

Response to UDL Article

In March 2017, the Tomorrow's Professor eNewsletter highlighted an article by Fernando Gonzalez, Assistant Professor of Software Engineering at Florida Gulf Coast University, on the possible effects of active learning activities on students with learning disabilities. You can read his article, *For Some, Active Learning Can Be a Nightmare*, here: <https://tomprof.stanford.edu/posting/1550>. The article generated discussion within the teaching and learning community. Although published research on the benefits or disadvantages of active learning for students with learning differences did not surface, many education professionals agreed that the article narrowly defines learning differences and active learning, and it overlooks the benefits of pedagogical approaches such as Universal Learning Design.

Donna Plummer, Professor of Education, teaches classes on Learning Disabilities and Autism Spectrum and Joel Klepac, a Licensed Marriage and Family therapist, works with college students with Learning Disabilities and ASD adapting to college life. They recently led a learning community on enhancing understanding and supports for students with neurodiversity.

Students with SLD's are on a spectrum with a wide-ranging variety of needs. In a lecture setting, advance organizers can serve as a road map for students. Such organizers can link what students have already learned to what they will be learning. One example would be a [graphic organizer](#). Students might complete such an organizer based on the reading prior to class as in a flipped classroom approach. Differentiation can also provide additional possibilities for instruction and learning. Clicker quizzes, student-generated questions or problems, discussion with peers, and visual representations of the class content can demonstrate understanding and competency. Students (and faculty) may be uncomfortable ("What do you want?" "What are you looking for?" "How do I assess?") with differentiated opportunities. However, students may explore and demonstrate content in a deep way through application of that learning (e.g., a PSA highlighting the importance of greater diversity in children's and adolescent literature or a role play written in Spanish demonstrating women's role during a period of history). Higher education has tended to focus on traditional forms of evaluation but we are experiencing more and more alternatives such as OCR codes on campus fixtures and film creation as well as the implementation of other technologies. Gonzalez's concern regarding student isolation is a valid one. Many students will do whatever is necessary to ensure they are the same as their peers even when campus resources and faculty support may be necessary for success. Some students arrive on campus with few if any personal learning strategies for success. The success they do experience is a testament to their determination and grit. Although self-advocacy is critical for students with SLD's, a need for ongoing professional development for faculty and staff (e.g., the current Neurodiversity Learning Community) is also important so that students aren't viewed as "lazy" and "dumb."

One way to provide supportive learning environments for all students is NOT to eliminate active learning, but to recognize the diversity of learning needs that our students have and develop course structures and teaching practices that are flexible and accommodate the range of student learning needs. Such flexibility can help to remove barriers to student learning.

For more information about Universal Learning Design, please visit the CTL page on UDL: <http://ctl.centre.edu/universal-learning-design.html>

For more information about Active Learning, please visit the Vanderbilt University Center for Teaching page on Active Learning: <https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/active-learning/>