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Review of the Georgia Leadership & Education in Neurodevelopmental Disabilities (GaLEND) training program in an effort to integrate Universal Design for Learning

December 21 2015

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We have very much enjoyed reviewing the GeorgiaLEND curriculum. This is an exciting and ambitious program that uses many innovative strategies to connect students to the values, knowledge and skills required to serve in leadership roles in disability. The course content and learning strategies seem very well positioned to help advance the leadership track in disability that each student is embarking on.

The Georgia Leadership & Education in Neurodevelopmental Disabilities (GaLEND) is an interdisciplinary training program for future professionals, disability advocates, and family members. Much of the program's focus is on building capacity to show leadership within inter-disciplinary teams. For example, the description of the clinical goal experience states that it is "intended to complement trainee's coursework and should allow trainees to observe the importance of inter-disciplinary teams, person and family-centered principles, and cultural competency in a "real world" setting."

Based on our review of the curriculum, we have identified areas where there may be additional opportunities to personalize the learning experience and simultaneously build necessary skills for leadership within inter-disciplinary teams.

In addition to specific recommendations aligned with the Universal Design for Learning principles we pose a few key questions to consider as you reflect on our recommendations. We hope these questions help you to consider what kinds of changes you might make to the curriculum over time and why you might do so.

1) Course Content

- Do trainees need to engage with all course content with the same level of intensity or can they focus more or less intensely on specific topics based on their future career interests and roles?
- Can trainees be provided with more options for how to learn content?

2) Skill Development

- Do trainees actually need to have all of the same skills or develop these skills to the same degree?

- Can trainees be provided with more than one way to build their skills?

3) Scaffolds and Supports

- A central UDL practice is to build scaffolds and supports into the course design from the outset. Given that these scaffolds and supports are so important it is worth considering, where might they come from?

We saw potential in the curriculum for personalizing the trainee experience and simultaneously building trainees' capacity to share their knowledge and learning with others, and rely on others for knowledge that they themselves may lack. The structure of the program itself, with its heavy emphasis on peer-to-peer collaboration and problem-based learning is already well positioned towards promoting the development of students that can learn from and with one another. Within inter-disciplinary teams, members might shift from being the teacher to being the learner several times in a single day. We saw several opportunities to leverage students' differences to better personalize the curriculum and allow trainees to help one another to reach learning goals.

An example around building content knowledge

The first principle of UDL calls for representing content in multiple ways to account for differences in how students perceive information as well as individual differences in what students find engaging. For example, some students are accustomed to interpreting graphs and charts and find them highly interesting whereas other students might struggle to understand or engage with them without accompanying written descriptions. In our experience designing and teaching university courses, we consistently offer two or three options for how to learn course content. These options involve both the media used to cover a particular topic (for example, providing both a print textbook *and* an ebook with illustrations and text-to-speech functionality) and the depth with which students must learn the content (for example, in the graduate level course on UDL at Harvard students can choose between a neuroscience textbook that goes into great depth or more of a lay person's neuroscience 101). The graduate students that are more interested in understanding the neurological underpinnings of learning differences can opt for the big textbook and the students that are more interested in practical applications of UDL in the classroom can choose the neuroscience 101, which frees up energy for them to go deep on UDL principles of course design.

In our review of the syllabi for the four GeorgiaLEND courses, we saw several opportunities to provide further options around the format/media for course content,

as well as opportunities to offer students some choice around how deeply they want to learn about any one content area. The Georgia State University Center for Instructional Innovation can work with you to find the right medium to convey information, and can help you leverage open educational resources and make online course materials accessible. This seems like a great place for your graduate student implementing the UDL recommendations to go for support (<http://cii.gsu.edu/teaching-support/content-and-etext/>). You might also use your students in the GeorgiaLEND program to help you curate resources over time and to help you determine which resources provide in-depth information on the topic and which provide more general information (which you can then indicate in your syllabus).

An example around skill development

Given that the trainees will work in inter-disciplinary teams and will have different roles and responsibilities within those teams, we saw this as an opportunity to have them zero in on some skills more than others based on what skills would be most needed in their future careers. Giving students more flexibility around which skills they develop and how can open up potential for them to play a role in teaching skills to one another.

For example, the family mentor program might be a substantially different experience for a self-advocate student or a student who has a sibling or child with a disability than it would be for those that have had less direct exposure to the inner workings of families of individuals with disability. The latter group may have more of a skill deficit in effectively interacting with families than the former group. Trainees who have had more experience interacting with families of individuals with disabilities may be in a position to offer a unique vantage point that could help prepare those with less experience. For example, these students might be in a position to teach their peers about the best ways to approach and engage with family members. For your self-advocate in particular, this could be an important way to reach the overall program goal of leadership in disability – he/she would be in a position to educate peers about person-centered, respectful and fruitful ways to engage with families, particularly the family member with a disability. In so far as any class time is dedicated to preparing for the family mentor program, or to reviewing or revising the family mentor manual, you might think about engaging students differently so that it becomes a peer-to-peer learning experience. This would bring conversations about each student's family mentor experience more centrally into classroom activities and discussions.

An example around scaffolds and supports

There are almost always elements of a program that allow for students to pursue learning goals in different ways, or to pursue different learning goals entirely. One of the concerns you raised when we first discussed conducting a UDL review of the Georgia LEND program was that the accommodations provided to self-advocate participants might cause them to feel separate from the rest of the group. Another concern was that

self-advocates may not know what supports they need until partway through the course. Unlike some of the more traditional approaches to instruction (where all students are expected to achieve the same knowledge and skills in the same way), UDL requires that you anticipate and design for learning differences from the outset. In this way, everyone benefits and no one person is singled out – all students have access to supports and options to meet their needs, and you don't have to wait to figure out what supports students will need. In contrast, when all students are expected to know and do the same things, you need fairly concentrated supports and scaffolds for those students who require a different approach or need more time to build skills or develop knowledge. Building those scaffolds and supports in from the start is consistent with UDL but you can also build some of those supports in dynamically by having students play a role in providing scaffolds and supports to one another.

Listening to lectures, especially guest lectures delivered by several different presenters, can be very exciting but can also pose challenges for students that have weaker auditory processing skills, have a more limited vocabulary or are not in the same discipline as the guest presenter. This might even be challenging for students who struggle with self-regulation.

One UDL approach would be to provide all guest presenters with some basic pointers for ensuring that their PowerPoints are accessible and to recommend a common structure for each lecture (e.g., big idea(s), outline, main point 1, 2, 3, summary, final take away). In addition, you can ask guest lecturers to provide you with their PowerPoint before class so that it can be posted to the course LMS. That way, any students that need the PowerPoint in front of them during the lecture can download and print it out beforehand. A second and complimentary UDL approach would be to assign weekly note takers that take notes on the lecture, including a summary of the main idea(s) and description of how the lecture connects to other course content and to specific learning goals. These notes can then be posted to the course site. While this means that students will have a heavier burden on the week they're assigned to note-taking, most weeks students will benefit from a lighter cognitive load, as they won't have to multi-task during lectures and will have access to more than one representation of what was covered in the lecture as well as information on how the lecture relates to the course as a whole. This approach helps provide scaffolds and supports universally and has the added benefit of having students think more strategically about what they are learning for each class session and why.

By varying the degree to which students are required to build skills and knowledge and providing multiple options for how to reach learning goals, students will have the opportunity for a more personalized experience of the GeorgiaLEND program. Such a personalized experience may help prepare students for leadership positions within inter-disciplinary teams where diverse expertise and experience is critical.