Applying UDL Principles in the Literature Classroom

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Abstract

The academic community has acknowledged Universal Design for Learning (UDL) as a valid framework, but resources for English instructors are sparse. In this paper I explore some of the major questions and pitfalls that an English instructor might encounter in the process of implementing UDL into lower-level college courses. These questions include how to devise a universal reading list, how to present texts in a universal manner, and how to mitigate the need for classroom accommodations. Using Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* as an example text, I argue that reading lists should be guided by class rosters instead of arbitrary notions of diversity, that students can derive valuable experiences from any given text, that universal design should replace the accommodations model whenever possible, and that UDL must distinguish between unnecessary barriers and valuable learning experiences.

Introduction

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is an educational framework which aims to provide meaningful education to all students regardless of their personal circumstances. As the phrase "universal design" was originally applied in the context of disability, UDL appears most often in discussions about disability rights in education, though the concept technically applies to all learners (CAST "The UDL Guidelines"). UDL is referenced in the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), where it is recognized as a scientifically valid framework. Thusfar, research on UDL has focused on K-12, and rightfully so—thirty years ago, far fewer students with disabilities sought higher education after secondary school. Accordingly, there have been fewer studies regarding the implementation of UDL into postsecondary education and virtually none with regards to college level English courses.

But as education advances for individuals with disabilities, so too has the percentage of those who seek postsecondary education. According to the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2), a ten-year long study funded by the US Department of Education, four out of five high school students with disabilities identified college as a primary goal, and more young adults with disabilities are taking college-preparatory courses than ever before (Sanford 13). The achievement gap is wide. Among students enrolled in a 4-year college, 42.2 percent of students in the general population graduated, compared to 29.4 percent of students with disabilities (20). Thus, it seems a ripe time to consider implementing UDL into college classrooms.

In this paper, I will focus on literature courses. As mentioned above, college level English courses have received little attention in UDL research, even when compared to other fields in higher education. Most discussions of UDL focus on STEM fields, and those which have covered English courses tend towards English as a second language. Perhaps educators

assume that literature courses have less need for a UDL framework due to their relatively flexible curricula.

The NLTS2 study suggests otherwise—among students with disabilities, reading comprehension represented the worst score across all subjects. With the mean score of the general population fixed at 100, the mean standard score for passage comprehension among youth with disabilities was 79, significantly lower than the 85 in science and the 84s in social studies and mathematics (Wagner 17). Furthermore, the lower score in reading was consistent across all disability categories, from those which were easy to explain, such as autism, to those which were not so easy to explain, such as orthopedic impairment (18). That is to say, the data was not skewed by any single outlier, but rather the low scores in reading comprehension were consistent across youth with disabilities regardless of their type of disability.

It is difficult to determine with certainty the cause behind the achievement gap, as the final answer is probably the result of multiple factors. Perhaps the flexibility that seems so accomodating to diversity also results in a wider range of bad course designs. After all, literature courses have the potential to be the least universal in terms of course content, and this inherent flexibility also allows for a wider range of interpretation when it comes to implementing educational frameworks. The fact that youth with disabilities encounter more difficulties with reading comprehension across the spectrum suggests that literature courses should be a significant part of the UDL discussion. Educators must consider how they might proactively improve literature courses in order to provide more rigorous and meaningful education for all.

In pursuing this research, I hope to cover three major questions that should form the basis of any instructor’s decision-making process when implementing universal design into a literature course:

1. How can English instructors align the learning objectives of a literature course with those of UDL?
2. What do students learn from books they do not identify with?
3. What types of unnecessary barriers exist for students with disabilities in literature courses?

I will examine some of the procedural changes required to implement UDL into the literature classroom, both in regards to the accessibility of class materials and the content of the curriculum itself, to help English instructors find a foothold within a new framework and to draw attention to potential issues they may not have been privy to otherwise.

The Example Text

I will use an example text, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* by Mark Haddon. When implementing non-canonical texts into a universally designed course, one major question for an educator is how a book implemented for the benefit of a single minority group affects the experience of the class as a whole. Thus, I have picked a book that not only has a high likelihood of being implemented into a real course, but also lacks the critical standing to easily slot into a typical course. *The Curious Incident* is a mystery/family drama narrated by a character with Asperger's syndrome. Its popular success makes it a prime target for teachers who are starting to explore the UDL framework, and accordingly, the book has already inspired several publications on how to incorporate it into various curricula. The book has been used as an example to illustrate strategies for promoting inclusivity in high school classrooms (Walton 2012). The popularity of the novel in education extends beyond even the English-speaking world—it was compulsory reading for the Matura exam in Slovenian grammar schools (Kukovec 137), and thus, has already served as part of a standardized curriculum. Themes of disability and

social alienation, simple prose, and the popular appeal of the detective genre make the book a compelling choice for teachers who wish to explore universal design in learning.

The book has provoked a wide range of reactions, ranging from "beautifully written, thought provoking, and empathy-inspiring" (146), to "a caricature of autism and of people with ASD" (Talley 240). Others have expressed concern over Haddon's depiction of Christopher as a dependent (Resene 82). I have chosen this controversial text as opposed to a canonical text in order to address some of the potential counterarguments that might arise when implementing UDL into a real curriculum. Potential for critique is integral to universal design, as we shall soon see.

