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How to Reach (Almost) All Learners with Universal Design for Learning

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Contact North / Contact Nord
Webinar Series
August 25, 2022

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On the screen is an image from the 1923 silent film *Safety Last*, where the star Harold Lloyd dangles from the face of a rapidly-disintegrating clock high above the street. As you are looking ahead to being in the classroom—but having to be prepared to continue with hybrid, flexible, and “toggle” teaching, should the need arise—what is your biggest concern about the interactions that you will have with your rural and remote students?

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On the screen is an image of students studying together in a classroom. One student has hands on a keyboard, everyone has a laptop, and one student is pointing to an off-camera screen where another student is projecting his computer desktop.

When we say “universal design for learning,” this is what we mean: the familiar multiple means of engagement, representation, and action & expression.

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A simpler way to approach the principles of UDL, though, is to adopt “plus one” thinking. If there’s one way for an interaction to happen now—between learners and materials (this is where everyone usually starts), other learners, instructors, support staffers, or the community—make just one more way for that to take place. While this approach doesn’t cover every possibility, it ensures that there is at least one alternative path for people to choose. It’s that choice that supports the positive outcomes: fewer people have to ask for special treatment, instead finding a welcome path built in. And for those learners who do still need one change, one time, for one person, the existence of plus-one choices is a supportive signal to them for their conversations with us.

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One thing I heard from your colleagues when I did my “homework” about the communities whom Contact North serves was the number of learners with long commutes for learning: up to two hours each day in cars, buses, and trains to get to a campus or training location. Regardless of where our students live, the biggest predictor of their success—with far more effect than the quality of our teaching, their cultural background, or the types of support services we offer—is time.

Students who are able to make time for study, preparation, homework, and practice beyond the formal spaces and times that we have with them: these are the people who are best able to stick with us. And the difference between stopping in to office hours and stopping out of college all together can be as little as 20 minutes a day.

So, I’d like to ask you to re-frame your thinking about how to keep your students engaged: think about where they are when they are on their own. Chances are, it’s commuting.

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When I talk about accessibility these days, I’m talking about barriers way beyond our ability profiles. I chop the end of the word “accessibility” off, and now I talk about “access,” broadly.

On the screen are photos of me from a few years ago using a satellite uplink to teach an online course while I was canoeing the French River north of Georgian Bay. Mobile data service can be spotty or non-existent in large parts of the province—and few people have a satellite antenna just lying around. Where and when do your learners have time in their busy days when they could be preparing, studying, reviewing? And how can we get them the information and access to be able to do those things?

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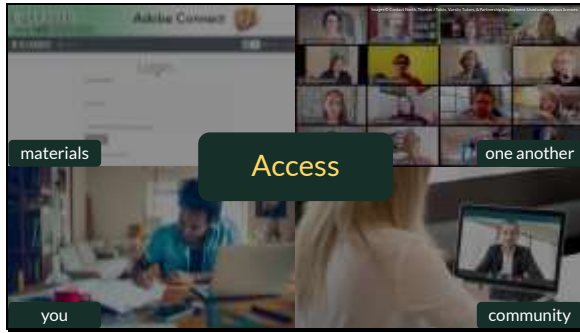


Access, Assessment, & Engagement

On the screen is a photo of students doing field work in a grassy area near a forest. In addition to containers and equipment, we see their laptops, notebooks, mobile phones, and books.

The shifts related to the pandemic made flexible and supportive “good enough” delivery part of college and university missions. Our rural and remote learners continue to need flexibility in our teaching and learning. Each of the following best practices follows the guiding principle of simplifying our focus in order to honor the circumstances under which our students are now learning with us.

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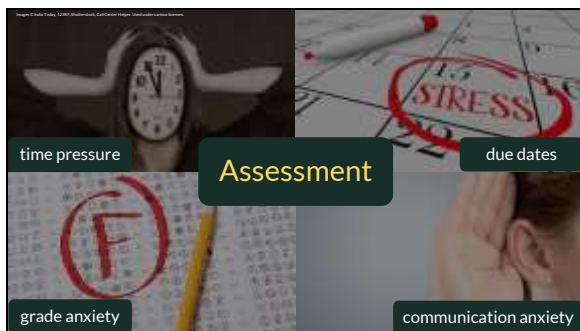


It's likely that you have, in past semesters, made some accommodations for students with disability barriers: you know, alternative versions of readings or course materials, allowing for sign-language or transcription helpers to come into the classroom.

