

Empowering Students through a Digital Badge in UDL.

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Abstract.

Student empowerment is increasingly recognized as essential for fostering meaningful learning experiences and cultivating engaged citizens. This paper delves into the concepts of empowerment within the educational context, emphasizing the pivotal role of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) in promoting student agency and inclusivity. By illuminating the challenges and opportunities associated with student empowerment, the paper highlights the imperative of fostering a culture of partnership and active engagement among students and educators alike. Building upon the success of UDL initiatives in Ireland, such as the UDL Digital Badge, the paper introduces a novel initiative—the UDL Digital Badge for Students. Through a collaborative design process involving students and educators, the course aims to equip students with the knowledge, skills, and resources to advocate for inclusive learning environments and navigate the complexities of modern education. By embracing principles of equity, flexibility, and community, the course seeks to empower students to become active participants in shaping their educational journey and effecting positive change within their institutions.

Keywords: Digital badge; Student empowerment; Universal Design for Learning.

1. Introduction.

The impetus for creating a Universal Design for Learning (UDL) Badge for students came about while facilitating the UDL Badge for third level educators. During this course, educators are asked to complete a redesign of some aspect of a module based on the principles of UDL and measure the impact of this on their students. When brainstorming ideas, educators often did not know exactly where to start. When they asked me, I simply suggested: “*ask your students.*” Getting students directly involved in their learning is a key aspect of UDL, and it is empowering. That is why spreading this knowledge to students is so vital. The idea is that once students understand the fundamentals of UDL, they will be strong advocates for this within their modules and throughout their institutions. Hopefully, they will no longer have to be asked how modules could be more inclusive, they will now be more comfortable making suggestions on their own. This direct student involvement will lead to a more authentic, relevant, and empowering educational experience for both students and educators.

1.1. Students as consumers vs. producers of knowledge.

Learning is fundamentally a social process. As Social Constructivists argue, learners do not enter a learning environment as a blank slate. Rather, they already possess an understanding of the world that has been shaped by society; values, history, and language all play a substantial role in determining what and how students learn. As Dewey wrote, “*The school is primarily a social institution...education, therefore, is a process of living and not a preparation for future living*” (1897, p. 78). As a result, the experiences of learners cannot, and should not, be disregarded by educators. Dewey goes on to argue: “*The teacher is not in the school to impose certain ideas or to form certain habits in the child...the teacher's business is simply to determine...how the discipline of life shall come to the child...The social life gives the unconscious unity and the background of all his efforts and of all his attainments.*” (ibid, p. 78).

For Dewey and Vygotsky, knowledge is subjective and constantly evolving. Therefore, learning is “*a constant reinterpretation, a constant reweaving of the “web of meaning”* (Vygotsky), a constant “*reconstruction of experience*” (Dewey). “*As human beings consciously...evolve new social practices...to meet human needs, to adapt to and transform their environments*” (Russell, 1993, p. 174). This philosophy is holistic as it acknowledges and values the understanding learners already possess.

Rather than thinking of how an instructor can impart knowledge to learners, this philosophy

asks educators to tap into what students already know. It empowers learners as active participants in the learning process. However, stepping into a modern higher education institution, it can often be hard to see this attitude reflected in how modules are organized and classes are taught. The reality is that students are more often passive consumers in the learning process. This has become so routine that both students and educators may now have come to expect it and may not know of any other way. This consumer mindset is detrimental on many levels, not least of which it fundamentally stifles the learning process and limits true collaboration between students and their institutions (HEA, 2016). This model effectively provides a *'take-it-or-leave-it'* educational offering where students are forced to adapt to the expectations and demands of the educator.