Aligning Our Objectives

The term "universal design" was originally popularized in the context of architecture designed for both disabled and nondisabled people without compromise of functionality. In the context of education, universal design refers to classes designed to promote inclusivity without sacrificing quality of education. To that end CAST's guidelines identify the learning goals of a UDL course as self-regulation, comprehension, and executive functions (CAST). In a literature course, the three goals of UDL may be translated as,

1. To promote self-reflection
2. To improve reading comprehension
3. To foster critical thinking

For students who are interested in disability studies, the inclusion of *The Curious Incident* on the reading list would constitute a step towards all three of these goals, but could we argue the same for students who do not have any interest in disability studies? While most literature instructors accept that any given text can be read in a multitude of different ways, the idea that

we can adapt any text to any situation invites the argument that we should simply accept the canon and stop trying to diversify the curriculum. I think that it is true that, in practice, we cannot expect underclassmen to contextualize themselves in relation to every text. While the instructor can use *The Sound and the Fury* as a text with a disabled narrator, *The Curious Incident* more immediately registers to the average student as an attempt by the instructor at inclusiveness, rather than just another canonical text.

There is an extensive amount of research on knowledge transfer. Kathleen Blake Yancey suggests that students can grasp new ideas that do not accord with their preconceptions, but only if the instructor engages with those initial preconceptions (Yancey 47). In other words, it is important to engage students from the outset on the surface level of the course—the content of the reading list—in order to encourage knowledge transfer. If a student with an interest in disability studies sees *The Curious Incident* in the course readings, they are more likely to engage with the other texts, even if the other texts have little to do with disability studies. Likewise, a black student may feel more comfortable engaging with texts by white authors if there are also black authors on the reading list.

Once they overcome that initial barrier to engagement, college students are smart enough to contextualize, and in fact, Yancey finds that the difficulty of contextualizing oneself within an unfamiliar environment can be beneficial to long-term transfer. In her study, students who were met with unfamiliar content tended to engage in more high-road transfer (93) than students who were overly familiar with the material (91). This suggests that the process of discovering for oneself how to adapt knowledge is an integral part of the learning process, given that the instructor provides the student something to care about from the outset.

Different educators have different ideas of what a literature course should be. For many, inclusivity in the literature classroom means changing the reading list to reflect the diversity of the greater population. For example, here is a set of guidelines Vicky Greenbaum recommends to instructors:

> "50% by or about women of various colors (including white) . . . no more than 25% white, male (Shakespeare, etc.) . . . a carefully chosen palette, varied from term to term, of authors of color . . . authors from an 'invisible' minority, gay/lesbian/bisexuals, so that those students who are secretly considering their non-heterosexual feelings will get a sense of inclusion, too" (Greenbaum 39).

Melissa Jogie, a researcher at the Australian National University, likewise supports a "post-colonial approach" that looks similar to Greenbaum's approach, but with more of a focus on questioning "colonial sentiments that are often echoed in older texts" (Jogie 304). Fenice Boyd offers a more general endorsement for culturally diverse literature, indicating that selection "is not an exact science" (Boyd 385).

While the process of selecting books does not have to be a science, it would certainly be helpful to have some guidelines, especially in higher education where rigor is important. In lower-level English courses, teachers have resorted to choosing from a random selection of diverse texts in the hopes that their class rosters will reflect their choices, when in fact it is the *choices* which should reflect the roster. A less formal version of Greenbaum's method seems to me the de facto method English teachers employ when drawing up an inclusive reading list; the practice is intuitive enough that one can empathize with an instructor who decides to replace a handful of canonical texts in a reading course in order to make minority groups feel more

included in the curriculum as a whole, with the ultimate vision being a universal design where, ideally, all students feel like they are a meaningful part of the class.

But we must ask ourselves whether the practice of arbitrarily choosing texts from minority groups actually counts as universal design. I suggested above that choosing a diverse set of texts is important, but how can we be sure that all students will be engaged from the outset if none of the chosen texts catch their interest? Jogie's post-colonial approach is tailored specifically towards indigenous populations in Australia, and for every group that Greenbaum's list of guidelines includes, there are many more she has left out. For example, *The Curious Incident* falls inside Greenbaum's majority classification even though the book is relevant to many disadvantaged people. In her paper, Greenbaum describes a Hispanic student who complained that the reading lists were mostly white with a few black authors scattered throughout (Greenbaum 36). Just as the Hispanic student does not see white and black as diverse, a student with a disability might complain that Greenbaum's reading list does not properly represent them, even though the list is diverse from a racial point of view. The tacit implication is that we are taking a utilitarian approach—there are more black students than Hispanic students, so we should focus on black students first. But favoring black authors over Hispanic authors is morally questionable, and the complete exclusion of students with disabilities puts the efficacy of Greenbaum's guidelines into question. She specifies that the "palette" should vary from term to term, but she does not explain how she determines the palette for each term. If the instructor cycles through texts out of personal preference, then there is no guarantee that students will have an equally meaningful experience. The instructor may be experiencing a diverse set of texts, but for the students, the choices might as well be arbitrary. My point is not to question any one instructor's list of guidelines in particular, but to question any such set of guidelines that

instructors have internalized to the belief that their courses are egalitarian. I believe that including a diverse set of texts is important within a UDL framework, but also that educators need a better standard than our current vague set of guidelines.

