

Conversation with Kristen Hardy on upcoming UDL course

Ariful Shanil: Hello, everyone and welcome. I'm delighted to have you join us today for a conversation about our upcoming course, Designing Online Courses through a UDL lens.

This new asynchronous course is designed especially for the post-secondary instructors across Manitoba who are working to make their online course more inclusive, flexible and engaging for all learners.

Joining me today is Kristen Hardy, the course author for this course and she's also a long-time educator and teacher in the post-secondary institutions in Manitoba. We're going to be exploring what inspired this course and how structure and some practical strategies to help an instructor apply UDL in their own teaching. Kristen, thank you so much for being here with us. It's a great [pleasure] to have you with us.

So, my first question to you, let's start with the big picture. What inspired you to create this course on universal design for learning? And why do you think it is such an important approach for today's post-secondary classrooms in Manitoba?

Kristen Hardy: Thanks. Well, I was really happy to have the opportunity to develop this course as accessibility is something that I'm really passionate about. One of the fields that I teach and research in is disability studies. So, I think a lot about access through what we call a disability justice lens. Disability justice is an approach pioneered by disabled, queer and trans people of colour and one of its foundational principles is what's known as collective access. So collective access involves the recognition that all of us, whether or not we're disabled, have access needs. There's nothing bad or shameful about having these needs. We all have both strengths and vulnerabilities and that we should all work together to try to ensure that everyone's access needs are met.

Now, as a university instructor, I'm in a position of particular responsibility to provide the groundwork in my courses to ensure that all students have the opportunity to participate fully without encountering access barriers. And I also have the opportunity to model for my students and for my colleagues what it looks like to be aware and proactive about access in whatever we do.

UDL helps to give us tools and guidance for making this possible in a teaching and learning context.

Now, here in Manitoba, we have an extremely diverse range of post-secondary students and UDL is a great way for us to recognize the variety of access needs that these students bring to their studies. For some, those will be linked specifically to a particular disability, such as a learning disability, mental health disability or chronic illness. For others, those barriers may be related to things like their comfort in spoken or written English, their need to work at paid employment during their studies to support themselves, their caregiving responsibilities for children or for elders, or other situations that we might not think of through the lens of disability, but nevertheless can be experienced by students as barriers to being able to learn well, to do their best work, and ideally to enjoy their post-secondary experience too.

Ariful: Wow, that's great. Let's talk about the instructor who might be new to the concept and how would you describe the UDL in simple terms and how does it help make online learning more inclusive and engaging for all of the students?

Kristen: Sure, UDL is an approach which encourages all of us to be proactive about addressing potential barriers in our teaching practice. It approaches this in three main ways, so how we engage or motivate students, how we represent the things we teach about, that is how we present our content, and how students express or demonstrate their learning.

UDL-informed teaching has the potential to make online learning more inclusive by prompting us to consider the barriers that students may face, especially given that their lives and experiences are often very different from our own. It also encourages us to consider how we can make productive use of the access opportunities that online learning offers. For example, asynchronous courses can offer students who work full time the possibility of engaging with course content and learning materials to the same or nearly the same extent as do students with a more traditional academic schedule. Or in synchronous online setting, the ability to participate in class discussions through written chat comments can offer students who are uncomfortable with formulating their ideas orally. The ability to carefully consider and rework their ideas and phrasing until they're confident enough to make contributions to our discussions.

Ariful: Okay, that's great. Let's talk about it a bit more on the asynchronous. Your course is designed, let's say be in asynchronous and which offers flexibility. So how does design of this asynchronous course itself reflect the UDL principle? Could you give us a few examples that a participant might notice as they move through it?

Kristen: Sure. Well, as you point out, the asynchronous format of this course really does offer needed flexibility, especially for busy faculty members.

Some of the ways that we've tried to incorporate UDL principles in this course is through the inclusion of reflective opportunities and knowledge check activities throughout. We know that stopping to reflect on one's learning and receiving feedback on new or developing knowledge are methods that help learners to better absorb and to integrate new information, as well as to demonstrate to themselves that they really are learning.

We also have a variety of accessibility features built into the course with captions and transcripts available for videos and image descriptions for the visual elements.

While a UDL approach does go beyond these disability-related accommodations, it also values and prioritizes these kinds of access needs.