The so-called *'market model'* holds that educators are the experts, and this power dynamic makes it very challenging for students to have a say over how they engage in the learning process, or even think that it is an acceptable or realistic feeling to have (HEA, 2016). As Fovet (2018) writes, *"Educators, for the most part, remain oddly convinced learners are not best placed to assess and verbalize their needs in pedagogical content and format. The assumption is that the instructor, as expert, will be better equipped to determine how to address learner expectations and wants."* This is because students are often conditioned not to speak up and are often uncomfortable doing so (Guo & Hoben, 2020) as this model rewards student passivity and compliance (Broom, 2015). However, research indicates that, when given a choice, students are much more willing to see themselves as active participants in a learning community rather than active consumers, despite educator assumptions to the contrary (HEA, 2016).

Students are not passive by choice. Rather, it is more likely that they do not see a pathway for meaningful engagement. This is a product of the design of modern higher education institutions, but this can be changed. The goal of this project is to plant the seed for student empowerment by providing students with the language, knowledge, and tools to shape their educational journey. We hope to illuminate the ubiquity of learner variability, the wide array of options available to provide flexibility, and the importance of self-advocacy.

1.2. What does *'empowerment'* mean in an educational context?

Empowerment is a multifaceted term. It is characterised by seeing individuals as whole and

respecting both their right and need to control their own lives, influence their environment, and determine their future (Guo & Hoben, 2020; Broom, 2015). Empowerment can take many forms in an educational setting, and it is often characterized by “*student involvement in decision-making processes in higher education institutions in relation to governance and management, quality assurance, and teaching and learning*” (HEA, 2016, p. VII).

Empowerment has been shown to have a number of positive effects on student outcomes and other intangible benefits as well. As Kirk et al. (2016) argue, highly empowered students report stronger academic performance and participate more actively in the school community than students who are less empowered. In addition, the effects of empowerment will likely have lasting impacts on their educational and career trajectories.

Embedding student empowerment and modelling democratic processes within an institution also fosters civic engagement and self-determination (HEA, 2016; Broom, 2015). This sort of engaged and self-directed learner is the stated goal of nearly all higher education institutes. So why, then, is student empowerment the exception rather than the norm? There are many avenues for students to get involved, but this requires participation from educators and other staff. In a report on student engagement by the HEA (2016), the authors argue, “*Student engagement is now understood to be a two-way process. While students are ultimately responsible for their own learning and level of engagement, student engagement is also dependent on institutional conditions, policies, and culture that enable and encourage students to get further involved*” (p. VII). In essence, students will only be as empowered as they are allowed to be. They go on to argue, “*In order for students to contribute conscientiously to changing their institution for the better...more than mere structural possibilities are required*” (p. 10). Third-level institutions can signal this by equipping students with knowledge and avenues for advocacy – and Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a useful starting point.

1.3. How does UDL contribute to empowerment?

UDL provides a detailed framework for adopting an inclusive mindset when considering how the college is run, how classes are delivered, and how students learn. A UDL mindset promotes the idea that all students can achieve at a high level, and this is shown through flexibility, community, and active learning. UDL is primarily implemented within the classroom, but it takes an institution-wide effort to support this, and all members of staff must play a role.

UDL acknowledges student variability and believes that all students have unique perspectives, strengths, and learning preferences. A UDL approach promotes student empowerment through flexibility and the removal of unnecessary barriers to learning by providing multiple means of engagement, multiple means of representation, and multiple means of action and expression. This framework puts the learner in the centre of planning, instruction and assessment.

In the classroom, *“student empowerment is predicted by equitable power use by teachers, positive teacher-student relationships and a sense of community”* (Kirk, et al., 2016, p. 589). UDL advocates for exactly this. Among the many facets of UDL, the framework advocates for promoting peer collaboration, expressing high expectations and promoting classroom community, activating and utilizing prior knowledge, providing meaningful and actionable feedback, and allowing students to access content and express their learning in ways that suit them best (CAST, 2018). The goal of UDL is to foster *“expert learners who are purposeful & motivated, resourceful & knowledgeable, and strategic & goal-directed”* (CAST, 2016). It is no surprise that in addition to, or perhaps as a result of, empowering students, implementing UDL in a post-secondary environment has been shown to positively impact the academic achievement for all students across multiple disciplines (King-Sears, et al., 2023; Seok, et al., 2018). Furthermore, a study by Dunne and Zandstra (2011) found that collaborative relationships between students and educators (and the broader institution) lead to greater knowledge sharing and expertise for both groups. Therefore, empowering students as partners benefits the entire institution.

