



Universal Design in Instruction

Overview

Universal Design is a concept that has emerged from the architectural field and is now being applied to other arenas. The principles of Universal Design can be used to guide course organization and development of course materials in a way that is accessible to a broader range of individuals. Many of us have recognized that architectural features designed to benefit people with disabilities are advantageous to everyone. Lowered water fountains, for example, allow children to get a drink without assistance. Ramps are more convenient when we are pulling luggage or moving equipment. The same phenomenon has occurred with newer technology. Cell phones equipped to send digital messages provide accessibility for people who are deaf, but are also convenient if you are in a meeting or in a noisy environment.

Many educators have embraced the concept of Universal Design because the applications of it benefit all of the students in their class. Here are a few examples of the students who benefit:

- Students for whom English is a second language
- Students who have older computer technology or browsers
- International students
- Nontraditional students
- Students with disabilities
- Students with a learning style that differs from the instructor's teaching style

The Principles of Universal Design

The Principles of Universal Design were conceived and developed by The Center for Universal Design at North Carolina State University. Several variations have been developed that take these principles and adapt them for the educational setting. One project that has taken this approach is the Universal Instructional Design Project at the University of Guelph. They have re-stated the principles to relate to educational environments as follows. Instructional materials and activities should:

1. be accessible and fair.
2. provide flexibility in use, participation and presentation.
3. be straightforward and consistent.
4. be explicitly presented and readily perceived.
5. provide a supportive learning environment.
6. minimize unnecessary physical effort or requirements.
7. ensure a learning space that accommodates both students and instructional methods.

Source: Jaellayna Palmer, © University of Guelph 2002.