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The Future is Connection:

Collaboration, Creativity and Compassion in a Digital Society

Beyond checklists: A relational approach to UDL implementation

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Although Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is grounded in principles of inclusion, flexibility, and learner variability, its implementation in higher education can become reduced to procedural or checklist-driven approaches, creating a tension between its human-centred philosophy and institutional practice. This paper adopts a reflective approach to examine the implementation of UDL across selected courses at an Australian university, exploring how shared understandings of inclusive teaching were co-constructed through dialogue between academics and an educational developer. The reflective inquiry suggests that meaningful UDL implementation is less dependent on frameworks than on relational, dialogic engagement through which pedagogical meaning is negotiated in context. At a time when higher education is increasingly shaped by digital technologies and artificial intelligence, the paper argues for re-centring relationships, collaboration, and human judgement as the foundation of meaningful curriculum transformation. In doing so, it positions educational developers as knowledge architects who facilitate the co-construction of inclusive pedagogical practice and offers a relational perspective on UDL implementation that may inform educational developers and academics seeking to implement inclusive curriculum renewal within their own institutional contexts.

Keywords: Universal Design for Learning (UDL), higher education, reflective practice, relational pedagogy, dialogic practice, educational development, human-centred learning design

Introduction

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a framework for designing inclusive learning environments that accommodate learner variability through multiple means of engagement, representation, and action and expression (CAST, 2024). UDL is closely aligned with the social model of disability, which views disability as arising from barriers within environments and systems rather than from deficits within individuals. As Kumar and Wideman (2014) explain, this perspective shifts the focus from adapting learners to fit educational systems towards designing educational environments that are accessible to all. By proactively designing for learner variability, UDL seeks to reduce the need for retrospective accommodations and create more inclusive learning experiences for all students.

While increasingly adopted in higher education, implementation remains challenging and often requires translation into specific disciplinary and institutional contexts (Hills et al., 2022). This is particularly relevant in Australian higher education, where disciplinary traditions, institutional structures, and curriculum requirements shape how UDL principles are enacted in practice (Cumming & Rose, 2021). Although UDL provides a valuable set of principles and guidelines for designing flexible learning environments, implementation efforts can often focus on frameworks, training (Dell' Anna et al., 2024; Morina et al., 2025), checklists and templates, leaving academics to interpret and apply the framework within their own contexts, often with limited access to tailored guidance and ongoing support. Recent work on collaborative curriculum development, however, highlights the importance of relationships, dialogue, and shared meaning-making in supporting educational change (Zeivots et al., 2024).

Consistent with recommendations emerging from the Australian tertiary education sector, which emphasise the need for institutionally supported approaches to UDL implementation rather than reliance on individual academics alone (Jwad et al., 2022), this paper describes the implementation of a UDL curriculum renewal initiative across selected courses within a faculty and reflects on several insights emerging from the process. In a higher education landscape characterised by rapid technological change, including the growing influence of artificial intelligence, this reflective inquiry deliberately recentres attention on the human dimensions of curriculum design (Castlereagh Summit, 2026). It demonstrates how reflective practice supports contextually

responsive implementation of UDL through relationships, dialogue, and professional judgement. Against this backdrop, the paper seeks to answer the following questions:

- What seems to have made UDL implementation successful in this context?
- What mattered most during the implementation process?
- What role did educational development play in supporting UDL implementation?

Project context

Course redesign and collaboration

The project emerged from the university's commitment to advancing inclusion through the contextualised implementation of UDL across disciplines. Working collaboratively with an educational developer, academics engaged in a relational, dialogic process of reviewing and redesigning their courses to enhance inclusivity, accessibility, and student engagement within their own disciplinary contexts. Rather than applying UDL as a checklist of practices, the approach emphasised collaborative sense-making, with the educational developer and academics co-constructing contextually relevant strategies informed by both disciplinary knowledge and pedagogical expertise (Thurber & Bossen, 2025), while also incorporating student perspectives (Samson, 2019). The process began with an in-depth consultation to explore academics' perspectives on inclusive learning, understand the student cohort, and identify opportunities and constraints within the course. These conversations informed a contextually appropriate renewal plan and implementation timeline. Through regular dialogue, the course assessments, materials and activities were reviewed and iteratively refined, with decisions grounded in the specific needs of each course rather than the application of a standardised set of UDL practices. Course redesign took place from September 2025 to January 2026, while the reflection was undertaken retrospectively after the course redesign period, drawing on project documentation and the author's recollection of key implementation decisions.

A note on ethics

As this paper reports a faculty-based educational development initiative and its implementation process – not research data or empirical findings – and includes no identifiable information about students or staff, formal human research ethics approval was not required. Although the implementation of student focus groups is mentioned, no focus-group responses or discussions are reported.

Methodology

This paper adopts a scholarly reflective approach to examine the implementation of UDL across selected courses. Drawing on Moon's (2004) conception of reflection as a process of meaning-making, the paper uses retrospective critical reflection to interpret experience, question assumptions, and develop insights that extend beyond the immediate context. The reflections presented are grounded in the author's experience as the educational developer responsible for supporting the implementation of UDL across the participating courses. Reflection was undertaken to interpret the implementation process and identify broader insights relevant to educational development practice. The intention is not to present a novel implementation model or to propose a universally applicable implementation model but to make the implementation process visible so that readers may consider and adapt its insights within their own institutional and disciplinary settings.

