

Clark Nall

# Academic libraries and the principles of Universal Design for Learning

## Representation beyond courses

The number of students with learning disabilities enrolled in higher education is growing.<sup>1</sup> To better serve this population, academic libraries can learn from the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL). The term *universal design* was coined by architect and educator Ronald L. Mace (1941–98)<sup>2</sup> and built on the work of Selwyn Goldsmith, author of *Designing for the Disabled*,<sup>3</sup> among others. Mace's universal design philosophy moved accommodation for the disabled from retro-fits to barrier-free inclusive designs that could benefit the physically disabled and nondisabled alike. A person carrying a large load of packages or a parent pushing a stroller can appreciate an automatic door as much as a person in a wheelchair.

UDL borrowed Mace's ideas and applied them to education. UDL's primary target is course instruction, and it provides inclusive learning opportunities for the widest range of students. Its conceptual framework includes multiple means of representation, action and expression, and engagement. *Representation* is the manner in which information is presented to the learner. *Action* and *expression* are the ways students communicate what they have learned. *Engagement* encourages and builds upon the interests and motivation of the student.<sup>4</sup> This column focuses on methods of representation in libraries. For more information on UDL, please see the websites of CAST<sup>5</sup> and the National Center on Universal Design for Learning.<sup>6</sup>

We can't be sure of the number of students affected by learning disabilities. Students with-

out diagnoses or who haven't registered with their campus disability services are patrons, as well. Thankfully, librarians require neither identification nor diagnosis to respond to the needs of the learning disabled population. The suggestions I can make are not revolutionary, and most libraries will have at least some of them in place already. It is useful, though, to think of these practices with learning disabilities in mind in order to begin building a more comprehensive response to a wide variety of learning needs.

The building is the first element of design that should be considered for those with learning disabilities. To ease navigation, clear signage is necessary. Fonts that allow for quicker reading for those with dyslexia should be used throughout.<sup>7</sup> Location information should also be available in print for those who need more time to process written language. Low-distraction environments are needed for those with attention deficit disorders. Quiet floors and rooms, study rooms with doors, and study cubicles with partitions allow patrons to work with less distraction. Offering a universal pull and hold service is a necessary service for many with learning or physical impairments.

Reference services should be offered in as many communication methods as possible. By offering in-person research assistance, ap-

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pointments, text and video chat, phone, and email, patrons can choose the method that fits their needs. Email and text communication will provide the patron with a record of the exchange for future reference. Print instructions for commonly asked questions (these can be printed versions of online FAQs) are useful for people who need more processing time or have memory problems. A quiet, low distraction space away from the reference desk is needed for patrons with attention difficulties or for when the desk area is busy and noisy.

In the classroom, traditional lecture along with worksheets, videos (captioned), and active learning meet the needs of a larger range of learners. Slower pacing and repetition also aid a wide range of learners.

In selecting materials, consider the needs of the learning disabled. Instructional videos and documentaries are useful additions to course readings and a boon for students who learn better through aural means. We should all be aware of reader softwares and built-in database reader options. Alternatives to assigned textbooks and textbooks on the high school level can help students who need a different presentation or a slower start on a subject.

Libraries' web presence should be carefully evaluated with learning disabilities in mind. The webpage is the primary or exclusive access point for many patrons and needs to be as inclusive as possible. Common language should be used in favor of library jargon. Don't coin

new brand names for catalogs and federated searchers. Brand names obscure rather than illuminate. As many students approach the website looking for books and articles, these words should appear prominently. The web presence should include instructional videos (including transcripts), tutorials, and written instructions.

While UDL was developed with semester course design in mind, its principles can benefit libraries. We are already putting in the effort to design our buildings, collections, services, and web pages. Considering the needs of the learning disabled will lead to a more welcoming and accessible library experience for all.

## Notes

1. Melana Zyla Vickers, "Accommodating college students with learning disabilities: ADD, ADHD, and Dyslexia," [www.popecenter.org/acrobat/vickers-mar2010.pdf](http://www.popecenter.org/acrobat/vickers-mar2010.pdf).
2. Ronald L. Mace, "Universal design: Barrier-free environments for everyone," *Designers West* 33 (1): 147–52.
3. Selwyn Goldsmith, *Designing for the disabled* (London: RIBA Publications, 1976).
4. For more information about Universal Design for Learning, see [cast.org](http://cast.org).
5. *Ibid.*
6. Visit the National Center on Universal Design for Learning at [www.udlcenter.org](http://www.udlcenter.org).
7. Gavin Reid and Shannon Green, *100 ideas for supporting pupils with dyslexia* (New York: Continuum). *ZZ*

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*"Taking a second look..." (continues from page 372)*

in their designated spots, and all employees were accounted for. In short, everyone knew what they were supposed to do and provided proper execution of the plan. The committee members felt a sense of accomplishment in seeing their year of work implemented correctly in a matter of minutes.

## Conclusion

Overhauling the library emergency procedures plan is a laborious undertaking but one that can yield vast dividends. The task is a chance for library personnel across departments to come together for the safety of

their co-workers, creating further cohesion. Cross-campus collaboration can strengthen the library's role as a partner and leader. Ultimately the knowledge of how to react in an emergency will lead to library employees feeling more secure in their work environment.

## Notes

1. MTSU School of Journalism, "Good Friday Tornado," [www.mtsujournalism.org/tornado](http://www.mtsujournalism.org/tornado) (accessed January 12, 2015).
2. Steve Albrecht, "How to Respond to a Security Incident in Your Library (ALA Editions Workshop)," lecture, June 12, 2014. *ZZ*