

**Universal Instructional Design: A New Framework for Accommodating Students in Social  
Work Courses**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This article provides an analysis of the current method of accommodating students with disabilities in social work education and presents a new framework for providing universal access to all students in social work education: Universal Instructional Design (UID). UID goes beyond adapting already developed social work curricula to fit the needs of an individual student with a disability, to building in accommodations in the front-end of curriculum design that promote a more inclusive environment for all students. The 4 components of UID are discussed, along with the challenges to its implementation.

## **Introduction**

Universities have been struggling with effectively accommodating students with disabilities in the classroom since the passage of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, and more recently, the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA). These laws require universities to make reasonable accommodations to qualified students with disabilities. While many universities are complying with these laws (Nelson, Dodd, & Smith, 1990), there is still much confusion about making effective and appropriate accommodations. There are debates about who shoulders the costs of accommodations (Selingo, 1998), what should qualify as a disability (Wolinsky & Whelan, 1999), and whether accommodations are fair to students without disabilities (Williams & Ceci, 1999). Along with this confusion there are numerous studies documenting the difficulties students with disabilities still face in higher education (Paul, 2000; Wagner, D'Amico, Marder, Newman, & Blackorby, 1992) and social work education in particular (Reeser, 1992). Proactively promoting equal access to all students in courses and field placements, including students with disabilities, fits with the values of the profession.

There have been numerous recommendations for making accommodations for students with disabilities in social work education (Alperin, 1988; Bricout, 2001; Cole & Cain, 1996; Cole, Christ, & Light, 1995; Pardeck, 1999; Pardeck, 2002). While ensuring accommodations is legally and ethically necessary, altering existing curriculum and educational practices ex post facto for students with disabilities may not be the best approach. This article discusses the limitations of the current method of accommodating students with disabilities and presents a new framework--Universal Instructional Design (UID)--for accommodating all students.

### **Current Means of Accommodating Students**

The ADA requires colleges and universities to make reasonable accommodations for students with disabilities so they can have an equal opportunity to receive an education. The ADA defines a disability as (a) a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, (b) a record of such impairments, or (c) being regarded as having such an impairment (42 U.S.C. § 12101 [2]). A "reasonable accommodation" is a modification of a course, field placement, or other educational activity to allow equal participation and equal access to education. Reasonable accommodations in classrooms can include note taking, flexible testing, interpreters, texts on tape, or tutoring. Accommodations at field placements can include flexible hours, adaptive equipment, or other job accommodations. This breakthrough for social work students with disabilities allows them equal access to courses, field placements, and other educational activities, but there are several disadvantages to using reasonable accommodations as the only means of ensuring equal participation.

First, a social work program is only required to provide an accommodation to a student with a known disability. Unlike the elementary and secondary educational levels that operate under the requirement to actively identify students with disabilities (Silver, Bourke, & Strehorn,

1998), at the university level students are responsible for self-identification and self-disclosure (Johnson & Fox, 2003). Thus, in order for a student with a disability to receive an accommodation, a student has to both disclose that he or she has a disability and become certified in some manner as having a disability. This requires students who think that they might have a disability to prove they have a disability, usually by getting documentation from a physician or other professional. In addition, students may have a continuing obligation to verify eligibility.

While for some this might not be a barrier, for others this can be a substantial burden in several ways. For instance, students must be aware that such accommodations are available and know the proper procedures for obtaining disability certification. While many universities have prominent disability centers and instructors make this information easily available, universities and instructors are not required under the ADA to provide outreach to students with potential disabilities. Further, the certification process can be a substantial burden, as testing for some disabilities can be prohibitively expensive, particularly learning disabilities. Documentation or certification of a disability is significant because, absent such proof, instructors at many universities are advised not to offer accommodations.

Second, while making disability a special category can legitimize the accommodation needs of students with disabilities, it also requires students and faculty members to focus on the student's disability, instead of his or her ability. This can put the focus on a student's deficiency, as opposed to on the university's inaccessibility. An emphasis solely on a student's limitations without a corresponding emphasis on societal barriers is the type of discrimination that adherents of the social model of disability decry (Oliver, 1990).

A related concern is the very nature of self-identification or self-disclosure. Because trust plays an important role in self-disclosure for students with disabilities (Bricout, 2001) the necessity of informing instructors while in the beginning process of building an educational relationship might impose a barrier. Thus, by purely following the anti-discrimination approach to accommodating students with disabilities the university and instructors may be inadvertently stigmatizing the very students they are trying to accommodate (Johnson & Fox, 2003).

Third, the requirement of designing accommodations to fit the individualized needs of a student often results in accommodations being added onto an already developed curriculum, rather than building the accommodations into their initial design. This results in increased work for both the student and faculty, who must constantly negotiate add-ons to the curriculum, and the resulting accommodations may not result in equal learning opportunities for students with or without documented disabilities.

