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Beyond Lectures: Insights from Business Discipline-

(Reflections, Transformations, and the Human Side of Teaching)

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UNIVERSAL DESIGN FOR LEARNING FOR NEURODIVERGENT STUDENTS: JOURNEY TOWARDS INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

Nazihah Omar, Khairunnisa Rahman, Rudza Hanim Mohamed Anuar, Ferri Nasrul

Introduction

I remember a student in my MGT269 class. He kept telling me his group members weren't doing their part. His behaviour made it hard for him to finish the assignments, which made up 70% of his grade. I tried to help him a few times. But it wasn't until I looked at the attendance list a third time that I realized he had ADHD. How did I miss something so important? It was a big mistake, something that now seems so clear.

At first, I didn't notice anything different about him. He seemed like any other student. But his active questions at the end of class always stuck with me. I completely forgot that students with conditions like autism or ADHD don't always look different from others. This event resonated deeply with me, as my own oldest daughter suffers from both autism and ADHD.

My experiences, both in class and at home, showed me how much we need teaching methods that work for all students. That's when Universal Design for Learning (UDL) came to mind. UDL isn't just a fancy term; it's a strong way to make our classrooms welcoming for everyone, especially our neurodivergent students.

Why Group Work Can Be Hard for Neurodivergent Students

For neurodivergent students, group work can be surprisingly difficult. Their brains often process information and social cues differently, creating hurdles that traditional group projects don't account for. While we often see group work as a great way to learn collaboratively, it can unintentionally create major problems for students with conditions like ADHD or autism. These issues aren't about their intelligence but rather how standard group work clashes with their unique learning styles. My experience with the student, who struggled so much with his group, really brought this home. It showed me how these challenges can directly affect a student's grades and overall well-being.

One key challenge is communication and understanding others. Neurodivergent students might find it hard to pick up on subtle social cues or unspoken rules or to adjust how they speak to fit the group. This can lead to misunderstandings, feeling left out, and a reluctance to speak up, even when they have valuable ideas. For instance, my student actively participated in class discussions. However, in a group context, he might have found it difficult to articulate his concerns clearly or understand what his peers were saying, which could have led him to believe that his group members weren't contributing adequately. The constant effort to navigate social interactions can be exhausting, taking away energy needed for the actual task.

Another issue arises with group roles and fairness. When tasks and responsibilities aren't clearly defined, confusion quickly sets in. Neurodivergent students may find it difficult to speak up for themselves, address unfair workloads, or handle disagreements. The social side of group projects can be incredibly draining, making it challenging for them to engage in the necessary give-and-take. This difficulty in asserting boundaries or challenging an uneven distribution of work likely contributed to my student's struggles with assignments, as he might have felt overwhelmed by the social pressure of confronting his group's perceived inaction.

Environmental factors, like too much noise or activity, also play a role. Classrooms, especially during active group sessions, can become very stimulating. The sounds of multiple

conversations, moving chairs, and general commotion can overwhelm neurodivergent students, making it incredibly hard for them to focus, process information, and participate effectively. While I didn't initially notice this with my student, it's possible such an environment made his internal struggles worse, further hindering his group engagement.

Finally, managing time and tasks often poses a significant hurdle due to executive function challenges, common in neurodivergent individuals. These challenges impact planning, organization, and starting tasks. Keeping track of schedules, coordinating deadlines, and breaking down big assignments into smaller steps can be daunting. These difficulties directly affected my student's ability to finish his assignments, as the complex demands of group project management from arranging meetings to ensuring timely submissions likely created a major barrier. The struggle to stay organized, combined with social complexities, created a compounding effect that ultimately impacted his academic success.

Understanding these challenges is the first crucial step toward creating more inclusive learning environments. Instead of expecting neurodivergent students to simply fit into traditional group work, we need to design learning activities that are flexible and supportive from the very beginning. This is exactly what Universal Design for Learning (UDL) aims to achieve, making our classrooms truly welcoming and accessible for every student.

What is Universal Design for Learning (UDL)

UDL is a way of teaching that helps everyone learn. Think of it like building a new university building. Instead of adding a ramp later for someone using a wheelchair, you design the building with ramps and wide doors from the very beginning. UDL does the same for education. It means planning lessons and activities so that all students, no matter how they learn, can understand and join in. The main idea is to remove any barriers to learning before they even show up, making the classroom a beneficial place for everyone.

UDL vs. Traditional Teaching

Many university classes unintentionally make learning challenging for neurodivergent students. These students can learn, but the lesson setup often hinders them. My experience showed me this clearly. Traditional teaching methods, even with good intentions, often create problems that make it tough for students with different learning styles. This is where Universal Design for Learning (UDL) offers a much-needed change.