Although UDL stresses universality, it does not need to imply standardization, a phrase which has a profoundly negative connotation due to its history of providing poorly implemented one-size-fits-all solutions. Because of universal design's origins in architecture, it is tempting to assume that UDL implies the instructor's syllabus must be set in stone. But education is not architecture—instructors have a class roster each semester, so they know the exact makeup of the student population who will be utilizing their course content for the next three months. "Universal" in the context of learning does not have to literally draw from the original meaning of "universal" in "universal design". In their analysis on the diversity of reading lists in higher education, K. Schucan Bird and Lesley Pitman suggest that descriptive representation, while having its merits, runs the risk of oversimplification, and they urge further reflection "to create a framework for analyzing reading lists that can be meaningful and theoretically justified" (Bird 913).

Given that my theoretical justification for diverse reading lists is that students need to overcome an initial barrier of engagement, I think that an effective implementation of universal design in education needs only to reflect the diversity of that specific class in that single term, as opposed to the diversity of the general population. For a college literature course, this more focused approach to descriptive representation may be implemented as thus: Issue some kind of survey or assignment that asks students to discuss their cultural background, challenges they face on a day to day basis, concerns about the class, and reading preferences, with the goal being to figure out how the students identify themselves. If a survey seems too formal, one can also

accomplish the same with one on one conferences early in the semester. Afterwards, choose texts based on your knowledge of the class population. If a student in the class has ASD and they express an interest in disability studies, then we know that *The Curious Incident* will likely engage their attention, whether they end up enjoying the book or not (I will discuss the importance of critique further down). By allowing the class roster to inform the readings, we can achieve real equality in the classroom as opposed to an approximation of equality.

There are some potential issues with this method of picking texts to directly reflect the student population. One is that the instructor must be well-versed in a wide range of literatures. The instructor has to either have eclectic tastes or become a fast enough reader that they can read and create lesson plans after the semester has already begun. Two is that the instructor cannot finalize their lesson plans in the months leading up to the first day of class, which could potentially cause a decline in the quality of education for everyone. Neither of these issues can be resolved in any systematic manner, but both are mitigated as the instructor gains more experience over time. If issuing a poll at the beginning of the semester seems unrealistic, one might also consider asking students for a short statement upon registering for the class as part of the instructor's consent, which would allow for a more flexible timeframe.

The advantage is clear—the responsibility of maintaining balance in the classroom has been offloaded onto the instructor's shoulders, instead of the students'. Any framework that places more burden on specific groups of students is not a universal design, and the solution is to shift the burden of equalization to the instructor. It does not discriminate between instructors either, as all instructors must be equally well versed in literature to accommodate their students. Of course, UDL functions best in smaller groups. In large lecture groups where the professor may never even meet all students face to face and where the majority/minority dynamic is even

more pronounced, this method will not function as well. The professor will have to engage in a little more generalization in order to cover all groups in the class roster; that being said, this method well never function any worse than choosing texts at random, assuming that the instructor has the time to read and write a few lesson plans after the semester has already started.

One reason that UDL theorists may focus their attention on K-12 education is the assumption that college students are strong enough readers to think beyond the confines of a text's content. This assumption is faulty, one, because freshmen are entering college with less and less reading experience, and two, because many students in lower-level English courses are taking those classes to satisfy breadth requirements. I do agree, however, that higher-level courses have less of a responsibility to diversify their curricula when compared to lower-level survey courses. For one, most higher-level courses are topical, and topical courses have less of an onus to diversify reading lists because a student in a Shakespeare course presumably has some interest in Shakespeare, though the instructor may still find it useful to include a few "flex slots". For example, if students in a Shakespeare course express interest in African American studies, the instructor might use that information to choose *Othello* over another text or to assign some critical essays by black authors. Nevertheless, once a literature student reaches optional higher-level courses, they should be more comfortable with specialization, so the need for UDL in reading lists is mostly confined to freshmen and sophomore reading courses.

What do students learn from books they do not identify with?

Of course, every student must be engaged for more than the one or two texts that interest them most. Once instructors overcome the initial barrier of engagement by diversifying their reading lists, they should take steps to ensure that every student is learning something meaningful from each text. I mentioned above that students are capable of extrapolating their

own experiences onto unfamiliar texts, but the instructor needs to guide them towards that ideal. The ordering of content is also important, again because the text must overcome an initial barrier to engagement. Instructors should begin with universally applicable parts of the text and gradually move towards the subjective. Let us explore, in order, three ways a teacher can present texts as part of a UDL framework:

- Fundamental Concepts

All reading courses regardless of content can cover some fundamental patterns in reading comprehension before tying those patterns back in with the content. Just as one should not reduce a novel to mechanics or style, one should not reduce a novel to its qualitative elements. In a universal design it is doubly important to discuss how stories are told, because the "how" transfers across texts and ultimately helps link the content of each individual text to the rest of the course material. Delving into the internal mechanics of each text helps reveal similarities in the thought processes behind the writing, in turn creating a sense of unity between students with different interests.

