

Applying Universal Design for Learning (UDL) to Arts Management Curriculum

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Author Note

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The purpose of this paper is to explore how educators can conceptualize curriculum through Universal Design for Learning (UDL) as a strategy to overcome the challenges to facilitating experiential learning in the arts management classroom. To do this, I present the case of an introductory arts administration class for undergraduate students, in which the primary assignment throughout the course is a team-based creation of a nonprofit arts organization. The following sections describe UDL as an instructional framework, as well as the course's context, curriculum summary, and evaluation methods. I end with further discussion of opportunities for future adaptation of arts management coursework through UDL.

Course Context

Introduction to Arts Administration (ARE 9432) is an undergraduate course at a large, public university in the Southeastern United States that surveys the primary principles of arts and cultural administration. Though the course exists in both in-person and online formats, this paper focuses on curriculum design for the in-person section. The course has 18-20 students each semester, typically an equal mix of arts and non-arts majors. While mostly comprised of juniors and seniors, there are often a few first- and second-year students in the bunch. The course fulfills a scholarship in practice credit, which is a general education requirement for all students across the university. Using a constructivist teaching style through the UDL framework, I guide students through readings, discussions, assignments, and in-class activities that apply the principles of arts administration to their prior experience, interests, and beliefs. Structuring the course in this way allows students to construct their knowledge and pursue areas of the field that interest them most, acknowledging the diverse ways students represent and demonstrate their understanding.

Literature Review

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a pedagogical framework and set of guiding principles towards flexible teaching and learning. It acknowledges the complex diversity of contemporary classrooms and prioritizes accessibility and inclusion for all students (Capp, 2017). Operating under a primary goal of eliminating barriers to learning, the three major principles of UDL note the various and flexible ways instructors engage with students and students represent knowledge and demonstrate their understanding:

1. Principle 1: Engagement. Teachers engage students' learning in multiple ways. They provide multiple representations of course content, prioritize individual choice and autonomy, set clear goals and expectations, and participate in both student- and self-reflection and assessment. In UDL, Engagement represents the “why” of learning.
2. Principle 2: Representation. Students represent knowledge in multiple ways, influenced by their unique background experiences and interests. Learners comprehend and perceive information differently, whether through written, visual, or auditory representation. Thus, there is no one ideal representation of information for all learners. In UDL, Representation represents the “what” of learning.
3. Principle 3: Action and Expression. Students demonstrate their knowledge and understanding in multiple ways. Student learning can be reflected through their writing, speech, or recreation of course content. In UDL, Action and Expression represent the “how” of learning. (CAST, 2024).

The UDL approach centers on students' needs. UDL attempts to meet the needs of a diverse group of learners at the onset of instruction, rather than a one-size-fits-all approach to learning (Capp, 2017). Thus, the instructor scaffolds their curriculum based on each unique grouping of students. In accordance with the main principles, every part of a course that applies UDL principles should allow multiple and flexible options for representation, expression, and engagement (Ralabate, 2011). The ultimate goal of UDL is to cultivate expert learners who are 1. purposeful and motivated, 2. resourceful and knowledgeable, and 3. strategic and goal-directed (CAST, 2024).

UDL originated in the 1970s in the field of architecture and has since been mostly explored through literature about K-12 curriculum design (King-Sears, 2009). The earliest roots of UDL are linked to civil rights and special education policies that promoted access to free and equitable public education for all students (Ralabate, 2011). Technology is often used in UDL as an alternate tool to traditional instructional materials. Technology-related learning tools have changed greatly since the UDL's beginnings, but some present examples of electronic technology used to implement UDL principles in the classroom include online games, videos, and even arts-based instructional materials (King-Sears, 2009; Bray et al., 2022). Though no formal UDL standards exist, Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST), a nonprofit education research and development organization, governs a set of UDL guidelines used across

the world (CAST, 2024). In the higher education sphere, UDL is gaining traction through the practice of individual instructors, having shown success for students with disabilities, international and indigenous students, and first-generation college students (Fovet, 2020).

Course Summary

Each week over the 16-week course, students complete readings, discussions, and activities specific to a general area of arts management study. These areas include organizational structure, planning and governance, human resources, programming and evaluation, financial management, fund development, marketing, arts education, community engagement, and arts advocacy. I start each semester with a general overview of arts and culture, asking students to solidify their arts philosophy, which they continue to develop throughout the course. Along with our regular class discussions and activities, I prioritize current events and experiential learning through field trips and guest speakers throughout the semester. Due to the range of academic interests of the students taking the class, I express to the students that my end goal is not to have them all become arts administrators but rather to grow their understanding and appreciation for nonprofit arts organizations since I believe that the world can always benefit from more arts participants and advocates.

