



## Improving Student Engagement through Universal Design in Online Courses

### What is this Research About?

The article analyzes a case study in which a university instructor focused on including concepts of Universal Design while planning and implementing an online course. Universal Design is broadly defined as an educational framework that uses diverse teaching strategies while also providing flexible options for students. University students come from a range of backgrounds, experiences, ages, and abilities. Students taking courses online may also have other obligations and responsibilities. This research investigates how concepts of Universal Design provide potential for online instructors to increase accessibility and engagement by pre-emptively addressing a range of students' learning needs.

### What did the Researchers Do?

The researchers conducted a case study on one instructor's experiences with using Universal Design to improve students' experiences in three online courses. Strategies discussed included an 'at-a-glance' weekly overviews, providing course materials online, visuals, tables, guided notes, audio recordings with transcripts, videos with closed captions, narrated presentations, and personalized feedback. Students were offered options to complete tasks individually or in groups. Students were also offered choice in demonstrating learning objectives. Course content was delivered asynchronously. Synchronous classes were reserved for student questions and group discussions. The instructor also collected data on student experiences using an anonymous feedback survey.

### What did the Researchers Find?

The researchers found that implementing concepts and strategies of Universal Design in the online course had a positive impact on student engagement. For example, 76% of students reported that they liked having short weekly assignments instead of fewer assignments worth more grades, a design decision that the instructor made following principles of Universal Design. Students also reported positive impacts relating to self-advocacy, time-management, and faculty-peer interactions. The researchers cautioned that the focus of this case study is on how Universal Design impacts student experiences in online courses, and not student learning per se. The researchers also highlight that implementing strategies of Universal Design does not eliminate the need to provide specific accommodation requests.

# SoTL

## Snapshot

A synopsis of a scholarship of teaching and learning journal article

### ➔ How to Implement this Research in Your Classroom

The researchers found that implementing Universal Design into online courses has a positive impact on student experiences. Instructors may consider using a variety of images, tables, guided notes, videos, audio recordings, and other creative strategies. Instructors may also consider implementing student choice into assignments. Principles of Universal Design are intentionally broad. Course instructors have considerable choice in how to implement them into their online courses. Admittedly, implementing concepts of Universal Design is time-consuming and some students may still require accommodations; however, once courses are adapted to concepts of Universal Design, instructors report using lessons again in later course offerings.

### ➔ Citation

Rao, K., Edelen-Smith, P., & Wailehua, C. (2015). Universal design for online courses: applying principles to pedagogy. *Open Learning*, 30 (1), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02680513.2014.991300>.

### ➔ Keywords

Universal Design  
Course Design  
Student Engagement

Distance Education  
Higher Education  
Online Learning



OFFICE of  
TEACHING AND LEARNING



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 Canada License.

Snapshot Writer: Todd Martin