Well, now everyone has barriers to access: time and tech, especially outside of our formal classroom and lab interactions. Think about how you will set up your students for getting access to ...

- **course materials:** post content in the learning management system, your media hosting service, Google Docs, even on thumb drives: anywhere students can get it. Provide more than one format (use the free Ally COVID-19 tool at <https://ally.ac/covid19/> to do this fast) so students don't have to have special software on their devices to get access.
- **one another:** make at least one space where students can talk with you and with each other. Bonus points if you set up one open-ended "water cooler" or "course lounge" space that is dedicated to anything *but* course-related talk, and then some more structured spaces where you tell students exactly how you'd like them to engage or collaborate (oh, and ditch the "post once, reply twice" stuff).
- **you:** The single best thing you can do is to offer a 10-minute one-to-one phone call with your remote students who'd like one, just to say hi and check in. Ask after the first week, and again before a big due date in your course. Don't want them to have your cell number? Use remind.com or set up a [Google Voice](https://www.google.com/voice/) number.
- **the community:** It sounds counterintuitive, but the more you can get students away from their computers and devices, the more engaged they are likely to be. Get them connecting with colleagues in your field, people in your community who work with your concepts. Get students working on real projects, real problems, or at least communicating and hearing the stories of those using the skills and knowledge you teach. The less your course is a self-contained box, the better.

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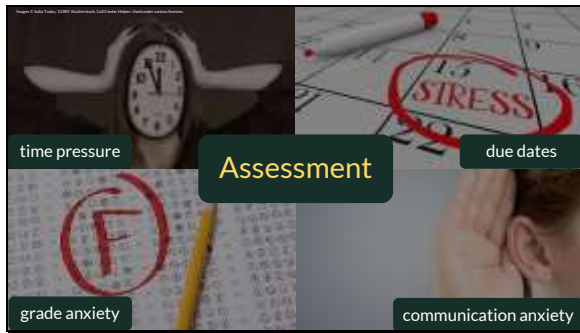


One best practice that we should bring from remote instruction back into the classroom is to re-frame assessment. And not with remote proctoring, browser lockout software, or plagiarism-scanning software. There is really one thing that actually works: lowering student anxiety and pressure.

Students are not out there cheating any more than they usually do, although one thing that could increase cheating is putting students into a bind where they get tempted—you know, like moving everyone to a hastily constructed online environment with new rules and social norms. Something like that.

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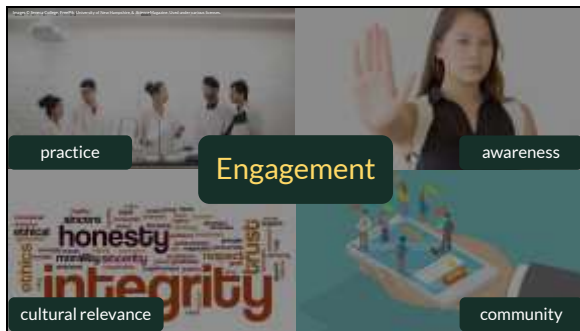
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Put plainly, students are most tempted to act dishonestly when they feel anxiety and pressure. Most don't act on those temptations regularly, but we all have our tipping points. The current shift to remote instruction can create both anxiety and pressure. The best thing that we can all do, regardless of the subjects we teach or support, is to offer students options, voices and choices.

- **Lower time pressure:** don't put time limits on your online activities that support your face-to-face instruction, including exams.
- **Lower due-date pressure:** allow late submissions, even if you lower the grade for such things (I don't, but do like you do).
- **Lower grade anxiety:** spread out the points across activities and avoid having one big thing carry enough points to possibly wreck a final grade. Or, consider minimalist grading ([Peter Elbow](#)), specifications grading ([Linda Nilson](#)) or ungrading ([Jesse Stommel](#)).
- **Lower communication anxiety:** Explicitly tell students that you are open to hearing about the challenges they face, and give them multiple avenues for making contact if things don't go as planned. Actually *say* that you are willing to accept late work, offer extensions, think of accepting revised work—whatever you are willing to do, say it, so that students do not feel that you are unapproachable and they have no choice but to "make the grade" any way they can.