Finally, when appropriate accommodations are added on to the curriculum, students who do not have a documented disability are not entitled to these accommodations. Thus, an accommodation, such as extra time for a test or the provision of class notes, might also benefit an English Language Learner (ELL), a nontraditional student, or a student with a different learning style. As these students would not have access to this accommodation, it can lead to a perception that accommodations for people with documented disabilities are not fair to students with other needs.

While accommodations should always be available for students with documented disabilities, the current model of adding on accommodations to the curriculum for those who are certified as having a disability is not sufficient. UID, a model that builds in as many accommodations in the initial design of the curriculum, is an appropriate additional model for

making social work education accessible for all students. UID does not negate the need for individual accommodations, but attempts to minimize the need for such accommodations.

### **Universal Instructional Design**

UID goes beyond adapting already developed curricula to fit the needs of an individual student to building in accommodations in the front-end of curriculum design. UID is an adaptation of the concept of universal design, developed in the field of architecture as a way of going beyond simply complying with disability codes, toward developing spaces and structures that accommodate the widest spectrum of users possible (Center for Universal Design, 1997). The classic universal design example is the curb cut. Curb cuts, which were designed to allow people who use wheelchairs to have access to streets and sidewalks, make travel easier for a wide variety of people beyond the initial target population, including people using strollers, shopping carts, scooters, hand trolleys, and bicycles. The curb cut is not a special accommodation only for people with disabilities, but rather is a fundamental part of the design that allows all people similar access.

In translating the concept of universal design to social work education, UID entails varying the format of courses to provide universal access for students with varying types of needs, including learning styles, family situations, cultural backgrounds, and abilities. By designing curricula to meet the widest variety of learner needs, there will be fewer individual requests for accommodations based on disability or other needs. This is beneficial not only for the student with a disability who will have to self-identify as having a disability less frequently and spend less time arranging accommodations, but also for the instructors, who will have to make fewer individual accommodations. Analogous to the curb-cut example, a universally designed course will benefit not only students with documented disabilities, but also students

who do not self-identify as having a disability, ELL students, students with extensive work and family obligations, and students with varying learning styles.

The Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST, 2000, p. 3) has delineated four fundamental assumptions of UID. These assumptions are:

1. Students with disabilities fall along a continuum of learner differences rather than constituting a separate category;
2. Teacher adjustments for learner differences should occur for all students, not just those with disabilities;
3. Curriculum materials should be varied and diverse, including digital and online resources, rather than centering on a single textbook; and
4. Instead of remediating students so that they can learn from a set curriculum, a curriculum should be made flexible to accommodate learner differences.

Of course, it is impossible to design a course that is completely accessible to all students, and universities and instructors should not interpret an effort to more universally design a course, seminar, or field placement as a replacement for making legally required accommodations for students. However, the more universally designed a course, seminar, or field placement is, the less likely course accommodations will be necessary *ex post facto*.

### **UID In Social Work Education**

There are numerous concrete changes instructors can make in their courses to create a more universally accessible educational environment for all social work students (Curriculum Transfer and Design, 2000). The following four core components of UID in social work education have been adapted from the Curriculum Transfer and Design Program (CTAD):

1. Develop a welcoming classroom and field environment;
2. Focus on essential components of course and field curriculum;
3. Use multi-modal instructional method and incorporate natural supports; and
4. Provide flexible means of evaluation.

Underlying all four components is a strong emphasis on the use of accessible technology as a means to ensure universal access to instructional material (Center for Applied Special Technology, 2000). The following section will describe each of the four components and their incorporation of accessible technology and provide examples relevant to social work education.

Develop a welcoming classroom and field environment. The first component of UID is to make classrooms and field placements safe, trusting places for all students, including students with disabilities and other learning needs (Bricout, 2001). This can be achieved in a number of ways, most importantly by encouraging instructor-student interaction. This can be fostered by holding office hours that are convenient and cordial, by ensuring that there are multiple modes of communication between students and instructors (class, e-mail, chat rooms, phone), and by modeling and encouraging a climate of trust, respect, and support. Blackboard, WebCT, or other classroom management software can be useful in increasing communication lines among students and between students and instructor. Instructors can also require individual conferences as a normal part of student-instructor interaction, rather than only relating to specific course issues. Forming a learning community in the class is important for making students feel welcome, and instructors should be clear about what their expectations are for students (Jehangir, 2003).



Instructors can also explicitly make their classes welcoming to students with disabilities by placing an accommodation policy in their syllabus, emphasizing this policy to students on the first day of class, and providing information on how students can contact the student disability office. This eases at least some of the burden for students with disabilities, as it provides them with the knowledge that they can receive accommodations if they have a documented disability and alerts them to the appropriate channels for seeking such documentation. It also demonstrates to other students in the class that the instructor views accommodations as a fair and important part of his or her educational philosophy.

This welcoming environment is also necessary in field placements. Providing field instructors with training on historical and current discrimination that people with disabilities experience, accommodation obligations under the ADA, practical resources for creating universal access, and the universal design approach to accessibility will benefit not only students in field placements but also present and future employees within their organizations.