The Curious Incident is a great point in a course to discuss perspective and unreliable narrators, and perspective in turn serves as a segue into a discussion about the social difficulties people with ASD face on a day-to-day basis. *The Curious Incident* is a mystery novel. Christopher's disability is at odds with the genre of the novel because a detective needs to have a strong understanding of motive, and Christopher expresses difficulty understanding complex emotions (Haddon 2), jokes (113), and other minds (110). Thus, a central question of the text is why Haddon chose to combine the fictional representation of a disabled person with a detective novel—one where the detective never makes headway in uncovering the identity of the killer, instead presenting an objective view of the whole case, and leaving the deduction up to the

reader. As Michelle Resene observes, "[The mysteries] are easily solved by the reader in the first one hundred pages, leaving the remainder of the book to accomplish Haddon's deeper goal: a complex representation of how Christopher interprets the world through the lens of autism and how that world responds to Christopher in return" (Resene 1). He cannot understand the irrational act of murdering the dog and therefore has a hard time deducing the identity of the killer, even after he learns that his father has lied about the death of his mother. Although he identifies with Sherlock Holmes (Haddon 65), Christopher's narrative function is comparable to that of a Mr. Watson. Conan Doyle uses a proxy narrator in the Sherlock Holmes tales to prevent the reader from prematurely deducing the mystery, and Haddon similarly hides the mystery of the family drama behind Christopher's narration.

The concept of narrative perspective segues into a discussion about the potential difficulties that people with ASD face in an irrational and emotion-driven society. If the class has covered a story by a Latin American author earlier in the semester, the instructor can then start a discussion about narrative perspective with respect to the earlier book, then posit that many of the difficulties Latinos face in American society also arise from conflicts in social interaction, but ones that come from a different place—cultural differences and policies that advantage certain groups over others. In this way, the teacher succeeds in using literary devices to bridge the content between the two texts, allowing both groups a gateway into the other's texts.

One could also focus on Haddon's style, how the author uses language to represent Christopher's disability. The instructor would ask students to look for moments in the text where Haddon uses a narrative technique to delineate Christopher's disability and then to look for moments in the text where people misunderstand or become frustrated with Christopher. When introducing the concept of rhetoric, I would also recommend identifying moments in the text

where Haddon's stylistic techniques fail. Too much of the novel is devoted to explaining Asperger's syndrome in textbook terms. One chapter begins, "This will not be a funny book. I cannot tell jokes because I do not understand them. Here is a joke, as an example" (13). Christopher goes on to pick apart the joke to explain why it is confusing to a person with ASD, but the scene reads more like Haddon's explanation than Christopher's. Many of the scenes involving Siobhan, the special ed teacher, have the whiff of research due to an overreliance on telling over showing. Haddon tries to resolve this issue by framing *The Curious Incident* as a fictional novel written by Christopher himself (216), but in a book whose rhetorical purpose is to offer some insight into the mind of a person with ASD, the tendency for the main character to explain away his own quirks before the reader can even try to understand them is disappointing. Instructors can juxtapose effective and ineffective scenes in texts to explain to students how they can evaluate the rhetorical strength of any given text using universally applicable criteria. My own critique of *The Curious Incident* serves as a good segue into the next point.

- Open Criticism

It is impossible to support UDL in the classroom if one does not actively allow students to critique the course material. If we return to Greenbaum's essay, we find a list of texts by minority authors which includes *The House on Mango Street*, *The Color Purple*, and *The Joy Luck Club* among others (Greenbaum 37). Greenbaum says that the texts on the list have been "granted uniformly high praise from a variety of readers", and she appears to take this statement as justification for including these texts in a course. As I mentioned above, choosing texts based on personal preference (or in this case, popular preference) is not good practice within the UDL framework. But there is another problem that needs to be acknowledged, a problem which affects any sort of reading list that claims to be diverse, including our own: Can we assume that a certain

group of people will enjoy a novel just because the novel is relevant to their personal circumstances? Members of a disadvantaged group may dislike a text even if they share their identity with the author, and in fact, they may react even more negatively than the other students if they find that the text in question is a warped or misguided representation of their community. This problem is slightly mitigated in our UDL-directed method of choosing texts because the instructor will have had the opportunity to get to know their students before finalizing the reading list, but it nevertheless remains a major problem. Greenbaum lists Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* alongside Frank Chin's *Donald Duk*, presumably with the knowledge that Chin has written flaming critiques of Tan's novel (Chin 2). Greenbaum seems to have included both for the benefit of an instructor reading her article, so that any potential objections to one is quelled by the presence of the other. But it raises the question—what if there are Asian students who, like Chin, do not like *The Joy Luck Club*, or vice versa? To say that the books have been granted "uniformly high praise" without acknowledging their controversies runs the risk of alienating the very group the book was meant to benefit.

Similarly, *The Curious Incident* has received an extensive amount of criticism as a popular novel about a sensitive topic, with one reviewer doubling down on the fact that the author is nondisabled: "Given that Haddon is not autistic, his novel is a guesstimate of what autism might be like. What is unsettling about the production of stories about disability by nondisabled people is that they are read as revealing" (Talley 244). Talley compares the book to reality television and the film *Rain Man* as a popular but stereotypical representation of disability from a nondisabled author (236), not exactly the type of content we would want to include in a college level English course. Haddon himself later insisted that the book was not about Asperger's syndrome, perhaps to distance the book from accusations of stereotyping (Cho 90).

