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Tomorrows Disability Officer - A Cornerstone on the Universal Design Campus 'there are no strangers here – only friends you haven't met yet" - W B Yeats

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AHEAD with TCD

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This paper will explore the evolution of one of the key roles on campus for students with a disability in the context of Universal Design for Learning - that of the Disability Officer. The role of Disability Officer, while neither a teacher or a learner – is primarily occupied with all those engaged in making learning accessible. It is a role that is very much part of the learning experience for any student with a disability. The challenge for Disability Officers on a UDL campus is that while they are part of the learning environment on campus they - similar to other non-teaching professionals - can find it challenging to position themselves on the current UDL framework. In recent years Disability Officers in Ireland started an exploratory journey on their role in the future of Higher Education on a UDL campus and developed the first role document. As higher education becomes more attainable, curriculum develops and technology improves; making decisions about what will work for a student with a disability can require knowledge and expertise about not just teaching and learning, but also disability in the learning environment in and of itself. In creating this document, it became increasingly evident that UDL on campus was transforming not just the world of the student but also the world of others on campus, including that of the disability officer. Thus, while UDL is making waves on campus and redesigning not just pedagogical approaches; is it timely to explore the UDL principles and ask – what do we mean by learning community.

This paper will explore one of the nine principles of UDL – the eight principle that focuses on community - and examine what this means for others engaged in learning communities.

Key word: Universal Design for Learning, Third level learning, Disability Officer, Community of Learners

Fitting the Job to the woman: Fitting the woman to the job?

Stemming from a history of design and ergonomic principles that sought to answer the conundrum of "Fitting the job to the (wo)man: Fitting the (wo)man to the job? Universal Design for Learning (UDL) has moved design principles forward to the same extent as we have deviated from the medical model of disability. However, until now, these two important and conjoined concepts have not been fully explored in relation to the non-curricular issues that affect the modern learning environment.

As a concept, UDL has been adopted across the higher education system in Ireland as the key UDL principles support accessibility and inclusivity for an increasingly diverse student population. There is an increasing emphasis on supporting not just students with disabilities but a diversity of students and working to promote engagement within more diverse fields of study in Ireland.

This paper sets out a position that argues for a wider implementation of the theoretical underpinnings of the UDL principles to HEI policy and practices – notably that UDL provides a robust framework that can provide solutions to all HEI students and staff that extend beyond pedagogical instruction and built environment issues. Explicitly, we argue that the role of the Disability Officer can evolve and develop to become a cornerstone of a UDL centred campus of knowledge exchange.

They Have Arrived: Non-traditional Students . . . . Students with Disabilities

The increase in the numbers of students with disabilities has risen significantly in recent years. Between 2009/2010 and 2016/2017, the numbers rose from 6,321 (3.3% of the student population) to 12,630 (5.7% of the student population). Such rises can be attributed to societal, policy, and legislative shift from a medical model perspective, and that of special education, to that of a social model paradigm which argues for the need to reduce the systemic barriers that obstruct students with disabilities ". . . from gaining access to the same academic benefits . . ." (Wendelborg & Tøssebro, 2010, p. 702) as their non-disabled peers. Expanding the post-compulsory education opportunities for students with disabilities has become a priority national and international in recent decades. Many factors have contributed to this including the implementation of government sponsored access policies and the increased level of supports available to students with disability at all levels in the education

system. The Fund for Students with Disabilities in Ireland was established in 1994 with the explicit goal of supporting disabled students in further or higher education (Higher Education Authority (HEA), (2005). It was then recognised that students with disabilities lacked sufficient opportunity to access and participate fully in Higher Education (HEA, 2008). Consequently, in 2009 the Disability Access Route to Education (DARE) was launched nationally an innovative admission scheme used by colleges and universities to offers places to students with disabilities.

And so, Have They: Rising Numbers and Increased Diversity of Students on Campus
Importantly, the developments for students with disailbties can also be aligned with increases in numbers from other diverse groups. Admissions schemes for those from socio-disadvantaged communities (HEAR), adult learners seeking opportunity and programs such as 'Springboard' for graduates and professionals seeking career change in a recessionary world all have led to approximately 40% of the student population now being from a non-traditional group. This together with the decreasing retention rates have created a perfect storm and placed a demand on providers of education to rethink their engagement with learners.

UDL – a new phenomenon on campus
UDL is a new phenomenon that seeks to create inclusive and accessible environments so that greater numbers of learners can realise their potential.   However, it could be argued that the principles of UDL have suffered as they may have been considered as primarily of use to a pedagogical approach that requires teachers to redesign their instructional methods. Rather, we argue that UDL can present educators with flexible tools and approaches that can be deployed to address contemporary educational issues – notably the importance of the wider educational experience that exists beyond the lecture hall and seminar room. As a solution focused approach, UDL presents useful challenges - not just for those designing and teaching the curriculum, but also to those colleagues who have traditionally been tangential to the formal learning relationship.

