Universal Design for Learning (UDL)

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a framework that includes, supports, and accommodates various types of learning. It is important to recognize that all students acquire knowledge differently. In order for teachers to create an environment that fosters learning and participation, it must be acknowledged that teaching strategies that only benefit certain populations of students limits other types of learners to reach their full potential. The UDL guideline, which spans across providing multiple means of engagement, representation, and action and expression, places all students on an equal playing field. It does not only highlight the learning differences, or preferences, between students, but it embraces them and aims to accommodate them.

Universal Design for Learning reassures students that their needs are valued, but does not subject them to feeling individual or segregated. UDL evolves over time; it does not work to favour dominant, traditional styles of learning. It promotes the real meaning of teaching, and that is to learn. Learning does not only generate learning, but rather it inspires teaching. The students become motivated and are influenced to continue to learn. At SCOTAY, and as student consultants we are proud to use our student perspective to bridge the divide between teachers and learners.

Student Consultants on Teaching at York (SCOTAY)

SCOTAY, or Student Consultants on Teaching at York, is a one-year program for undergraduate students from the Faculty of Education. By bringing together the student and instructor, implementing classroom observations and offering feedback to instructors, the program provides an opportunity for faculty to reflect on their pedagogy, as well as empower student voices to enhance the learning experience at York.

SCOTAY student consultants are trained comprehensively by educational developers at the Teaching Commons before they work with instructors. With key educational theory and perspectives, as well as skills of communicating and observing, student consultants fulfill their main responsibilities by implementing meetings with instructors and observation in classrooms.

After receiving a request from an instructor, one of our student consultants is assigned to facilitate an observation cycle, which includes a pre-observation meeting, classroom observation, and a post-observation meeting. In the pre-observation meeting student consultants discuss the objectives of observation with the instructor to make sure the observation goes smoothly. During the in-class observation, student consultants observe what
is happening in the classroom according to the goals set in the pre-observation meeting. The last step in the observation cycle is the post-observation meeting, in which the student consultant offers constructive feedback to instructors.

Last but not least, the role of student consultants is not an evaluator of instructors or their pedagogy. Instead, we provide a pressure-free opportunity for instructors to revisit and reflect on their current strategies.

**Student Engagement**

Student engagement refers to the degree of attention, curiosity, interest, optimism, and passion that students show when they are learning. Both parties (facilitator and students) create a relationship-building process that aids the learning environment, such as asking meaningful and engaging questions to the topic. This also stimulates the rethinking of significant ideas, which sparks meaningful connections with prior learning and personal experiences, which creates opportunities for transfer to other situations and subjects (Wiggins and McTighe, 2005).

Little classroom-based research exists to support the commonly held belief that students' attention span is about 15 minutes. Bunce et al. (2010) found that students alternate between being engaged and unengaged in ever-shortening cycles throughout a lecture segment. However, they found significantly fewer lapses of attention during the student-centered activities and the periods immediately following compared to lecture blocks of comparable length.

**From a SCOTAY perspective, how can instructors present student engagement "building blocks"?**

- **Active learning:** Create a teaching and learning environment primed for student participation, such as calling on students to answer a question, individual reflection, think pair share and group problem-solving.

- **Participatory teaching:** This student-centered approach to pedagogy accounts for the different skills, backgrounds and learning styles of students. The focus of participatory teaching is on self-regulation and self-reflection; specific strategies include using different teaching methods and varying means of assessment.

- **Technology in the Classroom:** Students expect to be constantly connected and want immediate feedback. Online and mobile technology can be used to provide active learning activities and to keep students engaged outside the classroom.
Student engagement strategies based on a curriculum

- **Set expectations:** At the beginning of the course, ask students what they expect from you and then try to meet those expectations. Students are more engaged when they have a good relationship with the instructor.

- **Make the course relevant:** Students want courses to be relevant and meaningful. Use real-world examples

- **Cooperative learning:** Arrange students in partners or small groups to help them achieve learning goals. Group work can include assignments, discussions, reviews and lab experiments — even having students discuss a lesson with their peers.

- **Authentic learning experiences:** Students tackle real-world problems and attempt to come up with a solution through methods such as inquiry and experimentation. Ideally, the solution will benefit others or the community. Experiential learning—when students learn from reflecting on their real-world learning experience—is a further development of this and is an effective teaching strategy.

- **Social media:** Potential uses for social media include sharing relevant content, posting instructional videos on YouTube and facilitating ongoing discussion groups. However, strict guidelines for use must be put in place and enforced.

Student engagement strategies for assessment - Prepare for class before class: Students get more out of class time if they are familiar with the material before they arrive. Exercises such as pre-class quizzes ensure they are knowledgeable enough to contribute.

Student engagement (Multiple means of presentation)

- **Use visual representations:** Engage students with animations, 3-D representations and concept maps, all of which can help them visualize complex subjects.

- **Inquiry-based learning:** To answer questions posed by the instructor or by the students themselves, a learner undertakes his or her research to arrive at an answer. Inquiry-based learning can be as simple as watching video lectures, or more involvement could come from designing and performing an experiment.

- **Use simulations:** Games or role-playing place students in an imaginary setting defined by the instructor, providing for an interactive, participatory learning experience.

- **Tell stories:** Wherever possible, tell stories to illustrate concepts when giving lectures.

References

https://tophat.com/blog/student-engagement-strategies/