Soohyun Cho agrees with Talley, citing popular reactions to the novel: “Even a brief glance over the Amazon reviews of *Curious Incident* shows how many readers believe that they were able to ‘picture’ Christopher’s mind and thus relate to the minds of autistic people” (91). Cho criticizes Haddon’s use of the detective genre in tandem with themes of disability, questioning whether the narrative conceit actually works towards its alleged goal of bridging the gap between reader and narrator. Then we have Resene, who finds Christopher’s inability to solve the mystery on his own “troubling”, because “if Christopher is unable to fulfill the detective role due to his intellectual disability, then that can lead readers to assume that he—and therefore the real child or teenager with autism—is somehow intellectually inferior to the neurotypical reader” (Resene 82).

A UDL course must be prepared to handle students’ objections to the course material. It is unreasonable to expect instructors to both implement unfamiliar texts and to understand every controversy or nuance about those texts. Jogie acknowledges this fact, stating that “no single text can claim with certainty to be an accurate representation of any given cultural group”, before suggesting that students can challenge the texts if they feel they are not accurate representations of their cultural background (Jogie 305). I would add that instructors must also foster an environment where the students are not only *capable* of voicing negative opinions about the text, but *comfortable*.

The idea that students should be able to critique the course material is not novel. After all, most canonical texts are wrought with controversy. But while teachers routinely encourage students to critique canonical texts, the same cannot be said for texts chosen for their cultural relevance. When an instructor includes a text on the reading list that has a clear social purpose, the automatic implication is that the instructor likes the text, which discourages criticism from

the outset. It is not enough to passively allow negative opinions in the classroom. In the case of *The Curious Incident*, a student might feel disinclined to critique the book because they would not want their negative opinion of the novel to come off as an attack on the novel's inclusion in the course, and in turn, a bias against books about disability. Or, if a student with ASD dislikes *The Curious Incident*, they might feel disinclined to challenge the text because they are afraid they will be perceived as ungrateful or over-sensitive. The instructor needs to actively encourage criticism by providing examples—alternate interpretations of course texts, critical essays, reviews—to take the responsibility off of the students' shoulders. Students will feel more comfortable critiquing a text if the instructor first demonstrates they are willing to critique those same texts. The instructor does not need to critique any single text in particular. They only need to demonstrate counterarguments for a sufficient portion of the course material as to make students comfortable challenging any given text, regardless of what they perceive to be the instructor's opinion. From there, I think that college students are mature enough to recognize the good intentions behind including a text like *The Curious Incident* on the reading list, even if they personally dislike it. One should also ask students who disliked the novel for superior alternatives to encourage them to offer something positive beyond the criticism.

- Widening one's social knowledge beyond personal experience

One of the goals of UDL is to encourage self-reflection, and one effective method of engaging in self-reflection is to contextualize one's own experience within a wider community. Anne Beaufort's first principle for encouraging reflection is to "Broadly frame the course content as knowledge to go, that is, make explicit references to broad applications for the course content in other arenas of life" (Beaufort 31). As Beaufort explains, "Seeing the need for transfer of learning is the first step toward making transfer happen" (32). If a student has a hard time

connecting with a particular text, the instructor can encourage them to contextualize their personal experiences in relation to the content, and in the process of doing so learn something new about themselves. Beaufort suggests allowing students a ten minute journaling period at the beginning of each class to reflect on how the day's readings connect to their personal lives (32).

Another example is an assignment that asks students to place themselves in a hypothetical conversation with Christopher. Many students only have a vague idea of what Asperger's syndrome is. While *The Curious Incident* indirectly defines the condition, an instructor can provide plenty of supplementary information alongside the novel to give students a better idea of what ASD looks like in the real world. The student would choose a personal experience and attempt to explain it in terms that would be easy for Christopher to understand. For example, a student could choose to write about a bad breakup, and then to attempt to explain their emotions to Christopher in a rational manner. The assignment would give students an opportunity to self-reflect while thinking deeply about the text.

Instructors should also develop overarching themes throughout their courses so that they can frame the content of any individual text as general knowledge within the wider context of the course. For example, if the instructor wants to use *The Curious Incident* to discuss the current status of disability rights in the country, it is much easier to explain the significance of that information to students who are ambivalent about *The Curious Incident* if the course texts they enjoy are also about social responsibility in America. If the instructor thinks that only a handful of students will find interest in the discussion, then the discussion should be recontextualized in terms with which each individual student can engage.

Accommodations & UDL

Students with disabilities face barriers which extend beyond course content. Currently, many of these barriers are mitigated through accommodation—under the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, colleges need to provide reasonable accommodations such as allowing students with wheelchairs to leave class early or having sign language interpreters in the room for the Deaf and hard of hearing. Accommodations are important for solving problems that cannot be solved through universal design.

But the accommodations model is itself a source of stress to students with disabilities. A study intending to identify barriers for the disabled in higher education found that the accommodation model itself was one of the most oft-cited barriers; the bureaucratic nature of applying for accommodations at a large university was a common source of complaint among disabled students (Griful-Freixenet 1628). Additionally, the accommodation model places responsibility on the students to acquire what they need, so even if the university administration were ready to meet all the needs of the disabled population, it would still be underserving a significant portion of it. Most students do not even disclose their disabilities to the university; in one study, out of 106 students with disabilities, only 23 contacted disability services to seek accommodations (Schelly 23). Accommodations can also contribute to a sense of alienation by drawing undue attention to a student's disability, which is a major problem when one of the biggest factors in enhancing student motivation is social belonging (Nilson 98). Furthermore, accommodations do not allow instructors much control over how they are incorporated into the course (Griful-Freixenet 1628), which can contribute to a sense that the instructor has no additional responsibilities towards the student.