Despite the strengths of the UDL approach, adoption of this framework is primarily up to the individual educator or department. Despite the mentioning of this framework within strategic plans or other documents, there are few notable examples of widespread adoption at an institutional level (Fovet, 2018). Recent efforts in Ireland such as the PATH 4 initiative have spurred efforts to change this, but this has been primarily driven by staff-led initiatives rather than whole-institution approaches. As a result of this, Fovet argues, students have largely been left out of the conversation and now must drive how UDL takes shape in their own institutions if implementation is to be successful (2018). ATU has taken a leadership position to change this dynamic by creating a tool for students to become the driving force behind UDL implementation at across the Irish higher education sector.

2. The Project.

Atlantic Technological University (ATU) is at the forefront of innovation, implementation, and integration of UDL in third level education institutions in Ireland and globally. The success of the ATU in this arena was recognized in 2022 when the institution was awarded the John Kelly Collaborative Award from AHEAD and University College Dublin (UCD). However, much of the work done thus far has been focused on building understanding and capacity amongst members of staff. The newly formed ATU Higher Education UDL Centre of Excellence has been tasked with capitalizing on the momentum of recent efforts within the institution and across Ireland and recognizes the imperative of involving students as the next step for truly integrating UDL within the institution. UDL is undoubtedly having a moment, and it is easy to see why. The educational landscape and student body of HEIs in Ireland is changing rapidly. One significant shift is the steady increase in the percentage of students registering with offices of disability. A recent study from AHEAD (2020) outlines the trends that HEIs nationwide are experiencing a 226% increase in the number of students registered with offices of disability in from 2009-2020. As a result, disability offices are having difficulty keeping up with the increased demand for services. There has been a 45% increase in number of students per disability support staff member from 2002- 2020 (AHEAD, 2020). This study also finds that many students with disabilities are reluctant to disclose their needs, indicating that there is a large portion of students with disabilities who may receive no support services.

A review of research illuminates the consequences of students declining to disclose their disability status. Students in higher education with non-apparent disabilities (e.g. ADHD, bipolar disorder, specific learning disabilities, etc.) frequently choose not to disclose their disability or seek accommodations due to perceived stigma, embarrassment, and fear that it will negatively affect their academic prospects (Kranke, et al., 2013; Smith, et al., 2021; Timmerman & Mulvihill, 2015). Students with non-apparent disabilities are much more likely to have lower educational outcomes and higher dropout rates than students without disabilities (Kranke, et al., 2013). These trends are posing a problem for students and service providers alike: service providers are overwhelmed, and many students are not getting the support that they need. Along with this, other student groups such as mature students and students from lower socio-economic backgrounds demonstrate a need for greater support (HEA, 2022). Taken together, there is a clear need for a reconsideration on how students are being supported, and UDL provides a framework to do just that.

Universities and third level institutions can support a broader range of student needs and reduce barriers to learning by implementing UDL. However, this cannot be done in isolation. As it has been argued, progress cannot be made in this area if students are not included as partners. To assess the degree to which students feel empowered in the university, the ATU UDL Centre of Excellence conducted a survey in Spring 2023 and received nearly 600 responses. The survey asked students if they were asked if they felt empowered in the areas of academics, mental health and well-being, physical campus, culturally, and socially. The results of the survey revealed that a great deal of students felt overlooked and powerless in lecture halls and throughout other areas of campus life as well. This survey helped us better understand our student body and recognize that feelings of empowerment are complex and intersectional. It also illuminated a desire from students to be provided more avenues to be brought in as partners within the university community.