Aside from the major group assignments that culminate in the final project and presentation, discussed below, students complete individual online discussion boards throughout the semester, which are their primary individual assignments. Discussion boards ask students to relate the principles of arts administration to their own beliefs, experiences, and interests. Submissions are typically 200-400 words in length, and students are required to provide constructive feedback on at least two of their classmates' posts. For their midterm assignment, students attend an arts or cultural event of their choosing, writing about the experience through the lens of a patron and then through the lens of an arts administrator, applying the concepts they learned in the first half of the semester. This assignment allows them to experience art in a format that is most accessible and interesting to them.

The culminating project of the course is a team creation of a new nonprofit arts organization. At the beginning of each semester, I assign students to their "ORG teams"—groups of three or four. I found that three is the best number for this project but assign some groups of four depending on the size of the class. When given the choice, every class I have taught asked me to assign the groups for them, rather than self-selection. I try to make the groups as diverse as

possible and include a mix of majors and academic years. In their groups, the students complete four “ORG assignments” to create their nonprofit. Each ORG assignment guides them through creating their own nonprofit arts organization through overall organizational structure, annual programming, marketing, and community partnerships. Students receive detailed feedback after each assignment throughout the semester. With each initial ORG assignment submission, each group member receives completion points. At the end of the semester, students use my feedback from each ORG assignment to edit and compile a final portfolio and in-class presentation to showcase their organization to the class. At this point, the final portfolio of all ORG assignments is graded for content.

Evaluation

Along with the standard course evaluation facilitated by the university, I require students to complete a “Self and Peer Evaluation” as part of their final project requirements. This online survey asks them to evaluate aspects of their and their teammates’ work throughout the semester on sliding scales. The survey ends with several open-ended questions where students note what went well, what could have been better, what they learned about working in groups, and what they would change for future semesters. Though the survey is not anonymous, I have consistently received thorough and relevant feedback. On a recent evaluation, one student noted about the ORG project: “This was a great project and I hope it continues throughout this course at [institution]. It was a great assignment that brought together all of the lessons of the semester and actually made me (and my group members) take what we were learning and put it into something.” Students frequently emphasize their appreciation of the layout and timing of the course, the ability to focus on one aspect of arts administration per assignment, and the flexibility to complete most group work in class.

Discussion

When conceptualizing the primary ORG project for this course in 2022, I discovered UDL as a curriculum-building paradigm for meeting the needs of a diverse range of students. I implement UDL in the following ways:

1. Engagement: Through the ORG project structure, students are free to pursue topics and art forms that are most interesting to them in a flexible and dynamic way. This aids in their ability to construct and apply their learning of the course material and keeping them engaged throughout the semester. Offering an appropriate amount of choice helps to

increase students' connection to their learning and develop their self-determination (CAST, 2024). The ORG project structure also engages students by fostering collaboration and community.

2. Representation: I consider the multiple ways students learn when developing instructional material for the course. Along with traditional materials like slideshows, group discussions, and assigned readings, I employ a wide variety of tools to engage students' learning, such as games, visual art projects, and videos. I utilize online programs such as Slido, in which students submit questions or answers in real time using a personal device, connecting classroom learning to a familiar technology tool.
3. Action and Expression: I allow students to complete ORG assignments in a format that best serves their understanding of the material. This includes traditional essay form, written bullet points, images, videos, and audio files. Assignments are evaluated with rubrics that include detailed guidelines for content and critical thinking requirements. Submissions that are required to be in a written format, such as the midterm paper, include guidelines for writing.

As noted in Grannemann (2023), students often express trepidation about the amount of group work required. After teaching the class multiple times, I learned to mitigate this by allowing for as much autonomy as possible while still empowering students to resolve interpersonal conflicts (e.g., Teammate C still has not completed their portion of the assignment one hour before the deadline). For example, one source of interpersonal conflict is how the workload is shared by the students. One way I ease fears around uneven workload is by encouraging students to digitally highlight the sections of their submission, giving each group member a unique color. This allows them to show whether all group members are contributing equally, and I can see what was completed together in class versus individually outside of class. While I do give ample time for group work in class, I have found that more time spent in class on group work is not always best. There is a delicate balance between productivity and how much group work should be completed in class versus outside of class. I continue to test this balance with each new group of students.

Structuring the class through UDL has worked very well, with increasing success each semester as I rework the content and implement student feedback. As this is a general education course, I am distinctly aware of meeting students where they are and providing ample

opportunities for them to explore their interests through the course material. Above all, students expressed feeling a deeper connection to and understanding of the course content through the ORG assignment structure. I also believe implementing this curriculum has increased undergraduate students' interest in studying arts management at my institution. In my five semesters of teaching the course, it has gone from consistent under-enrollment to a healthy waitlist of students hoping to take the class. Moving forward, I am very interested in ways to adapt the course for arts administration majors and graduate students.

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