Therefore, educators should begin thinking about how to mitigate the need for accommodations through universal design. Although universal design cannot solve all problems in the short term, instructors can reduce the need for minor accommodations, things like requests for note-taking assistance or recorded lectures. A Belgian study surveyed students with disabilities to find what types of barriers were most obstructive and what types of UDL solutions they found most helpful. The most common themes were structure (syllabi, clear expectations, outlines, repetition, etc.), self-reflection (encouragement and guidance in self-monitoring), and reduction of physical strain (Griful-Freixenet 1636). In another study, students emphasized "the importance of presenting concepts in multiple ways and offering course materials in a variety of formats" and "the need to summarize key concepts before, during and immediately following instruction" (Schelly 25).

Some of these changes are akin to the "dropped curb" in architecture because they have no real opportunity cost. For example, allowing more time on exams is just good general practice, given that the instructor has the free time to allow it. Students who suffer from anxiety will receive more benefit from the change, but all students will benefit regardless. Optional class materials also have no opportunity cost. Class notes, outlines or PowerPoints posted online will not affect students who choose not to use them, so there is no reason for instructors not to give students access to these materials. Students with disabilities also found guidance to reflection and self-learning helpful (1637, 1640). A student may dislike self-reflection, but the skill is so fundamental that, with good implementation, there is no reason to avoid it.

Other changes present more challenges. One of the principles of UDL is to provide multiple means of representation, and accordingly, the study above noted that most of the students thought a "combination of sensory inputs" was helpful. In the same study a student with

ASD expressed discomfort with multimodal courses (1635), a result consistent with findings which suggest autism is correlated with multisensory integration (Stevenson 2014, Ostrolenk 2018). Thus, an instructor looking to provide multiple means of representation should first gauge the students' preferences in the course pre-survey. Providing multiple means of representation seems to be an inclusive strategy, but it is possible that a student will react negatively to an overabundance of sensory inputs, as in the case of the student with ASD, or to one specific type of input. In this particular example, it would be best to provide a choice instead of bombarding students with multiple means of representation and/or forcing students to participate in, say, a video project. Many more students in the study called for clearer directions on assignments, which suggests that even instructors who want to encourage freedom in their assignments should outline their expectations assertively in order to provide equal opportunity to students who need clear directions. But then we are met with the opposite problem—what if a student is uncomfortable with the assignment and wishes they were allowed more freedom to suit their personal circumstances?

The wider point is that instructors should be cautious when implementing changes that have the potential to be harmful to certain individuals. As with the reading list, some of these issues can only be resolved after the instructor has a better idea of the individuals they will be working with. In the following table, I have separated examples of strategies that can be implemented immediately and strategies that should only be implemented after the instructor has a more complete picture of the class roster.

"Dropped Curb"	Potentially Harmful
• Outlines and class notes provided before class • Textbooks with alternative formats • More time on exams	• Provide options for multiple means of representation, but do not force students to engage with all of them

• Assignments that involve self-reflection • Maintaining a positive climate in class • Demonstrating content with real examples • Multiple options for approaching the instructor • Identify the general takeaways from each class at the beginning and end of each session	• Provide clear directions on assignments, but remain flexible if a student asks for more freedom • Assign cooperative assignments and peer evaluations to give students a chance to interact with one another, but lower the stakes to reduce stress for those who have difficulty with social interaction

Though it is important to mitigate unnecessary barriers, it is also important to differentiate between unnecessary barriers and valuable learning experiences. As proponents of UDL, we assume that catering to students' needs is good practice. But as mentioned above, students benefit from the process of overcoming unfamiliarity. It is widely acknowledged in the scientific literature that "learning styles", the idea that students learn best in the manner of their own choosing, is a myth with no scientific basis (Scott 2010, Kirschner 2017, Antoniuk 2019). Since UDL encourages flexibility, it runs the risk of becoming a platform to implement learning styles. Some writers have even cited the rise of universal design as one of the driving factors behind the learning styles myth: "UDL approaches may embed the notion of learning styles by creating learning experiences that are accessible to all learners, regardless of what learning style they may be attributed with" (Antoniuk 86). A UDL that dogmatically applies all of the accommodations listed above is one that confirms the skepticism of researchers.

As Sara Wyse and Paula Soneral acknowledge, the line between rigor and unnecessary difficulty is narrow. Students have a hard time articulating the meaning of academic rigor, so they do not always have good judgment when it comes to defining what constitutes a fair challenge (Wyse 2). Most students express a desire for intellectual challenge, but they also want those challenges to be attainable (12-13). Thus, an instructor looking to implement UDL must

identify challenges of academic significance and set them apart barriers with little academic value. A student with deep social anxiety might express discomfort with public speaking, but that does not mean the teacher should immediately give them the option to skip the presentation. Most students probably have some degree of anxiety over public speaking regardless of their personal circumstances, but instructors continue to assign presentations because they want their students to improve. The instructor can try to alter the assignment to lower the stakes, but the core of the assignment is still public speaking. One of the barriers that students listed in the survey above was "Compulsory Attendance". Even though allowing students to choose when to go to class caters to their individual desires, allowing students to skip class does not work towards the ultimate goal of UDL, which is to provide a meaningful learning experience for everyone. Unnecessary barriers are those which do not provide anything of value when they are overcome; attendance may be categorized as a necessary barrier. The goal of UDL is not to undermine academic rigor, but to eliminate those barriers which are irrelevant to academic rigor.

