IMPLEMENTING UDL IN A NON-UDL ENVIRONMENT: LESSONS LEARNED AT A DUTCH HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTE.

ABSTRACT CONFERENCE PUBLICATION AHEAD ANNUAL CONFERENCE 2015

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In 2014 we joined forces to implement Universal Design for Learning (UDL) at a Dutch Higher Education Institute (HEI). Although not all critical elements for implementing UDL were met, it was considered worthwhile starting with UDL because the staff had the potential to make the curriculum more inclusive.

WHY: CURRICULUM REFORM DUE TO SOCIAL WELFARE CHANGES

On the 1st of January 2015 various Dutch social welfare regulations were radically reformed. These reforms have huge implications for the next generation of social workers. As a result, reforms in the curricula of social work studies are necessary. One Dutch HEI wanted to use this change as a trigger to make their education 'more flexible, accessible and inclusive'. Various teachers that participated in a UDL workshop suggested UDL might be the framework with which to implement that ambition.

WHAT: USING UDL AS A WAY TO MAKE THE NEW CURRICULUM MORE INCLUSIVE

UDL is relatively unknown in The Netherlands. Therefore, the HEI decided to work with 'handicap + studie' (Dutch Expert Centre for studying with a disability) and 'UDL Nederland' to run a pilot. A project was formulated, funded, and in September 2014, started.

HOW: PILOT WITH UDL TRAINING & COACHING IN PARALLEL WITH THE CURRICULUM REFORM PROCES

The HEI decided to start with a pilot. They selected a small group of teachers to be trained in UDL. These ten teachers also played a key role in the curriculum reform. The teachers did not have any experience with UDL. The group was mixed: experienced and not so experienced, young and old, male and female, with diverse educational backgrounds. During a period of 5 months 4 sessions were organised by UDL Nederland. Between the sessions

participants were offered individual coaching. They were invited to use this in whatever way fit their needs best. For example they could have a coaching session with one of the trainers, get feedback on their teaching materials or receive feedback on their work for the curriculum development. At the start of the first session a baseline assessment was done by handicap + studie. The aim was to measure their current level of inclusivity in education. The teachers were asked to formulate their own preferred learning outcome and to choose a specific target for the training program. Handicap + studie interviewed the participants a month after the last training session and wrote a report with recommendations for management.

RESULT: IMPLEMENTING UDL IN A NON-UDL ENVIRONMENT WORKS AS A CATALYST FOR FURTHER IMPLEMENTATION

The results of the pilot can best be presented by using the four critical elements for implementing UDL as identified by UDL-IRN and a fifth one identified by UDL Nederland. Not all these conditions were met during the UDL implementation phase. Despite that, it was considered valuable to start delivering UDL-training & coaching. In this way the process of working in a UDL way can evolve on the work floor.

Below, in a nutshell, our findings and questions for further investigation:

 1. Clear Goals: educational goals were not clear to a number of the teachers. A lot of time was spent getting the goals clear, which could not be spent on other UDL topics. However, it was very valuable to devote time to reflect on the goals. It gave the teachers space to think of variability in the materials and methods they used.

Question: Is it critical to have educational goals clear in advance?

 2. Embrace diversity & plan accordingly[i]: proactive planning was not common practice at the HEI. Due to the reform the teachers could create opportunities to do this much more in the future. By sharing their insights with colleagues in the department they became more aware of the necessity of pro-active planning.

Question: Should this UDL mindset be there from the start? Or is creating this UDL mindset part of the training?

 3. Flexible Methods and Materials: using a scheme of the UDL Principles & Guidelines was very helpful for the teachers to be able to identify where their curriculum was already UDL proof and where they had to improve. Many realised that they were 'unconsciously skilled' and became more 'consciously skilled'. The use of IT is of course important to make the curriculum more flexible. However, the participants tended to see IT as a goal instead of a means. The relationship between UDL and IT was a continual concern.

Question: How does IT relate to UDL, and how best to embed it?

4. Timely Progress Monitoring: at this HEI a quite inflexible central assessment policy was in use. Changing this policy was beyond the capability of the teachers, or so they thought. During the training participants became aware of the fact that they do in fact can influence the decentral assessment policy. Also they became more aware of the value of formative assessments. They worked together on developing alternatives to monitor progress during the semesters. This critical element is also about the professional development of the teachers.

Question: Do you need to train teachers before implementation? Or is training a crucial part of the implementation process?

5. Involve all relevant actors: Dutch research indicates that teachers in HE have many concerns about the quality of the education, but they do not feel responsible for this. They tend to point to their managers as being responsible. In this pilot the main actors we worked with were the teachers. During and after the pilot it became clear that the management lagged behind in their UDL mindset. This had a negative effect on the progress of some of the participants. In such a large HEI many decisions are beyond the scope of the individual teacher. We conclude that other key actors like facility managers, timetable makers, and student services need to be on board to create a truly inclusive learning environment where all can play their part in implementing UDL.

Question: Is UDL implementation possible when not supported by managers / other relevant actors?

REFERENCES

✓ Critical Elements of UDL in Instruction (Version 1.2). Lawrence, K.S., UDL-IRN (2011)

✓ Studiesucces en diversiteit en wat HBO-docenten daarmee te maken hebben, Middelkoop, D. & M. Meerman, Amsterdam: Centre for Applied Research on Economics and Management (CAREM), Hogeschool van Amsterdam (2014)

✓ Pictures used to highlight the Critical Elements:

  ▪ Picture Critical Element 1: Haiku Deck, Photo by Brintam

  ▪ Picture Critical Element 2: Haiku Deck, Photo by colemama

  ▪ Picture Critical Element 3: Haiku Deck, Photo by a4gpa

  ▪ Picture Critical Element 4: Haiku Deck, Photo by Mylla

  ▪ Picture Critical Element 5: Google, BC Studentencafe

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[i] The original critical element was formulated as 'intentional planning for learner variability' by UDL-IRN.