UDL Principles – some challenges
The nine UDL principles are focused on teaching and learning in the classroom (e.g., Principle 1: Equitable use; Principal 3: Perceptible information [effectively communicated]).

For our argument, we focus here on Principal Eight – a "community of learners". We also take the approach that community is a broad concept that can have multiple meanings and participants in a traditional HEI setting.

To place this in context, we have already examined the changes in the higher education system that have led to the adoption of the UDL principles. We will now tease out how UD and UDL provide a framework that will lend itself to a more inclusive curriculum on campus. However, on campus there are more involved in successful learning than just students and academics / professors and we propose to explore this through a UDL lens. The challenge, when doing so, is that while it is easy to envisage this in relation to teaching staff, it not as apparent when positioning the "others".

We will tease out the 8th principle in particular and seek to propose that it could be "redefined" to include all others in the learning environment, thus enabling a shift from inclusive curriculum to inclusive learning environment. To do this we will particularly focus on the role of Disability Officer as it is a cornerstone for many students with a disability. The challenge is that if it is to emerge and align with the UDL theories it will need to find its place as it embraces and adapts to a new role in the future world of learning.

Universal Design Thinking adopted as a Solution in a Physical World

UD originated in the United States having been identified by Ronald Mace, an architect and wheelchair user. He proposed that design could be preemptive and that physical environments could be designed from the "get-go" to meet the needs of an increasing diverse individuals, thus making them more functional while also being more inclusive (Wilkoff & Abed, 1994). The term *universal design* (UD) emerged as a definition and was seen as a positive development of the social model of disability as it minimized the need for individual accommodations (Center for Universal Design, 1997).

UD and its original principles emerged from design thinking in the fields of architecture and technology and are very much aligned with the physical environment or physical things.

As noted by Welch (1995):

> The concept of UD goes beyond the mere provision of special features for various segments of the population. Instead it emphasizes a creative approach that is more inclusive, one that asks at the outset of the design process how a product, graphic

communication, building, or public space can be made both aesthetically pleasing and functional for the greatest number of users (p. iii)

UD as a concept was considered very desirable and was soon to be embraced in the world of policy – as a solution. The UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (UNCRPD), adopted by the General Assembly on December 13th, 2006, identified UD as a key concept in protecting the rights and dignity of people with disabilities in all aspects of life.

UD was soon to be explored as a model for the development of more inclusive physical learning spaces for an increasing population of students with disabilities accessing mainstream.   As the world of education embraced the concept

universal design underwent various linguistic permutations, including universal design in education, universal access design, universal learner-centered approach for instruction, universal curriculum access, and the more commonly used terms UDL and UDI. (P. 172 McGuire, Scott, & Shaw, 2006)

Whatever term is applied, a common theme is the focus of making educational strategies, curricula, and assessment approaches as inclusive as possible for as many students as possible with a view to 'enhancing the educational engagement for students with disabilities' (McGuire, Scott, & Shaw, 2006).

Thus UD offered solutions for things that were once considered inaccessible and as a theory it continues to offer an exciting framework for many disciplines including education to redesign themselves. It promotes a pre-emptive approach that designs for the greatest diversity of people from the outset.

UDL – a pedagogical approach

Universal Design of Learning as afore mentioned is an outgrowth of the UD model, and it uses UD principles, to design courses "to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design"

(*http://www.design.ncsu.edu/cud/about_ud/about_ud.htm,* cited in Burgstahler, 2009.) As students with disabilities attended education with their peers at primary and post primary

level it was thought that moving away from a traditional approach of 'one size fits all' to one of 'universal design' might enable inclusion for a greater diversity of learner. Rose and Meyer (2002) highlighted the disconnect between an increasingly diverse student population and a "one-size-fits-all" curriculum, and how this limits success for learners. They further discussed how the UDL concepts are grounded in emerging insights about brain development, learning and technology.

 In third level education, it is thought that universal design can offer access to an increasingly varied student population, including more "otherwise qualified" students with disabilities who will need fewer accommodations because inclusive features have been factored into the curriculum design and environment (Brinckerhoff, McGuire, & Shaw, 2002).

While a common theme of UDL is that it allows for a more inclusive environment for *everyone,* Welch and Palames (1995) acknowledge that UDL has its origins in the classroom or in the curriculum. CAST (Centre of Applied Special Technology) a not-for –profit organisation founded in 1984 have described UDL as an approach to planning and developing curricula so that it is designed for all learners (CAST, 2018). CAST identifies with three philosophies of UDL: (a) curriculum that provides multiple means of representation; (b) curriculum that provides multiple means of expression; and (c) curriculum that provides multiple means of engagement (CAST, 2018).