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Engagement could easily have been first in the list. Even in ordinary times, our students can get the sense that they don't need to come our classrooms—or worse, that they don't belong there—for both overt and unintended reasons: all of the examples we provide involve middle-class white people. We don't use language that includes them. They don't yet have models for how to respond when we challenge their assumptions and ideas—or they don't feel safe in our conversations.

Before you think “buck up, buttercup: college is where you learn how the real world works” and “we can't cater to every snowflake poor-us category” (both things I've actually heard from colleagues), there's a business-continuation reason to adopt inclusive practices. It's even more important when we aren't there in the classroom physically with students: those students who have a sense of belonging, choice, a voice in their classes, safety, and control over their circumstances are more than twice as likely to persist, be retained, and recommend our institutions to their friends.

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As you look at the interactions that you will design for your students, think about inclusion four ways:

- **Practice:** if you wondered where students “went” when they had the option to be remote learners, it’s most likely because they felt they didn’t need the real-time parts of our courses. Our colleagues in music, the applied arts, theatre, and lab-based courses felt the lack of “practicing together” keenly during the pandemic, and they are eager to pick those interactions back up in the classroom. A good portion of the cameras-off-and-not-participating response from learners has to do with how we break up the time we have with them. Unless our real-time spaces include practice, conversation, and something beyond information-presentation, students are less likely to want to be there, whether in the classroom or on a live Zoom session. Where possible, flip your course to provide new information when students are working alone, and then use together time for practice.
- **Awareness:** study about countering invisible oppression, recognizing micro-aggression, avoiding labels, and referring inclusively about gender, race, and ability. Then tell your students that your space is a welcoming one along those dimensions.
- **Cultural relevance:** consider how interactions are intelligible to non-native speakers, how to frame difficult class conversations, and how to create a shared understanding of academic integrity standards.
- **Community:** foster a sense of belonging, being “a part of” instead of “apart from,” and give first-generation college learners a template for “how to be a student in this environment” (to work against imposter syndrome).

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With access, assessment, and engagement as guiding principles—and referring back to the big concerns with which we began—what are

- some specific practices that you see as possibilities for your remote course prep,
- questions that you still have about any of the connections we’ve been making together,
- ideas you have for collaboration or design work,
- things you are already doing that we have underlined as effective or important?

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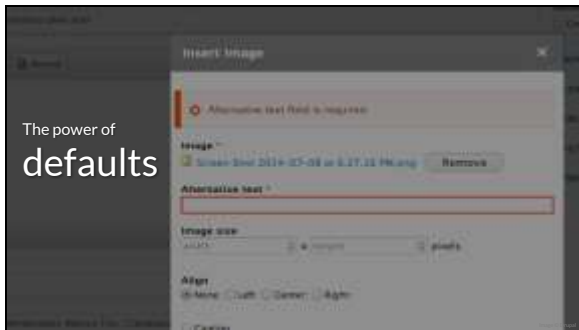


On the screen now is an image of a man standing on a box in an outdoor space, holding a microphone as he speaks to an audience. This is “Bughouse Square” in Boston, where anyone can stand up and speak to the public about any topic.

My hope is that, during our session just now, and in the remainder of this conference event, that you will gain at least one way that you can become a secret, sneaky evangelist for Universal Design for Learning or another way to lower barriers for learners in remote and rural Ontario.

I’d like to offer three of them now.

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A key to UDL is to harness the power of defaults. On the screen is a dialogue box in a learning management system that warns “alternative text field is required” for an image that is being uploaded.

Reminding people, training people, pleading with them to remember to practice inclusive techniques consistently is doomed to be ever only a partial solution to a challenge that requires near-perfect adoption if it is to be effective. There are already whole shelves worth of legal requirements related to making materials accessible, and yet colleges and universities continue to be sued for their inaccessible materials.

Rather than trust to everyone doing the right thing, assign resources to create systems that just require good practices, like the required alt-text field on the screen, or a work flow in your media services area that requires the staff to create captions for all video content produced through that office. This part of UDL helps to normalize the work of making engagement, representation, and action choices. It moves accessibility and inclusion from “extra effort” to “everyday tasks.”

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The smiling academic advisor on your screen who is meeting with a graduate student and pointing out career option on her computer screen is an example of moving UDL beyond the classroom and formal teaching-and-learning interactions.

While UDL had its beginnings in the classroom, it is a framework for lowering barriers across various learning interactions in which our campuses engage. And there are a lot of learning interactions happening in spaces far beyond the classroom, lab, and lecture hall.