2.1 Developing the course.

The clear need for student engagement with UDL implementation led our team at to begin the design of the UDL Digital Badge for Students course. We took inspiration from the success of the UDL Digital Badge designed by the disability advocacy group AHEAD and University College Dublin (UCD). This course was developed in 2018 for educators and support staff in the tertiary education sector and has seen tremendous uptake. To date, the course has been completed by over 3,000 participants. Key to this success was the light touch approach, self-paced delivery, and relevant content. ATU has been actively involved in the roll-out of this course from the beginning, so the team were able to apply these lessons when developing the course for students. The team chose to use the Rise Articulate platform as it provides a user-friendly interface and allows for the use of a number of interactive features and multiple modalities for content delivery. This platform allows for a self-paced engagement as well. Finally, it includes several accessibility features and works seamlessly with most virtual learning environments.

For the content development, the Centre initially collaborated with AHEAD to remix a course they created for their Accessibility, Resources, and Know-How (ARK) page. This short, introductory UDL course outlined the three pillars of the UDL Framework. This was a great starting point and the course quickly expanded from there. This content was used selectively and amended to reflect a student perspective. Importantly, the team considered not only what students should know about UDL, but also why they should know and what they could then do

with this knowledge. That is why the team added two additional sections: one exploring learner variability and another providing pathways and resources for advocacy.

From the beginning, the team understood that this course would need to be designed not only with students in mind, but with direct input and participation as well. However, this posed an interesting problem: how could students help design something about a concept that they did not yet know? To address this, the team organized a meeting with students who were serving as Student Champions with the N-TUTORR programme. This is a national initiative to increase student engagement and empowerment based around multiple themes, one of which is UDL. At this meeting, the team gave the students a brief introduction to UDL and informed them about our project. We then presented the Student Champions with a preview of the course along with a detailed feedback form. In total, six Student Champions reviewed the course and provided extensive feedback and suggestions including ways to improve relevancy, engagement, accessibility, and removing some extraneous content. Overall, the Champions found the content relevant and engaging. Many expressed surprise that this had not been introduced to them earlier in their educational careers and were glad that students would have a chance to learn this as First Year students. In addition, the Champions gave feedback on accessibility changes, content changes, and suggestions to make the content more relatable to the student experience. The team made changes to the course based on this feedback.

After amending the course, the team then piloted the course within an Early Years B.Ed. first year module at ATU Sligo. This course was delivered to the entire cohort and discussed as a class. According to the lecturer, the course was met with enthusiasm by her students, and she found it very effective as well. She found that students were engaged with the material and that it helped frame conversations about relevant aspects of her module.

Overall, this course had a very positive reception. In an informal survey, it participants rated it highly in the areas of relevancy and engagement. A vast majority of students said they would recommend the course to their peers. From this, the team believes that it is well placed to be integrated into future modules. This will be especially effective in modules designed to develop academic readiness and study skills as it dovetails nicely with many topics covered in these courses such as self-advocacy. We believe that if students understand the fundamentals of UDL at an early stage, they will be more likely to advocate for this approach throughout their third-level education.

3. Conclusion.

Institutions, by nature, are slow moving and change is managed deliberately when possible. Inertia, politics, and implicit power dynamics all play a role in this. However, it is now evident that a rapid shift in how our third level institutions operate is necessary. Students must be brought in and seen as partners. They must know that their voices will be heard and that their ideas matter. If this does not occur, third level institutions run the risk of losing credibility in the eyes of students and, eventually, the public at large.

A universal design approach addresses this by providing students with an avenue for empowerment. The UDL Digital Badge for Students will provide participants with the language and tools to advocate for the flexibility, authenticity, and community that they need to pursue their goals and become prepared to be engaged citizens. All students deserve the opportunity to learn in an environment that is free of barriers. The course outlined in this paper is one small step towards achieving this goal.

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