Thus UDL, as a further development of the UD approach, is firmly grounded in both theory and subsequent practices in the curriculum and classroom. It is considered the domain of the teacher.

Re-examining the UDL principles

UDL is premised on 9 Principles. These being:

1. Equitable use
2. Flexibility
3. Simple and intuitive instruction
4. Perceptible information (effectively communicated
5. Tolerance for error
6. Low physical effort

Note: This principle does not apply when physical effort is integral to essential requirements of a course.

7. Size and space for approach and use

8. A community of learners
9. Instructional climate (Reference required)

These 9 principles are predominantly a framework to assist teaching practice. To embrace these principles can mean a new and more inclusive curriculum but can also present challenges for tradition teaching and pedagogies. While this is clear – what often remains, unclear and has not been explored are the challenges presented for the wider learning community – those outside of the teacher/ student dyad. The UDL ideology in and of itself presents an opportunity to not just rethink the classroom but also to explore who and what is involved in today's learning community (the 8th principle).

A deeper exploration of the 8th principle: A Community of Learners

This principle has its origins in the classroom – and in the teacher / student relationship. It refers to the instructional environment and encourages an environment of interaction and communication among students and between students and faculty (Scott, McGuire, & Shaw, 2001). However, on campus learning relationships cannot be confined to the lecture hall/classroom as learning happens across the campus in a variety of ways. This has been influenced by technology, the increased emphasis on social learning and a recognition that there are places outside of the lecture hall such as the library where learning takes place. If UDL is to be embraced on campus – it cannot just be aligned with the student with a disability, peers and teachers – it demands that it engages all of the community in higher education – no prisoners! To do so means taking the opportunity to explore new paradigms and thinking.

The "Nexus": Positioning the Role of the Disability Officer in UDL Framework

As UDL is embraced and curriculum is redesigned for an increasingly diverse group of students, the role of the Disability Officers evolves from one of 'expert in disability' supporting the shift to inclusive learning environments to one of coordinator and advisor of reasonable accommodations.
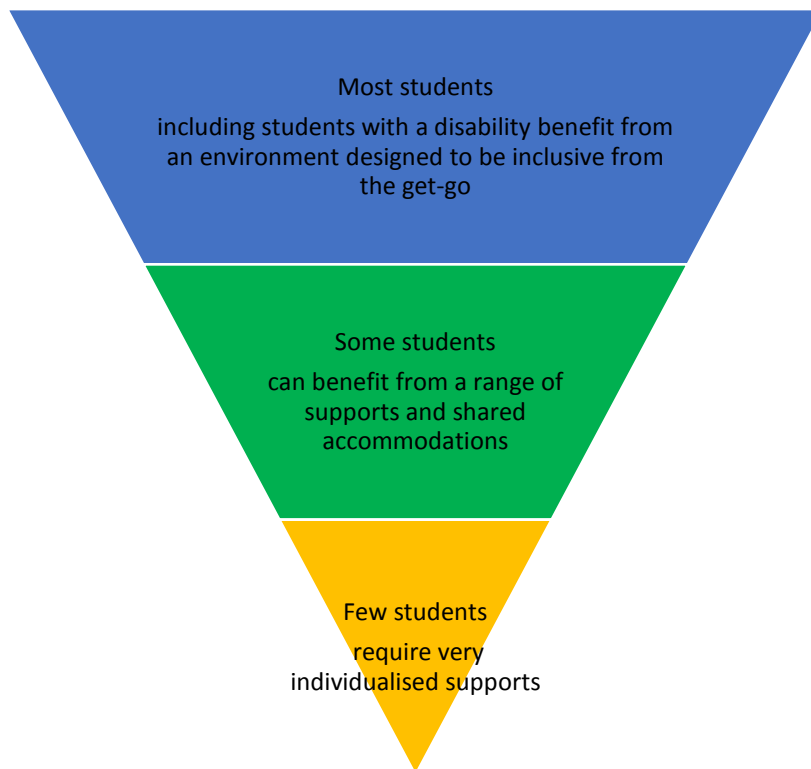
The bottom of the model is symbolic of the smaller numbers of students that engage with the Disability Service in an inclusive environment. This demonstrates the shift towards the larger numbers that benefit from activity by the Disability Officer that result in practices that benefit all students.

Figure 1: Disability Service funnel effect - Most, some, few approaches to needs assessment and increased inclusive teaching, learning, assessment and student independence
Shared by Trinity Disability Service, September, 2018.

