Quarterly Update

DISABILITY TRAINING NETWORK

Universal Design Faculty Learning Community

The Disability Training Network: Training, Innovation, and Research (DTN-TIR) is using Faculty Learning Communities (FLCs) to help meet their goal of improving the access, retention, and success rates of college students with disabilities. An FLC is a network of instructors from different disciplines who work together to enhance teaching and learning in higher education (Cox, 2008). The first FLC implemented by the DTN focused on universal design and met every other week during the spring semester.

The members of the Universal Design Faculty Learning Community (UD FLC) were instructors from diverse disciplines including biology, education, finance, philosophy, and psychology. Using the text, *Universal Design in Higher Education: From Principles to Practice* (Burgstahler & Cory, 2008), UD FLC members shared their thoughts and teaching tips with each other. One of the major components of the UD FLC was the design and implementation of a teaching project. The purpose of the teaching project was to try out universal design strategies while assessing the results. During the final meetings of the UD FLC, the members shared their teaching projects with the group. The following highlights some of the teaching projects designed by the UD FLC members.

Teaching Project: Meeting the Needs of Diverse Students

A professor from the department of Finance was charged with re-designing a course that had previously been taught by several instructors and, as a consequence, was not consistent in its objectives and assessments. The professor needed to re-design the lessons and assessments that various instructors had used while teaching the course so future instructors could teach and assess the exact same content. She felt that by using universal design principles in the development of the lessons and assessments, future instructors could more effectively teach the content to the students. With the help and guidance UD FLC, she began the process of incorporating universal design into the curriculum.

One of her initial activities included reviewing course materials that had been used previously. She realized that she and the other instructors were teaching to their own learning styles and not to the varied learning styles of the students enrolled in the course. Therefore, she decided to provide multiple modes of delivery, expression, and assessment (CAST, n.d.) for each of the course objectives. These multiple modes constitute the essential elements of universal design, and by interjecting these elements into the curriculum, the professor was able to implement several of the universal design principles. For example, when teaching a lesson about a cycle or process in finance, she would typically lecture about the process without using any visual content to support her lecture. She decided to add a graphic of the process to help learners who were more visual than auditory learners (UD principles: Flexibility in Use; Simple

and Intuitive Use; Perceptible Information). She also decided that the course's assessments would be scheduled during the evenings so that all students could have extra time to complete the examinations without undue stress or anxiety (UD principles: Equitable Use; Flexibility in Use; Low Physical Effort). Examinations were designed so that questions were presented in multiple formats (i.e., the test would be a combination of short answer, multiple choice, and computations) so that students would have the opportunity to show their learning via their preferred testing modalities (UD principles: Equitable Use; Flexibility in Use).

Teaching Project: Making an Online Course Accessible

A Higher Education professor needed to convert a traditional course to an accessible, online course. He was able to accomplish his goal by using universal design and a computer program called Moodle. Moodle is screenreader friendly, has a tracking feature that shows how much time students spend interacting with the site, and notifies the instructor when students post questions. Because this program was new to his college, and thus to his students, he decided that it would help the students if he developed a tutorial for navigating the program. He did this by using Camtasia and Jing, two computer programs that allow a person to create videos and screen shots of a website or computer program. Using these programs, he was able to walk the students through the website step-by-step, highlighting course components and expectations (UD principles: Equitable Use; Simple and Intuitive Use; Perceptible Information; Tolerance for Error; Size and Space for Approach and Use).

Teaching Project: Creating an Accessible Course in the Traditional Classroom

A Microbiology professor decided to join the UD FLC because she is always striving to be a better instructor for her students. The course she teaches is very heavy in factual content about diseases and pathogen processes. Her first step on the universal design journey was to re-design syllabus to make it more user-friendly (UD principle: Simple and Intuitive Use). She then posted the syllabus online prior to the beginning of the semester and provided the students a hard copy of the syllabus during the first class (UD principles: Equitable Use; Flexibility in Use; Size and Space for Approach and Use). Next, she developed a course website that provided materials such as notes and examples of assignments from previous semesters (UD principles: Flexibility in Use; Simple and Intuitive Use). She also changed some of her course assignments to allow students choices (UD principles: Flexibility in Use; Perceptible Information). For example, students can present their assignments via written or oral reports, videos, songs, or poems. Finally, she revised her assessments. In the past, her tests were usually four pages long with text written in an 8 point font because there was so much information that needed to be assessed. Now, she give more frequent assessments that are written using a larger font size (UD principles: Equitable Use; Simple and Intuitive Use; Low Physical Effort; Size and Space for Approach and Use).

More About UD FLCs

The DTN will develop other UD FLCs within the Texas A&M University System beginning in the fall of 2009. While universal design offers great strategies, it does not eliminate the need for accommodations. Instructors who apply universal design to their courses still make accommodations as asked, but most find they are much less than anticipated and that they are able to better serve those students who may not have disclosed a disability. Visit the DTN website if you are interested in learning more or joining an FLC.

References

Burgstahler, S., & Cory, R. (2008). *Universal design in higher education: From principles to practice*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education.

Cox, M. (2008). *FLC program director's and facilitator's handbook.* Oxford, OH: Miami University.

CAST. (n.d.). *Universal design for learning*. Retrieved February 26, 2009, from http://www.cast.org/