Ariful: Okay, that's great. So, we talk about access needs. So now I'm going to talk about the many instructors who already tried to create accessible learning environment, but UDL can take that a step further from that. What are the some small or practical changes for the instructor can make right away to start teaching through that UDL lens?

Kristen: Sure. So there are lots of ways that instructors can integrate changes or new elements into their work. My colleague, Curt Shoultz, who's the Director of Brandon University's Center for Teaching, Learning and Technology, uses the phrase one new thing to describe an approach that focuses on helping faculty members to identify a single new approach or change that they want to be given. To begin by making, to improve their teaching. I really like this framing. It avoids that sense of overwhelm that people often experience when they encounter teaching enhancement advice and initiatives.

So, some of the things that an instructor might consider would include going over the syllabus for one of their courses, or what we call a course inventory, and thinking about where students facing certain types of barriers might struggle. For example, students with certain learning disabilities or with English as an additional language often require more time to complete tests or quizzes or written assignments. Is there a way that you can incorporate a greater time allowance than you think the average student might require for those types of assignments?

For some students who experience social anxiety or who are not yet confident in their English skills, having methods of participating that don't require the courage to raise one's real or virtual hand and to be in the spotlight for that moment are really helpful. So those could include allowing contributions sent to the instructor through direct messaging to be read out anonymously, or using a third-party website where students can post real time anonymous responses to questions.

Or remembering that some students really struggle financially, and quite literally every dollar they need to spend on educational costs means less access to other necessities.

Are there options for assigned readings or other required materials that can reduce or eliminate costs, such as by choosing open access resources or other freely available materials when it comes time to refresh your reading list?

So, this course is designed to help with this process of thinking about possibilities, so that instructors can identify their own one new thing to try out or to adjust in the beginning to enhance their own teaching practice and then continue to build from there.

Ariful: That's super. I like the term that one new thing. I hope instructor will find that thing [useful]. Okay, let's talk about it now. Next question. As a participant to go through your course, what are the mindsets or approaches would you help them to get most out of the learning experience from this course?

Kristen: Sure. I really think having an open mind and an inclination to help support students. Those are really the key things. Okay, I've been teaching for quite a few years now, many of those exclusively online, and I continue to learn from my peers and from my students about how I can develop my own teaching practice in ways that support and enhance access. This course really just arises out of those conversations, as well as my reading and research in this area, and my own and others experiences with course design.

Ariful: Okay, that's great. I think this is going to be our final question. So looking ahead, how do you hope this course will influence teaching practices across Manitoba's post-secondary institutions, and what might be a UDL informed classroom looks like or feels like a few years from now?

Kristen: Sure. Well, first of all, I hope that Manitoba post-secondary instructors continue to push for more high quality online learning opportunities for students. And one of the ways to bring this into being, I think, is to demonstrate the ways that online environments can facilitate access for many students who may otherwise lack opportunities to learn in ways that meet their needs. When we're thinking about online education, it's important that we don't regard it as inferior to the physical classroom. Rather, it's an opportunity to open up learning to more people. And as a modality, it still allows us to engage students as whole persons, not just as names on a screen.

One of the tests, I think, of how well UDL principles are being implemented in courses and classrooms is whether students who have experienced barriers to learning in the past or in other contexts find that those barriers are no longer present for them in our courses. It's extremely gratifying when a student takes the time to tell you that they found your course very accessible, and perhaps even that they didn't need to use their formal accommodations because their needs were already met through the course design.

When I think about a UDL informed classroom, what I think of is a space where everyone knows and feels that they're welcome, where they can engage as fully as they wish on par with their peers, and where they have their contributions and their individuality and their personhood acknowledged and valued.

Ariful: Wow! That's, I mean fantastic and insightful. Thank you for the conversation, Kristen, and thank you for sharing your insight or giving us a glimpse into the thought and the purpose behind this course. It's clear that UDL offered a powerful framework for designing learning that truly meets the needs of all students.

For our instructors watching this, we encourage you to explore Designing Online Courses through a UDL lens course when it launches, and it's a great opportunity to reflect on your own teaching and experiment and with new ideas that can make your course more accessible and engaging.

Thanks, everyone, for turning in, and we hope this conversation inspired you to approach your teaching with inclusion, flexibility, and creativity at the forefront. Thank you.

Kristen: Thanks.