In Review

I have written this article in the hopes of illuminating the way forward for English teachers interested in UDL. Gloria Ladson-Billings writes that the usual response to her research on culturally relevant pedagogy is "But that's just good teaching!" (Ladson-Billings 159), and with many of the principles I have covered here, one could argue the same. A successful implementation of UDL in the literature classroom does not need to blow apart the definition of good teaching so much as identify those aspects of good teaching which can be universally applied. And in fact, the very concept of universal design promotes seamless integration, so if a class which seeks to provide equal opportunity to a diverse population is also a good class in general, the course is well-designed.

It should go without saying that one should not engage in bad teaching practices under the pretense of conforming to the UDL framework. Such bad practices include dumbing down the content so as to trivialize inclusion (it is trivial to include everyone if the class is itself trivial), allowing students to skip class, and indiscriminately giving out good grades regardless of the quality of the students' work. All of these practices are inclusive per se, but they are not beneficial. The common theme among these universally bad practices is that they make the instructor's job easier, and as such, they are also at risk of becoming the most popular ways of engaging with UDL. Regarding grades, some teachers might choose to deemphasize grades in order to address inequalities that exist within the education system itself, which is valid from a political standpoint, but is detrimental to the students in practice. In Yancey's study, the students who were overpraised by their instructors were less likely to develop a fundamental understanding of the material, and also less likely to transfer their knowledge beyond the classroom (Yancey 91). In literature classes, where revision and self-reflection are so integral to the learning process, a lack of grades disincentivizes students from engaging in either.

Let us return to the three questions I posed in the introduction. First I asked how English instructors could align the learning objectives of literature courses with the learning objectives of UDL. I decided that the goals of a literature course should be to promote self-reflection, to improve reading comprehension, and to encourage critical thinking. Instructors should continue to diversify reading lists in order to ensure all students are engaged from the outset, but they should also avoid choosing texts based on an immutable set of guidelines. Instead, instructors should wait until the beginning of the term, issue surveys or interviews, and choose course readings based on the answers they receive. Instructors should not finalize their courses before they have a complete picture of the student population.

Second, I asked if students could derive meaningful learning experiences from texts that do not explicitly apply to themselves. I concluded that instructors could make content more significant by encouraging students to contextualize their own personal experiences in relation to the course texts. Fundamental concepts will transfer across all texts, and instructors can use those fundamental concepts to link course texts with disparate themes. Unfamiliar texts can widen students' perspective on social matters if students are actively encouraged to reflect on their own place in society. The instructor must actively provide examples of disagreement or counterexamples in order to foster an atmosphere where students are comfortable challenging texts they find problematic.

Finally, I asked if there were any unnecessary barriers to students with disabilities in literature courses, and I found that teachers could adopt some basic practices to mitigate the need for accommodation. Some common themes identified by students with disabilities were structured content, lower physical strain, different options for engagement, and auxiliary materials. I stressed the importance of differentiating between practices that are truly universal and practices that have potential downsides.

To close out this discussion I will present some supplementary materials to demonstrate what UDL looks like in practice: three lesson plans for *The Curious Incident* which collate some of the principles I have discussed in my article.

Three UDL Lesson Plans for *The Curious Incident*

In a hypothetical classroom, we have a student with ASD and a high density of Latin American students who express a special interest in Latin American literature. We will have chosen *The Curious Incident* for its relevance to students with disabilities and "Funes the Memorious" as a text pairing because the class has a high density of students interested in Latin American literature.

*A version of each lesson plan with answers written out may be provided as an outline to students before class

Lesson 1 – Genre & Style

*We begin with fundamental concepts so that all students are engaged from the outset

Objective: Draw attention to the fundamental concepts of perspective and unreliable narration as well as the genre conventions of the novel.

Detective Fiction:

- Identify the genre conventions of detective fiction
    - Withheld information
    - The protagonist is a brilliant detective
    - The protagonist has a less-than-brilliant sidekick
    - The criminal is often the least suspect character
    - Hints that point to the solution
    - A neat resolution
    - Red herrings
- Identify where the novel conforms to or strays from those conventions
    - Conventional

        - Information is confined to Christopher's narration
        - The criminal turns out to be Chris's father
        - Hints: The father is opposed to Chris's interest in the mystery, mentions of Mr. Shears
        - The novel resolves fairly neatly
        - The entire mystery of the dog is in part a red herring for the other mystery involving Chris's mother
    - Unconventional
        - Christopher isn't a very good detective, as he never deduces the solution on his own
        - Christopher has no sidekick

*We start with easier questions (make a list of genre conventions) and transition into questions that require critical thinking in order to whet the students' interest before engaging in full-on discussion

- What are some reasons that Haddon might have decided Christopher would not figure out the solution on his own?
- Why does Christopher have no companion to help him solve the mystery?
    - Christopher clearly has a hard time making friends, and many of the people around him are dismissive or uncooperative
- Why choose the detective genre in the first place?