Traditional classrooms often have several issues. They tend to use a "one-size-fits-all" approach, expecting everyone to learn and show what they know in the same way. This can be difficult for students who need more time or express themselves differently. There are also unspoken rules about how to act in class, which neurodivergent students might miss, leading to confusion or anxiety. If a teacher only lectures, students who learn best by seeing or doing things will struggle. Often, help comes too late, only after a student is already having problems, making them feel singled out. Finally, strict class setups don't allow students to use their best ways to learn. All these points likely added to the difficulties my student faced, making his academic journey harder than it needed to be.

UDL changes these problems by planning ahead. It helps teachers design classes from the start that welcome and support all students, including those who are neurodivergent. UDL believes that the problem is usually with the lesson design, not the student's ability. By fixing the design, learning becomes easier and more effective for everyone. This approach creates an environment where students can succeed without constantly fighting against how the class is structured.

The Three Principles of UDL

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is built on three main ideas, acting like clear guides for how we teach. The first principle is about getting students interested in learning (the "why" of learning). This means understanding that not all students are motivated by the same things. Some like new activities, while others prefer a set routine. To help every student, teachers should offer choices that grab their attention, keep them trying even when tasks are hard, and teach them how to manage their learning. For my student, offering different ways to engage might have helped him feel more connected and less overwhelmed by the group dynamics.

The second principle focuses on showing information in different ways (the "what" of learning). People learn best when information is presented in formats that suit them. Some need to see it, some need to hear it, and some need to read it. UDL encourages teachers to present information so it's easy to notice and understand. This could mean using large text, providing audio versions, or explaining new words with pictures and examples. If the student had access to information in multiple formats, it might have helped him process complex instructions or group discussions more effectively, reducing misunderstandings.

The third principle is about giving students multiple ways to show what they know (the "how" of learning). Not every student excels at writing essays or giving presentations. Some are better at speaking, while others might prefer to create projects or use special tools. UDL suggests offering flexible ways for students to respond, communicate their ideas, and get help with planning their work. This could involve allowing students to type, speak, or draw their answers or use tools like speech-to-text software. Had my student been given more options to demonstrate his understanding, especially within his group assignments, he might have found a path to success that better suited his strengths.

How to Use UDL in Your Class

Bringing Universal Design for Learning (UDL) into your teaching doesn't mean you have to change everything at once. Instead, it's about making thoughtful, planned adjustments that benefit all students, especially those who are neurodivergent. My experience, and what research tells us, points to simple yet powerful ways to use UDL. It starts with truly understanding your students. In the first week of class, try to find out how they prefer to learn and if they have any specific needs. A quick, anonymous survey can help you ask about their learning styles or what helps them focus. This approach helps create a classroom where everyone feels comfortable and understood.

A key part of UDL is to plan ahead, rather than just reacting. Instead of waiting for a student to struggle before offering help, design your lessons with everyone in mind from the very beginning. For example, if you plan group work, give each person clear roles or offer different ways for students to contribute, such as writing, drawing, or speaking. This helps prevent problems before they even start. If I had considered these things sooner, I could have avoided my mistake with my student with ADHD and ensured his success from day one.

UDL says that giving students choices is an effective way to keep them interested and motivated. Not everyone is excited by the same things, so giving options can make learning more appealing. This could mean letting students choose how they want to show what they have learned, perhaps through a research paper, a presentation, or a creative project. You can also connect what you're teaching to real-world situations that matter to them, making the learning feel more relevant. Additionally, providing flexible grouping options, allowing students to work alone, in pairs, or in small groups, helps them pick what works best for their learning style and comfort level.

Another important UDL principle is to show information in many ways. People take in information differently; some learn best by seeing, others by hearing, and some by reading. To support this, present your lessons using various formats. Use pictures, videos, and

diagrams alongside your lectures. Provide written notes for videos or audio versions of readings. This approach helps students who might find it hard to just listen or read. Using clear, simple language and explaining technical terms, perhaps with outlines or concept maps, also helps connect new ideas to what students already know. Sharing lecture notes or slides before class allows students to review them beforehand, so they can focus on understanding during class rather than just writing everything down.

Finally, UDL emphasizes letting students show what they know in different ways. Not all students are good at traditional tests or essays. Some might be better at speaking, creating projects, or using specific tools. Offer various options for students to prove their understanding, such as oral presentations, portfolios, or creative projects, allowing them to use their strengths. Encourage the use of helpful tools like text-to-speech software or apps that organize thoughts. Providing regular feedback and chances to revise their work also helps students learn from mistakes and improve. UDL is an ongoing process; regularly ask your students what works and be ready to adjust your teaching methods based on their feedback to make the learning environment better and more inclusive for everyone.

Conclusion

My journey, from not understanding a student's struggles to seeing the power of UDL, has taught me a lot. The problems neurodivergent students face in university aren't their fault; they're often caused by how lessons are designed. By using UDL's three main ideas – offering multiple ways to get students interested, showing them information, and letting them show what they know – instructors can create classes where every student can succeed. It's about changing our approach to teaching, not trying to change the student. This way, we not only help neurodivergent students but also make university a better place for everyone.

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