Reflections

Insight 1: Relational engagement as a catalyst for curriculum change

Throughout the project, it became apparent that the relationship developed between the academics and the educational developer was instrumental to the curriculum renewal process. Rather than relying on a transactional model in which the educational developer provides guidelines and recommendations for implementation, the work evolved through a series of iterative conversations. These discussions gradually

fostered mutual understanding, trust, and respect, creating the conditions for meaningful collaboration. Through this process, academics developed not only an understanding of UDL principles but, more importantly, an appreciation of how these principles could be adapted to the specific needs of their discipline, student cohort, and teaching context within the practical constraints of the project. At the same time, the educational developer gained a deeper understanding of the course context, disciplinary priorities, and student needs, enabling more tailored and relevant guidance.

A similar dynamic emerged during the student focus groups conducted to gather students' experiences of inclusivity. Considerable attention was given to creating an environment in which students would feel comfortable sharing their perspectives openly and honestly. This included clearly communicating the purpose and value of the session, emphasising the inclusive nature of the discussion, and attending to participants' comfort through the provision of breaks and refreshments. While seemingly small, these measures contributed to establishing a sense of trust and psychological safety that encouraged participation.

In reflecting on these experiences and engaging with the literature to better understand the factors that appeared to support successful collaboration, relational pedagogy emerged as a useful interpretive lens. Relational pedagogy positions relationships as central to learning and change, emphasising dialogue, trust, reciprocity, and the co-construction of meaning (Lysaker & Furuness, 2011). From this perspective, relationships are not peripheral to educational development work but constitute an important mechanism through which curriculum change can occur. The experiences from this project suggest that fostering genuine relationships may be as important as the frameworks and digital tools used to support curriculum renewal. As AI increasingly supports curriculum development, relationships remain essential for interpreting educational contexts, negotiating competing priorities, and exercising professional judgement.

Insight 2: Dialogue as a space for collaborative meaning-making

A second observation emerging from the project was the central role of dialogue in facilitating meaningful curriculum change. While UDL principles and guidelines provided a useful framework for reflection, it was the ongoing conversations between academics and the educational developer that ultimately shaped substantive course revisions. Rather than beginning with the question of how to apply UDL principles to a course, discussions were grounded in the experiences of students, the goals of the academics, and the realities of the teaching context. UDL therefore served as a lens through which possibilities could be explored rather than as a prescriptive set of solutions (Kirsch, 2024). These conversations were often iterative and exploratory in nature. Discussions frequently began with a particular challenge or idea and evolved in unexpected directions as assumptions were questioned and alternative perspectives considered. In many instances, a single meeting generated more questions than answers. However, these unresolved questions often became catalysts for further reflection, with both the academic and educational developer continuing to consider possibilities before reconvening to refine ideas. Through this process, pedagogical meaning was progressively co-constructed rather than transmitted from one individual to another. This collaborative sense-making is especially valuable in a rapidly evolving landscape where academics are required to interpret, rather than simply adopt, emerging digital technologies and AI.

A similar dynamic was observed during the student focus groups. The researcher's questions acted as prompts for discussion, encouraging participants to reflect on their experiences and build on one another's contributions. The focus groups became spaces in which students collectively explored and articulated what inclusion and effective learning design meant to them. Insights emerging from these conversations were subsequently brought into discussions with academics, allowing student perspectives to inform curriculum renewal. In this sense, the educational developer often occupied a bridging role, synthesising insights across stakeholder groups and facilitating dialogue between student and academic perspectives.

In reflecting on these experiences, Freire's dialogic theory offers a useful lens through which to understand the processes observed throughout the project. Freire conceptualised dialogue as a process of collaborative inquiry and meaning making rather than the transmission of information from one individual to another (Freire, 1970). From this perspective, knowledge emerges through mutual engagement, questioning, and reflection. Similarly,

Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory emphasises the social nature of learning and the role of interaction in the construction of understanding. Together, these perspectives suggest that meaningful curriculum change may emerge not from the implementation of predetermined solutions, but through sustained dialogue that enables participants to collectively explore, interpret, and refine ideas within their specific contexts.

Insight 3: The educational developer as a knowledge architect

This reflective inquiry has brought into focus the educational developer's role as extending beyond pedagogical advice or expertise in accessibility and inclusion. Rather than simply facilitating curriculum renewal, the educational developer integrated disciplinary, pedagogical, institutional, and student knowledge to interpret UDL principles and guide contextually responsive curriculum decisions. This involved listening to academics and students, understanding their experiences and needs, and adapting inclusive practices to specific disciplinary contexts. The educational developer also acted as a connector of people, perspectives, and knowledge, supporting academics to critically interpret educational technologies, institutional priorities, and evolving pedagogical practices. Rather than positioning technology as the driver of curriculum renewal, the educational developer helped academics determine how emerging technologies, including AI, could be meaningfully integrated while remaining aligned with inclusive educational values. These reflections point to a broader conceptualisation of the educational developer as a knowledge architect. Rather than prescribing solutions, the role involves designing the conditions for meaningful and sustainable curriculum change by bringing together ideas, perspectives, and evidence. This extends beyond the more neutral roles of facilitator (Thurber & Bossen, 2025) or strategist (Puhr, 2024) often described in the literature. Instead, the educational developer acts as an interpreter, connector, and synthesiser of knowledge, supporting academics to make sense of educational theory, student perspectives, disciplinary requirements, and institutional priorities within their local context.

Implications and conclusion

This paper has focused on insights emerging from the implementation process rather than on project outcomes or findings. These insights suggest that relationships, dialogue, and collaborative meaning-making play an important role in supporting curriculum renewal and the contextualisation of UDL principles, particularly within a higher education landscape increasingly shaped by digital technologies and AI. Although drawn from a specific institutional context, these reflections may provide useful considerations for other faculties and universities seeking to implement UDL. In doing so, the paper contributes to emerging discussions on UDL implementation by highlighting the relational dimension of curriculum change and reframing the role of educational developers as knowledge architects who support contextually responsive and inclusive educational practice.

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