation, action and expression.

UDL arrives at False Bay TVET College

With a well-established Inclusive Education (IE) Department, False Bay TVET College (FBC) was more than ready to undertake this transition in teaching and learning. After our initial engagement in HEDSA, FBC IE staff attended an inspirational UDL workshop in 2018 coordinated and hosted by Dr Marcia Lyner-Cleophas, who currently heads the Disability Unit at the Centre for Student Counselling and Development of Stellenbosch University.

The FBC IE Department and delegates from other institutions presented their strategies for supporting students with disabilities and learned about the exciting progress UDL was making in the United States. Delegates returned to their universities and colleges determined to make UDL a reality for our students too. Even though there were challenges along the way and implementation and buy-in proved to be a slow journey forward, dialogue among the delegates continued through HEDSA. HEDSA has advocated and facilitated the implementation of UDL throughout the pandemic period, and has recently published research on the role of UDL in effective learning in the 'new normal' (www.hedsa.org.za).

The FBC Academic Management team had been actively promoting the use of technology, e-learning and embracing the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) across our FBC campuses and courses for several years. Thus, despite the initial shock of lockdown restrictions in 2020, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic proved fortuitous, as we seized the urgent imperative to develop a proactive response plan as an opportunity to roll out a strong Academic Recovery Plan that incorporated UDL principles.

The Academic Management team implemented a blended learning approach at FBC to mitigate the impact of Covid-19 on teaching and learning. Along with a six-day time-table (three-day class time and three-day home study cycle), other measures were implemented to enable quality access. The upgrading of the MYFBC remote learning management tool and content was key. The new system is zero-rated, content is externally assured and guidelines for asynchronous learning are applied. Content is packaged to promote the blended learning approach, with problem-based learning promoting self-study skills and peer-assisted learning.

While lecturers were eager to save the academic year, the new requirements could be overwhelming at times. Despite this, the advantages of UDL were soon apparent to the lecturers and academic managers.

Not only is UDL a powerful approach to effecting inclusion, but it offers enormous potential for all students to survive and thrive through asynchronous learning, self-directed learning, blended learning and flexible approaches to teaching, learning and assessment. UDL emphasises the ideal of student-centred learning. Crucially, for the majority of our institutions and students who are under-resourced and lack the financial means to afford high-end technology, UDL can be implemented on the ground through simple and effective actions. We advocate 'use what you have' at FBC. For example, lecturers can provide explanations in various visual, aural and kinaesthetic modes (see www.vark-learn.com for more information).

A workshop to cement learnings

Following extensive engagement between the FBC IE Department, E-learning facilitator Mr Mark Selby and the Deputy Principal (Academic), a College-wide virtual UDL workshop was presented to over 40 academic and support staff on 26 May 2021. The workshop practiced the principles it preached, using interactive virtual presentation tools to introduce UDL and share its possibilities for improving student participation and success. Dr JP Bosman, the Director of the Centre for

Learning Technologies at Stellenbosch University, demonstrated the core principles and practical applications of UDL in a highly engaging manner as our key speaker. Dr Lyner-Cleophas, who is also an active member of the HEDSA Executive, was on hand throughout the workshop's development with invaluable encouragement and advice.

In addition to Dr Bosman, FBC's E-Learning Department Manager, Ms Carol Dwyer, shared the work her department was doing to facilitate blended learning. Ms Dwyer's presentation made excellent use of various modes of content delivery to reach a wider audience and to show what was possible.

The IE Department's main role is to support FBC students with a wide range of disabilities to achieve their academic potential. IE staff members Ms Judith de Jager and Ms Jacqueline Lenting, both experienced occupational therapists, co-presented on the application of UDL in the FBC teaching and learning context. The workshop emphasised that while UDL has specific strengths in making teaching and learning more accessible for students with barriers to learning, the approach makes education more effective and meaningful for all students. Rather than adapting mainstream protocols to accommodate people with disabilities, the principle of Inclusive Practice requires educators to recognise that all students have diverse strengths and support needs, and that our approach to teaching, learning and assessment must always adopt this perspective.

UDL accessibility guidelines from HEDSA that were shared in the workshop (also see website: <https://www.understood.org/articles/en/5-examples-of-universal-design-for-learning-in-the-classroom>) included:

- If PDF documents are used they must not be saved in JPEG /image format (this enables screen-reading software);
- Have transcription done of the video recording and podcasts;
- Use visual explanation to explain concepts, clarify new concepts and use concrete and relatable examples;
- Provide assignment options wherever possible;
- Post lesson goals;
- Provide texts in audio and digital format;
- Provide frequent feedback.

Staff who attended the workshop were encouraged to apply their learning and use the e-learning resources that had been demonstrated, and to develop and upload material to the electronic learning platform, MyFBC, in line with UDL principles. The MyFBC platform also allowed for lecturer discussion, resource sharing, feedback on the workshop, and requests and suggestions for further training. Some of the participants were so eager to get started that they began to cascade learning from the workshop to other staff on the same day. The IE and E-learning teams continue to facilitate the development and sharing of materials by the staff who participated in the highly rewarding workshop.

Discussions of many UDL-related topics that support teaching and learning in HET can be accessed on the websites mentioned above. Other resources and tools for UDL are accessible to FBC staff via the MyFBC platform, including:

- **Zeetings:** a web-based platform that enables participants in a workshop or class to actively contribute through live polls.
- **Handbrake:** an open-source resource tool for converting video from nearly any format to a selection of modern, widely supported codecs. This makes it easier to incorporate video material in teaching.
- **Presi:** an alternative to MS PowerPoint, that allows the presenter to interact with the learning visuals.

It is encouraging to report that our experiences with UDL at FBC thus far confirm that UDL is a powerful tool for orienting mind-sets and teaching methodologies towards achieving study success, and does so in a way that confirms equity and fair access as principles of the new emerging pedagogy in the digital world.

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