The needs assessment is a systematic tool that is used to advise on modifications or additions that are identified as reasonable accommodations that enables a student with a disability to learn independently. Having an understanding of disability and education in learning environments is necessary and therefore this knowledge can also be used to 'disability proof' new curriculum. In doing so the disability officer can engage increasingly with curriculum development and examinations as well as with students who require accommodations. This leads us to examine the idea that on campus – the disability officer can play a key role in and for the community of learners.

UDL – a shared responsibility
If it is accepted that learning takes place outside the lecture hall and seminar room, UDL then becomes a shared responsibility.   A UDL campus will support learning across campus, and so truly redesign the learning experience for not just students with a disability but all

students. If "equity of participation in education" (Kinsella & Senior, 2008, p. 63) is to be realized – this needs to ask more from not just the teacher/ academic in reconsidering their role in learning and how they apply it on campus.

The Disability Officer is very much part of the community on campus and is also a resource that can be utilised for more than a student with a disability. The role was often considered an administrative role and a broker of support services working exclusively to ensure that students with a disability are supported in all aspects of learning. As third level education seeks to ensure that these students are included in a system that is embracing Universal Design for Learning – the role in and of itself has to adapt. If the "challenge is to make staff internalize inclusivity as a general ethos" (Hopkins 2011, p. 723), the added challenge for the Disability Officer is to redesign their role to support more than just the student with a disability. They now have to step up and become a true 'inclusivity expert' in the UDL world.

Re-examining the Role of Disability Officer through a UDL lens
The journey of one of the 'community' of learners - the Disability Officer

#Evolution from Administrator to Professional Resource#

Old
- Disability Support Services - an administrative function predominantly addressing problems for students with a disability
- The terms "support" and "services" and such medical model terms are often used.
- The implication is that students with disabilities need "support"
- This language and approach continues to keep the focus on the student as the problem

New
- Disability Resource Center - a resource for students and the campus community
- Evolving into an 'expert role' on campus in the creation of more usable and inclusive environments.
- Disability is now taking its place as part of the diversity agenda
- Students with disabilities are increasingly seen as a driver in the inclusive learning discourse
- The Role of the Disability Officer on a UDL Campus is a significant player in the learning community

UDL – Moving from Inclusive Pedagogical Approaches to Environment of Learning

The idea of community is about relationships that develop a culture of learning – and while that may have been initially considered based in the classroom and pedagogical approaches – perhaps it needs to be a bit more on a UDL campus. In developing the Role Document for the Disability Officer, it led to an investigation of UDL in and of itself and the ecology it seeks to base itself in. We have established that the Disability Officer should be recognized as part of a the UDL campus – but where to position this role is a challenge. It is perhaps new thinking for the theoretical model– be that a new principle in and of itself or an expansion of Principle 8 should be considered.

Conclusion

This paper set out to explore the emerging role of Disability Officer and how it is to be interpreted and implemented in the UDL lens. To appreciate the emerging role – more needs to be investigated about UDL – as a theoretical framework and principles of practice, most particularly in the context of those involved in learning – beyond the teacher student relationship.

1. To take the UDL principle community of learners as a broader concept than was previous understood – it must include those that were tangential and are often utilised as scaffolding to the learning experience.
   There was a thinking that on a UDL campus – no disability officer would be needed. However when reviewing UD and UDL it was never claimed that an environment would be totally inclusive. They aim to be "*accessible to the greatest number of users*" (P. 172 McGuire & Scott 2006). What is emerging is a new disability professional and their role in the UDL world. It is apparent from this exploration that the new role changes the relationships on campus between the disability office and its people. It is also clear that disability officers have unique expertise and knowledge about disability, one that will continue to be a strong voice in the inclusive agenda on an inclusive campus.

2. To review a true UDL experience we should explore the habitat of the university and learning environment and reflect on the wider ecological perspective (e.g.: Bronfenbrenner or Vygotsky), so that all people are positioned and have a clear idea of their role. The academic/ researcher, the administrative/support staff, the student

population – they are all part of the UDL revolution. It is timely to appreciate and rethink engagements on campus going forward. It is also worth exploring what we understand by 'community' in a learning environment in the broadest possible sense.

3. These changes, as already discussed, in turn have created an opportunity to engage all involved in learning. If this engagement is to take a true UD/ UDL ethos, it needs to be inclusive, diverse, authentic, holistic and egalitarian. It also demands that disability be considered from the viewpoint of what it has to offer – rather than what it lacks. While this paper examined the theories of UDL and the evolution of the role of Disability Officer, it uniquely did this by bringing together the different perspectives of those engaged and living this discourse on campus – a Disability Officer, an Academic, a Disabled Academic and a PhD student (mature!). UD and UDL affords us the opportunity to reexamine the world and community of learning – as a principle embedded in the ethos of design – should it not continually be evolving to recognize and embrace the continuing changes for all involved in education.

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http://www.tcd.ie/disability/people/dtreanor.php

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