

This article makes the case that adopting universal design for learning in further education and training (FET) can help us reach every learner and reduce barriers to learning in the FET classroom. By offering flexibility, accessibility, voice, and choice in mainstream teaching and learning practice, we can reduce the need for individual add-on supports and provide a rich and engaging learning experience that benefits everyone.

I want to start by asking you to transport yourself out of our Covid-19-infused reality to a very different time and place. You're on a holiday with your friends in a beautiful Mediterranean city by the sea – let's say Barcelona. You've just checked in to your hotel and are out exploring the city. The sound of distant street music floats through the gentle bustle of Las Ramblas, and as the sun begins to set, the clinking of glasses across tables outside pretty cantinas marks the beginning of the evening's festivities.

Before dinner, you take a much-needed trip to the ATM. Your card is gleefully ingested by the machine, which then asks you a simple question. Obviously it's in Spanish, which you don't speak (for this story anyway). You can see that an empty box has appeared and correctly think, *No problem, it must be looking for my PIN*. Hurdle number one to a fun night out expertly navigated.

But now there's a second question, again in Spanish, this one less obvious. There are three answers to choose from, all in Spanish. You consider taking your chances on the most inviting option, but then panic sets in: *What if it's asking if I wish to cancel my card? Maybe it's offering me a loan? How am I going to bankroll the evening's tortillas and cervezas if this goes wrong?* You stand momentarily in an existential funk, before you see them in the corner of the screen: three little flags denoting German, English, and French. Relief flows through you as familiar words fill the screen and the joy of comprehension fills your brain. It turns out the ATM was only asking what kind of account you had, but no matter; you are now pulling crisp euro notes from the machine and are ready to skip on to whatever the night has in store.

If we look at what happened in your interaction with the ATM, you'll notice that the machine recognised that different people would require different ways to engage with and navigate its system; its designers built flexibility and choice into the interaction so you could engage with it on your terms. This recognition of the value of

Flexibility, Accessibility, Voice, and Choice

Universal design for learning can help us reach every FET learner



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flexibility, accessibility, and choice, to give people options at the point of delivery, is ingrained in consumer culture worldwide, and I think we all, at some level, understand that value and desire it.

Go to any sandwich bar and you'll find at least five types of bread, with ten spreads and twenty toppings, placing hundreds of combinations at your fingertips. In online stores selling picture frames, calendars, and photobooks, you are offered countless options for customising your purchase to your taste. In major clothes stores you'll find trousers, skirts, and tops designed for the smallest to the largest of people in every conceivable colour, shape, and style.

These businesses are recognising the huge diversity of the people they serve, and accordingly are designing their offerings to the edges of their customer base, rather than to some mythical average person. And yet, with an education system, we still often demand that the people we serve – our learners – engage with programmes on our terms only. In many cases, practitioners want to be inclusive but don't know how, thinking, *If it worked for me, I guess it will work for them?*

When there is a need or a legal obligation to accommodate certain student groups when 'our way' doesn't work for them, for example for those with disabilities, we often make one change, one time, for one student, and then do it all again when the next student who needs accommodating comes through the door.

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But there is another way: one that locates barriers to learning not primarily in the individual but in the curriculum itself, and seeks to remove as many of those barriers as possible at the point of delivery. It is an approach where we offer all students choice in how they engage with, understand, and demonstrate learning, and that responds to the huge variability in our classrooms by building flexibility and accessibility into everyday teaching practice. It seeks to give learners real agency in their learning and to recognise that it's their class, not ours.

It's called universal design for learning, UDL for short, and it's based on a fundamental truth that is borne out by neuroscience research: 'Learning is as unique to individuals as their fingerprints or DNA' (Hall, Meyer, and Rose, 2012). UDL is a set of principles and guidelines for educators to design teaching and learning interactions that address the needs of the widely variable learners in our classrooms. Developed by Harvard-based organisation CAST in the 1990s, UDL is based on research in both neuroscience and the learning sciences.

Neuroscience shows us that three key networks of the brain need to be activated to learn effectively, and that different people need different approaches to activate them. Research in psychology and the learning sciences reinforced these findings (Rose, Meyer, and Gordon, 2014), and CAST developed the UDL guidelines in response through a dynamic, collaborative, and developmental process.

These guidelines have flexibility, accessibility, voice, and choice at their core, and call on educators to respond to diversity and variability by

following three core principles in the design of learning interactions (CAST, 2018):

- Provide multiple means of engagement – the ‘Why’ of learning (engaging the affective networks of the brain).
- Provide multiple means of representation – the ‘What’ of learning (engaging the recognition networks of the brain).
- Provide multiple means of action and expression – the ‘How’ of learning (engaging the strategic networks of the brain).

By applying these principles and the associated guidelines in their everyday teaching practice, educators can remove barriers to learning and provide enriching and engaging learning experiences that reach everyone. Additionally, when UDL is implemented, the need for retroactive add-on supports to address individual needs is reduced by building in flexibility and accessibility at the point of delivery.

Professional Development in UDL

SOLAS’s FET: Facts and Figures 2018 series of statistical reports showcase the huge diversity among Further Education and Training (FET) learners, highlighting the particular need for these practices in a sector where diversity and variability are part of the ethos. But to implement UDL successfully across the sector, we need all parties to recognise that inclusion is everyone’s business. It will require both the active engagement of practitioners with UDL on the ground and the strategic commitment and support of SOLAS, the Education and Training Boards (ETBs), and college/centre management.

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SOLAS have signalled their intent in the new FET Strategy by making the provision of consistent learner support, underpinned by universal design, a strategic priority, and by committing to adopting a universal design for learning (UDL) approach in shaping its future provision (SOLAS, 2020).

On the ground, FET practitioners have shown they are ready and willing by signing up in their droves for the provision of CPD in this area. More than 600 signed up for AHEAD’s UDL for FET Summer School in July 2020, and similar numbers have registered for the AHEAD/UCD national roll-out of the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning’s ten-week UDL Badge course this winter (AHEAD, 2020).

The resources required by AHEAD to deliver these initiatives are provided by the UDL for FET project, commissioned by SOLAS and Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI). The development of the key project output, a guide for practitioners on implementing UDL in FET, is nearing completion.

Guide for practitioners on implementing UDL

The key developers of the guide, Ann Heelan (AHEAD) and Dr Thomas Tobin (a UDL expert from the US), have tapped into the rich vein of inclusive practice that already exists in FET, and have translated the CAST guidelines into FET contexts by placing real Irish practitioner stories of engagement

with UDL at the heart of the guide. The development of the guide has been underpinned by a wealth of practitioner consultation and site visits, and by significant engagement from the UDL National Advisory Committee/Subcommittee, made up of important FET stakeholders and representatives from other key stakeholders such as the Centre for Excellence in Universal Design.

With growing commitment from senior FET leaders and policymakers to supporting UDL, increasing practitioner engagement led from the ground up, and key practitioner guidance on implementation nearing completion, the stage is set for the large-scale adoption of UDL in FET. But there remains much to do to capitalise on this momentum, so I finish with a call to action and a request for you to reflect: How can you play your part as an actor on this stage?

National policymakers: How can you further support the adoption of UDL through state policy and resourcing? Senior ETB and college/centre leaders: How can you facilitate the time, networking, and professional development opportunities needed by practitioners to apply UDL on the ground?

Practitioners: How can you begin to use UDL to reflect on your practice and design learning interactions that offer learners voice, choice, flexibility, and accessibility?

If we can each answer those questions and act, we are well on the road to a UDL-infused FET system where inclusion is everyone's business.

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