Focus on essential components of the curriculum. The second component of UID is to design all learning activities to focus on the essential components of the curriculum. The purpose is to develop a nondiscriminatory baseline of knowledge and skills required for student mastery in a course or field placement (Curriculum Transfer and Design, 2000). To develop these essential components instructors can refer to accrediting standards, licensing requirements, departmental guidelines, course objectives, and faculty and field instructor knowledge. After determining the essential components, the instructor can then decide which parts of these essential components are accessible to all students, and which might not be accessible to some students. By returning to these essential components and analyzing accessibility, an instructor

can then plan course delivery methods to make the essential components accessible to a broad variety of students.

For example, instructors may teach policy courses with closed-book quizzes and final papers. After returning to the essential components, they may find that short-term retention is not essential for this course and decide to alter the quiz. They may also find that expository writing is essential; however, this component may be less accessible to some students with learning disabilities or some ELL students. This does not mean that writing is an inappropriate component, but rather gives instructors insight into how it might be inaccessible, and a forewarning that writing assignments might need to be modified for certain students. If instructors anticipate that expository writing assignments may cause difficulties for certain students, they can build in accommodations to create more universal access, such as allowing all students ample time for completing writing assignments, or at least anticipate accommodation requests. After returning to essential functions, the instructional methods and evaluation tools can be designed to focus explicitly on these essential functions in the most widely accessible manner possible.

Multi-modal instructional methods. The third component of UID is to use multi-modal instructional designs that include natural supports for learning the essential components, so that course material is accessible to all students. Many of the accommodations typically requested for students with disabilities are accommodations that can benefit many students (Curriculum Transfer and Design, 2000). For example, instead of an instructor providing lecture notes only to a student with a documented disability, an instructor can post lecture notes on the Internet before class. This allows all students multiple means of accessing course material without requiring individual students to disclose a disability to receive such access. This benefits students with

visual impairments who can preview the notes with a screen reader; ELL students who can look up definitions before class; and students with a learning style that benefits from listening more intently. The key in UID is to anticipate accommodation needs inherent in course components and to include a variety of instructional methods that would meet these needs.

Many good course instructors already include a variety of instructional methods, such as rotating between lectures, small and large group discussions, multi-media, and individual reflection. Similarly, field instructors can use a variety of methods for instruction, such as modeling skills, providing written feedback, or allowing students to audiotape supervisory meetings for future reflection. Other basic ways instructors can make lectures more accessible are by speaking distinctly, facing the class while speaking, providing outlines, allowing tape recorders in class, explaining technical terms, using charts and diagrams, and reading handouts out loud. A variety of technological tools can also improve course access, such as self-paced tutorials with built-in assessments, electronic flashcards, threaded discussions, interactive animations, and study-guides. While using technology to present key information is an important component of UID, technology has its own accessibility issues and should be assessed for its accessibility (Bricout, 2001).

By using a variety of instructional methods and presenting material in a number of manners, the instructor will not only meet the learning needs of a wider variety of students, but also will likely encounter fewer requests for accommodations.

Provide flexible means of evaluation. UID calls for allowing students in courses and field placements alternative ways to demonstrate their mastery of essential components, be evaluated frequently, and be provided with regular feedback. For example, in the earlier illustration of the expository writing essential component, an instructor can design a variety of assignments and

activities to address this activity. An instructor can have the students write during class, in brief take-home assignments, and in a final term paper, with opportunities for frequent instructor and peer feedback. Instructors can use course management software to allow for easier feedback on writing and point students toward online writing tutorials for help with specific topics. With interactive technologies such as online quizzes or learning modules, assessment becomes more than measuring outcomes, but rather a teaching tool that provides instant feedback and diagnoses learning needs that helps students with further learning (Rose & Meyer, 2000).

UID also suggests allowing options in demonstrating mastery of course components. For example, if an essential component of a Human Behavior course were to demonstrate an understanding of child development theories, students could be given the choice of writing a paper, making a professional presentation, or developing a multi-media presentation. In each option students would be demonstrating mastery of the same component, but presenting it in a way most meaningful to their learning needs. Offering these types of choices obviously becomes more difficult in larger classes or for instructors with large teaching loads.

## **Conclusions**

Students are entitled to the most up-to-date pedagogy that social work has available. While UID is a new approach and its effectiveness needs to be further researched, it appears to be an approach that minimizes stigma and is inclusive to a broad array of learners. Theoretically, developing a course from a UID approach would also reduce the amount of instructional time spent on retrofitting course materials to meet the learning needs of individual students with disabilities on a case-by-case basis. If a course is developed to be widely accessible to learners with multiple needs, then the instructor might not have to be consistently retooling course material based on individual accommodation needs.

UID's primary limitation is that it can require an enormous amount of faculty time and instructional support to both develop and teach courses with a UID philosophy (Johnson & Fox, 2003). It assumes that instructors have ample technological support for developing and maintaining extensive course WebPages, posting handouts prior to class, and developing online exams. Further barriers include faculty's attitude, budgetary constraints, and administrative support (Johnson & Fox, 2003). However, the more social work educators can make courses and field placements universally accessible in their initial design, the more equitable social work education will be for all students.

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