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Building inclusive Learning Development spaces '…but we don't have time for universal design'

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Presentation abstract

This project sets out to convert a Continuous Professional Development (CPD) workshop on Dyslexia awareness into a series of mini asynchronous learning experiences. The aim is that learning and teaching staff will access the short asynchronous activities by scanning a Quick Response (QR) code; these activities will provide a brief insight into relevant examples of neurodiverse experiences, followed by tips on changes to professional practice that can embed inclusive and universal design.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is an ethos that we all strive for in our various roles in Learning Development; It embraces the principles of the social model of disability, which the Office of Students (2019) states 'is not about "fixing" the individual but about restructuring environments and attitudes around them'. As highlighted by Dettmer and Welton (2024) the learning community seeks to promote the social model of disability when promoting inclusive learning environments.

Stripe and Ntonia's article on implementing change for inclusive teaching (2023) highlights that the challenges faced include lack of time for staff CPD, negative attitudes towards reasonable adjustments, and mindsets that are not conducive to inclusivity. These factors are sector wide; time is precious for many learning and teaching staff, and attending CPD workshops, particularly when it means adding to an existing heavy workload, is not typically at the top of priority lists. However, as proposed, engaging in a 30-60 second asynchronous activity, might lead to some 'quick wins' for the adoption of universal design principles.

The proposed short asynchronous activities discussed here are based on experiences of neurodiverse learners when faced with non-inclusive environments, and provide strategies that can be immediately implemented. It is hoped that by scanning a QR code and engaging in learning experiences 'on the go', this approach will encourage staff to see that inclusive and universal design can start with small changes and have a fundamental impact on students' learning experiences.

Keywords: universal design for learning (UDL); neurodiversity; inclusivity; higher education.

Community response

Most people working within Learning Development (LD) appreciate the importance of collaborating with both academic staff and students to truly affect change within an institution. This project and poster gave the LD community insight into how we might influence change within our institutions by creating short, bite-sized learning opportunities for our colleagues. In doing so, the author has found a way to open up new channels of conversation on UDL and the ways in which they can be incorporated in the student learning journey.

> I'm such a fan of 'quick wins'—which is not to say this project has been quick or easy, but rather that the short videos produced empower staff to embrace those "quick win" moments that can make such a difference for learners [...] I like that you're targeting staff with this strategy: not every lecturer will sign up to attend a full-hour workshop on UDL, but a two-minute video on their lunch break? Sure! (Alice Stinetorf, University of Southampton)

Next steps and additional questions

This presentation raises some very pertinent questions about the nature of staff training and development within higher education. Clearly it will be very important to evaluate the impact of this study to see whether it offers a new model that can be adapted and adopted to wider contexts.

One 'elephant in the room' here may be that there is no regulation of staff training beyond some expectations of formal qualifications such as Postgraduate Certificates in Education, which may have been undertaken many decades ago and not revisited. There is both a need to attract staff to such training, often in high pressure working environments where attention is a precious resource, and a need to ensure staff are equipped and empowered to support students with a wide diversity of backgrounds and individual circumstances.

Questions provoked by this innovative and timely presentation include:

- What are the best methods of empowering staff to understand diverse student needs?
- How do we enable cultural change within institutions to better support our students?
- Are there non-traditional means of staff training which provide better opportunities for colleagues to pick up key concepts and tips without having to commit excessive time?
- How can technology help staff to catch up with concepts and ideas they need to know?

Author's reflection

The development of the '…but we don't have time for universal design' project allowed me to explore and refine an idea that I had been considering for some time. I would like to express my gratitude to AldinHE for providing the opportunity and platform that enabled me to explore and bring the idea to fruition.

Reflecting upon the design of the videos, I encountered the initial challenge of producing engaging and informative videos limited to 90 seconds. Despite best efforts to maintain the 90 second cap, the pace felt rushed and hindered the effectiveness of the content. Therefore, after multiple attempts, I revised the videos with a two-minutes format, finding this the ideal balance allowing for an asynchronous activity, quick reflections and tips on inclusive practice. In addition, the two-minute format lent itself to the catchy title of 'Take Two' and with the convenience of scanning a QR code, both effectively attracted the interest of colleagues.

One critique of the videos could be that, while thought provoking and informative, they can be perceived as a didactic approach to learning. To enhance the learning experience, the next phase of this project will focus on exploring additional topics and more interactive approaches to asynchronous CPD activities. This will involve collaboration with the University's Learning Design team and engaging with wider faculty members to identify learning and training needs. The goal is to ensure the delivery of high-quality learning opportunities while adhering to the principle of achieving 'quick wins.'

The idea of 'quick wins' received positive feedback from both ALDinHE peers and colleagues at the University of Suffolk. Many shared that we all often face the challenge of limited time to attend or deliver continuing professional development (CPD) activities. Additionally, several colleagues noted the value of having reminders regarding easily implementable changes to academic practice that can provide universal benefits.

The response to the project has prompted valuable discussions and highlighted several important topics for further consideration. Notably, while many institutions provide mandatory training on topics such as Health and Safety or Safeguarding, there appears to be a significant gap in regulated training focused on inclusive practices. However, completion of some form of Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education is often a requirement. It is with this in mind, that I have initiated discussions with our programme lead for the Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice. We are exploring ways to further develop the 'Take Two' videos and how to integrate these 'quick wins' into the curriculum of the Universal Design and Inclusive Practice modules.

It is our hope that by promoting the idea that Universal Design can be easily and quickly implemented, these small changes will contribute to a more inclusive institutional culture overall.

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Author details

Alexandra Read is an Academic Skills Advisor at the University of Suffolk. In her role, she provides academic skills and learning support through individual sessions with students as well as delivering workshops embedded through aligned courses. Additionally, Alex actively contributes towards the development of Inclusive CPD training within the institute, focusing on her areas of expertise and interest, which includes Specific Learning Differences (Splds), Inclusive Practice and Universal Design in Higher Education.

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