

Universal Course Design and Teaching Visual Learners °—Reflections on 2011

Lance Hidy

2011 OVERVIEW—The dominant activity for the year was the selection and monitoring of ten faculty, each of whom received a \$350 stipend to encourage experimentation with Universal Course Design methods. For various reasons I took a back seat in this work while Susan Martin did the coordinating. Lori Cooney of UMass Boston provided the grant money and guidance, while Janice Rogers, Rick Lizotte and Sue Tashjian helped Susan with various details.

As one would expect from such a team, the project went beautifully. While I haven't seen the feedback from all ten stipend recipients, the general feedback at the year-end meeting was positive. The concept of UCD is becoming clearer. Its benefits to the students are beyond dispute. Some of the faculty reported optimism and success with their first attempts. They plan to build upon these first efforts next semester.

The faculty also helped us see some of the difficulties with introducing UCD. There is an over-abundance of UCD strategies to choose from, which meant that

there was some risk of not choosing the strategies that were the best fit for the particular teacher or course. This problem was alleviated to some degree by mentoring from Rick and Sue in CIT, and by a list of UCD strategies that are identified as giving “the most bang for the buck.” It also became evident in the wrap-up meeting that the faculty were learning from each other as they reported upon what worked and what didn't. This exchange was perhaps the most enthusiastic and productive bit of SFIG activity that I witnessed all year. The result was a request for more opportunities for this interdisciplinary group to share stories about their experiments with UCD. There was also a willingness to form a group of three or four participants to present their experiences with UCD at Division Meetings, or some other campus gathering.

To have reached this stage of integrating UCD at Northern Essex is largely due to the years of work done by Susan Martin and her colleagues in Learning Accommodations. Susan was the first one to tell me and others about UCD, and she brought the speaker Kirsten Behling to NECC to inspire us with stories from other campuses. The SFIG would not exist without Susan's vision, her congenial style of leadership, and her hard work. She has shown that UCD's benefits extend far beyond the clients of the Learning Accommodations Center—raising the learning success for all.

UCD'S INTERNAL CONTRADICTION— Our SFIG intentionally has a double mission in its name, Universal Course Design *and* Teaching Visual Learners. There is a growing awareness on our campus, as elsewhere, that as many as 70% of our students have some preference for visual learning. This fact has been analyzed by scientists such as Richard E. Mayer who have shown that people learn better from words and pictures together than from words alone.

Since one of the foundation principles of Universal Design is the increased use of pictorial content, where is the contradiction? The problem, I learned, is the difficulty of making pictorial content accessible to blind students. The UCD policy at UMass and elsewhere is to create content that is accessible to everyone, including the blind. As a result, images are scarce in most UCD promotional materials, with the exception of screen shots to explain how to use software. The most commonly cited ways for faculty to use images are the addition of a portrait, textbook cover, and campus map in the syllabus. But there is little effort given to promote strategies for widespread increase of image content in course materials and homework.

The unfortunate result, as I see it, is that the majority of students who learn better from picture-word combinations are being under served by a well-intentioned effort

to make course content easily accessible to their blind peers.

There may be another reason for the weak support for visual learning, which is the absence of visual communication skills among faculty. Most teachers have achieved their status as a result of proficiency with words—with reading and writing. When they were pursuing their degrees, pictorial communication could not be among the core academic skills because the technology was, back at that time, too expensive. But now that everyone has affordable access to digital cameras, on-line image databases, and can even use their smart phones to make videos, most faculty are unprepared to avail themselves of the opportunity. Even simple tasks involving digital images, such as cropping, resizing, or using a desktop scanner, are not within their skill set.

Yet there are reasons for optimism for visual learners. NECC librarians recently subscribed to ImageQuest, the image database from Encyclopedia Britannica that has been copyright-cleared for educational use. This resource is now available at all campus computers, and remotely to anyone with an NECC library card number. There are also a growing number of faculty who are experimenting with visual course content, and who are willing to exchange their stories through our SFIG.

As the momentum grows, we are sure that the college

will ultimately add specific visual communication skills to the required computer proficiencies, and to core academic skills—but we are not at that point yet.

Meanwhile, the conundrum of how to serve visual learners while also trying to accommodate blind students will continue to challenge efforts to promote UCD at NECC, UMass Boston, and elsewhere.

WORKSHOPS FOR FACULTY— Judith Kamber has bolstered the work of our SFIG by allocating \$500 for the fall 2011 and spring 2012 semesters to support my time as co-chair with Susan Martin, and to enable me to put on two UCD-related workshops for faculty. One was about how to design slide shows, and the other about techniques for teaching visual learners. This financial support recognized that I was one of only two SFIG leaders whose work fell entirely outside of the contracted job description—in my case, as a half-time professor. While \$500 does not go as far as it once did, this enables me to do the workshops, write this report, and give a little more support to Susan Martin as SFIG co-chair.

CONCLUSION— Clearly, the \$3500 UMass grant was a welcome boost to the work of our SFIG. The ten stipends of \$350 was a small step toward raising consciousness of UCD on campus, and created an interdisciplinary conver-

sation on what works, and what doesn't. But at this early stage, and with the kind of stress that our faculty are experiencing from existing workloads, this one grant is not sufficient to keep the momentum going. It will be a test of institutional commitment to UCD to see if additional funds are made available to assist faculty who want to learn new skills and experiment with UCD. Bringing UCD into a course is not always easy, and sometimes efforts backfire during the trial and error process. But we have a commitment to continue to support the ten stipend recipients during the spring semester, to attract additional faculty to attend our monthly SFIG meetings, and to let others on campus know about the work our SFIG members are doing.