

Practically Speaking

IS REASONABLE ADJUSTMENT A DEFICIT IDEOLOGY?

Greg Alchin
Learning Experience Designer
Apple Distinguished Educator

“There exists, for everyone, a sentence - a series of words - that has the power to destroy you. Another sentence exists, another series of words, that could heal you. If you're lucky you will get the second, but you can be certain of getting the first.” Philip K. Dick, VALIS

Language can empower our thinking and actions or it can constrict our thinking and creates barriers to participation. If we go back several decades, the terms handicapped and retarded were regularly used to label people, frame policy and control programs. Whilst the language we use today is far more inclusive and respectful, is it now time to reexamine the ideas and resultant actions of around the concept of reasonable adjustment?

The Disability Discrimination Act (1992) and Disability Standards for Education (2005) are landmarks in the social and education landscapes about the rights of people with disability. The language used in the DDA and DSE has framed the thinking of policy makers and educational leaders around Australia. The NSW Board of Studies, Teaching & Educational Standards' new Collaborative Curriculum Planning Tool is a recent example.

Both the DDA and DSE articulate the legal obligations and responsibilities that educational institutions have to ensure that all learners (with or without a disability) are able to participate in learning on the same basis. Furthermore, to ensure that all learners are able to participate in learning on the same basis involves the educational institution taking reasonable steps so that any adjustments required are made in a timely manner.

The aims and purpose of the DDA and DSE are not in dispute. What does need further examination is how the language of reasonable adjustment unwittingly creates barriers because of the myth of the average learner.

There has been considerable educational research that recognises that learners bring a huge variety of skills, needs, and interests to their learning. In particular, the Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST) has specialised in the study of learner variability from pedagogical, neuro-scientific and cultural perspectives.

CAST's research has highlighted that advances in neuroscience have revealed that learner differences are as varied and unique as our DNA or fingerprints particularly in the three neural networks of Recognition, Strategy and Affect. The extent of these differences debunks many presumptions particularly about the mythical 'average' learner, and teachers who 'teach to the middle.' The research clearly identifies that learner variability is 'the norm, rather than the exception.'

The concept of a reasonable adjustment implies that time and energy is invested in designing learning experiences and assessments for an average group before considering those learners at the margins. As such it is a reactive rather than proactive strategy that is also based on the myth of the average learner. Furthermore, because it is a reactive strategy in too many cases the same amount of time and energy is not invested in the adjustments and therefore the learners at the margins can be further disadvantaged.

To move to an inclusive and proactive approach, education must begin from the point of recognising that learner variability is the norm, rather than the exception. This redefines our learning design goal to designing inclusive learning opportunities that are usable by all learners, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialised design.

Rather than reactive adjustments, this requires considered thought about how to design in flexibility in the ways information is presented, learners respond or demonstrate knowledge and skills, and subsequently build and sustain engagement in the learning process.

A curricular design framework for supporting learner variability is CAST's Universal Design For Learning Guidelines (UDL). The UDL Guidelines provides the understanding and processes on how to create curricula that meets the needs of all learners from the start. This is achieved through designing in flexibility of goals, methods, materials, and assessments as a means to reduce barriers, as well as optimise levels of challenge and support.

Inspired by CAST's research Basham, Diedrich and Lawrence's UDL Instructional Planning Process (UDL-IRN, 2011) provides a five-step planning process to follow when using the UDL instructional framework. It is similar to Wiggins & McTighe's (2006) curriculum design model of *Understanding by Design*, only more explicit on learner variability.

The time has come to retire the concept of 'reasonable adjustment' and move to the more inclusive process of designing in flexibility through universal design for learning. Doing so is more in keeping with aims of the Disability Discrimination Act (1992) and Disability Standards for Education (2005) as it enables all learners to participate in learning on the *same basis from the start*.

UDL INSTRUCTIONAL PLANNING PROCESS (UDL-IRN, 2011)

As a framework, UDL requires educators to think proactively about the needs of all learners. In consideration of the UDL Critical Elements, educators implementing UDL should use a backwards design instructional process that incorporates the following five steps.

Step 1: Establish Clear Outcomes

Establish a clear understanding of the goal(s) of the lesson (or unit) and specific learner outcomes relate to:

- The desired outcomes and essential student understandings and performance for every learner. (What will learn look like? What will students be able to do or demonstrate?)
- The desired big ideas and their alignment to the established standards within the program of study that learners should understand.
- The potential misunderstandings, misconceptions, and areas where learners may meet barriers to learning.
- How will goals be clearly communicated to the learners, in ways that are understandable to all learners?

Step 2: Anticipate Learner Variability

Prior to planning the instructional experience teachers should have a clear understanding of the barriers associated with the curriculum as it related to learner variability within their environment. Understandings should minimally include:

- Curriculum barriers (e.g., physical, social, cultural, or ability-level) that could limit the accessibility to instruction and instructional materials.
- Learner strengths and weaknesses specific to lesson/unit goals.
- Learner background knowledge for scaffolding new learning.
- Learner preferences for representation, expression, and engagement.
- Learner language preferences.
- Cultural relevance and understanding.

Step 3: Measurable Outcomes and Assessment Plan

Prior to planning the instructional experience, establish how learning is going to be measured. Considerations should include:

- Previously established lesson goals and learner needs.
- Embedding checkpoints to ensure all learners are successfully meeting their desired outcomes.
- Providing learners multiple ways and options to authentically engage in the process, take action, and demonstrate understanding.
- Supporting higher-order skills and encouraging a deeper connection with the content.

Step 4: Instructional Experience

Establish the instructional sequence of events. As a minimum plans should include:

- Intentional and proactive ways to address the established goals, learner variability, and the assessment plan.
- High-expectations for all learners.
- High quality content integrated with explicit and targeting teaching.

Considerations should be made for how to support multiple means of...

- Engagement: A variety of methods are used to engage students (e.g., provide choice, address student interest) and promote their ability to monitor their own learning (e.g. goal setting, self-assessment, and reflection)
- Representation: Teacher purposefully uses a variety of strategies, instructional tools, and methods to present information and content to anticipate student needs and preferences
- Expression & Action: Student uses a variety of strategies, instructional tools, and methods to demonstrate new understandings.

Step 5: Reflection and New Understandings

Establish checkpoints for teacher reflection and new understandings. Considerations should include:

- Whether the learners obtained the big ideas and obtained the desired outcomes. (What data support your inference?)

- What instructional strategies worked well?
- How can instructional strategies be improved?
- What tools worked well? How could the use of tools be improved?
- What strategies and tools provided for multiple means of representation, action/ expression, and engagement?
- What additional tools would have been beneficial to have access to and why?
- Overall, how might you improve this lesson?

REFERENCES

Centre for Applied Special Technology. www.cast.org

Disability Discrimination Act 1992. (1992) Retrieved from <http://www.comlaw.gov.au/Details/C2014C00013>

Disability Standards for Education 2005. (2005) Retrieved from www.comlaw.gov.au/Details/F2005L00767

UDL-IRN (2011) UDL in the Instructional Process. Version 1.0. Lawrence, KS: Author
Wiggins, G, & McTighe, J. (2006). *Understanding by Design* (2nd ed.). Alexandria, VA:
Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.