Style:

- ACTIVITY: Write a paragraph or two of narration in the style of the novel.
- Identify some features of the style/structure of the novel

  - Short chapters numbered in primes
  - "Childishness"
  - Short, matter-of-fact statements - "I like dogs. You always know what a dog is thinking. It has four moods" (9)
  - Lack of emotional or descriptive language

- Introduce the concept of perspective in fiction

Key Points:

*Most students in the studies mentioned above appreciated having a few key points to take away from each class.

- Haddon uses the narrative conventions of detective fiction in tandem with a narrator who has Asperger's syndrome in order to alter/enhance the narrative
- Haddon reflects the narrator's disability in the style and structure of the prose, using style to enhance his fictional representation of autism

Lesson 2 – Rhetoric & Representation

*We transition into a subject that is halfway between a fundamental concept and social criticism

Objective: Introduce the idea of rhetoric as an evaluative tool. Offer a critical perspective on the novel and alternate ways to represent disability in fiction.

Rhetoric:

*A discussion on rhetoric is fundamental in itself, but it also leads the students ever closer towards subjective evaluation. Thus, rhetoric is often a good starting point when trying to encourage students to challenge course texts, as it gives them some objective foundation from which they can argue their position

- How did you like *The Curious Incident*?

- Identify the rhetorical purpose of the novel. What is Haddon trying to accomplish?
- List some of the things you liked or disliked about the novel.
- Discuss the critical reception of the novel, its popularity and its controversies
    - Problems with fictional representations of minorities
    - Cite the concerns of Talley that the novel gives a false impression of mental solidarity

Text Pairing:

* We can use fundamental concepts such as rhetoric to tie texts together in a multitude of ways. In this example, we compare the critical standing of a canonical text to that of a contemporary text, drawing the attention of students who have an interest in Latin American literature towards the discussion on disability

- "Funes the Memorious"
    - Is Funes's condition a disability? How would you define a disability?
    - Why does the narrator think that Funes isn't capable of much thought?
        - Knowledge vs understanding
        - The narrator thinks that Funes isn't actually capable of much significant thought because the process of critical thinking is a process of subtraction. You have to generalize and abstract things in order to create a theory. You have to be able to recognize patterns or render judgment.
    - Both characters Funes and Christopher have similar mannerisms and social difficulties

        - The potential advantages of having a disability – Christopher is portrayed as a genius at mathematics and oftentimes perceives himself as superior to others
        - Funes, likewise, sees his state prior to the accident as a state of "deafblindness"
- How does "Funes the Memorious" differ from *The Curious Incident* as a narrative about a person with a disability?
    - Point out the difference between a narrative that's told from the perspective of the person with the disability and from the perspective of somebody who's describing and trying to understand a person with a disability
    - Does the fact that the author is disabled affect our perception of his fictional representation of disability? If Haddon had more experience with autism, would that have helped weather some of the criticism he received?

Key Points:

- Many critics take issue with Haddon's novel and take its popularity as an indication of a negative trend towards sensationalized representations of disability in fiction
- There are many ways different authors can approach the same topic, and identifying their ultimate rhetorical aim can help in evaluating whether they chose the best approach

Lesson 3 – Social & Course Themes

*Finally, we end on more specific and/or subjective topics. By now, students should be familiar enough with the material that they can engage with topics that are not as universal

Objective: Allow students agency to contemplate the text in a wider context.

Self-Reflection

*Students identified guidance in self-reflection as one of the most helpful aspects of a UDL course. In this case, we use an activity to ease students into a naturally self-reflective mindset.

- ACTIVITY: For ten minutes, write about your daily social life. Who do you interact with on a daily basis, and how do you interact with them? What, if any, difficulties do you face in your social life?
- What are the origins of these difficulties?

Discussion of social issues brought up in the novel:

- What types of barriers do people with ASD face in society?
    - Communication is integral to the very concept of society, and with impaired communicative skills, it is difficult to function within a society
- Consider the difference between physical and mental disabilities
    - People are generally more accepting of physical disabilities because they are perceived as "real" disabilities
- The effect that disability can have on a person's family life
    - Christopher's disability appears to have served as the catalyst for a lot of the family's dysfunction. Even though he does not directly cause
    - The stress of taking care of Chris seems to have led to the rift in his parents' marriage
- ACTIVITY: Place yourself in a hypothetical conversation with Christopher. Try to communicate a personal experience to Christopher in terms that he would understand.

*This final lesson places more of an emphasis on individual writing activities in order to encourage self-learning and transfer of knowledge

Key Points:

- Disabilities which affect a person's ability to communicate can cause unique difficulties for both the affected person and the society they are trying to interact with
- Everyone has their own unique set of problems, and the aim of fiction is often to highlight or propose solutions to those problems

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There is no governing body behind the UDL framework. CAST (originally the Center for Applied Special Technology) is the nonprofit organization which first proposed the concept, and is therefore the most oft-cited resource in UDL literature. As noted in their "UDL Guidelines Structure" video tutorial, the guidelines are arranged in columns, with the bottom row constituting the three end goals of UDL.

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