Your advisors are teaching students how to navigate the systems of your college or university. Your tutoring staff are teaching study skills. Your mental health counselors are teaching coping strategies. Your librarians are teaching how to assess and work with information. Wherever students interact with support services, think of how they are teaching and learning interactions. If students are learning something—even if it’s not part of the academic curriculum—we can apply the principles of UDL to lower barriers, increase engagement, and support learner voice, choice, and agency.

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Across all of our outreach, we should commit to core UDL applications to be implemented institution-wide, along with milestones for measuring success. At Kennesaw State University, Jordan Cameron came up with [The Basic Four](#):

- **Image alt-text.** The photo of Meryl Streep on your screen has descriptive text beneath it.
- **Basic document formatting.** Using semantic structure, list styles, tables, contrast, and descriptive links as in the graphic of a file being composed on a laptop.
- **Video captions & transcripts.** Ensure that they are synchronized, equivalent, & accessible, as shown with the captions for a scene with a woman and man reading books.
- **Choosing accessible third-party resources.** Perform accessibility testing of existing and new systems with learners from across the ability spectrum (and include mobile-device testing). Don't buy products that don't have VPATs (Virtual Product Accessibility Templates), and test to see if the claims in the VPAT actually reflect the operation of the tool or product.

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On the screen is a photo that I took when I was grocery shopping outside of Chicago some years back. It's winter time, with snow and slush on the ground, and the photo depicts a parking lot with cars in it. The focus of the image is an accessible parking spot that has the trolley corral in the parking spot, making it impossible for anyone who needs the accessible spot to actually use it.

I took out my mobile phone, snapped the photo, and went to Twitter. "Dear @NameofGroceryStore, this is @ThomasJTobin. I'm at your River Forest, Illinois location." Then I switched to all caps: "NOT COOL." And I pressed "send."

Here is the power of social media. Not five minutes later—I was still putting oranges and bananas into my cart—my phone buzzed in my pocket. It was a tweet—from Corporate HQ! "Indeed, @ThomasJTobin, not cool. We're calling the store manager right now."

Hooray! I did a little victory dance right there next to the cabbages. I'd done something good for the world.

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Indeed, when I had finished my shopping, someone was parked in the accessible spot! In Illinois, we use mirror hang-tags for disability permits (I looked).

My joy was short lived, though, because the store staff had just moved the corral over into the striped part of the pavement, so that the person couldn't open their doors all the way.

What's my point? If we aim for perfection, to lower every barrier, we'll see the enormity of the tasks that stand before us, and we'll suffer from "analysis paralysis," and not even start.

I'll take progress over perfection any day. Define one barrier. Work on one activity. Expand one assignment or interaction. Take one action. Then come back and do something different. But don't try to do everything all at once.

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On the screen is a table laden with food. There are tortilla chips, guacamole, various salsas, roasted corn, tortillas, black beans, and a "litre margarita" in a glass jar. This is take-away food that, I hope, puts you in mind of what you'll take away from this session.

Now that you have been part of our conversation, what is one thing that you will take away and try out, whether it's an idea or a practice?

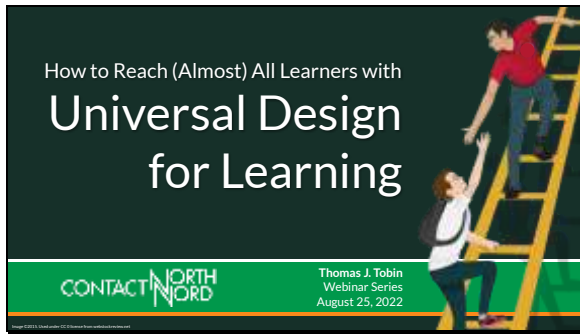
We won't play any music for this lightning-round wrap-up. Please share *one* thing in the **Chat** feature that you will take away from our time together, and I'll repeat as many of them as I can.

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One the screen is an image of many people's hands holding their cell phones around a table. If you're on Twitter, please take a moment to commit to taking one action for inclusive design. Post "I commit to #UDL," along with the @ContactNorth handle and my handle @ThomasJTobin.

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Thank you!

I'm always glad to hear from colleagues, so whether you'd like to ask questions, share your story, or just connect on social media, I welcome your outreach.

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