

# Inclusiveness in Higher Education through Universal Design Learning – UDL

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper deals about the dire need for Inclusiveness in the higher education system. The reasons for the lack of inclusiveness namely – ignoring the differences among the students, biases, assumptions are outlined. The various measures to bring in inclusiveness in higher education are also discussed. Especially, Universal Design Learning – UDL as a tool to incorporate inclusiveness in higher education is dealt with some detail. Finally, the paper touches upon the need for inclusivity in the Indian context.*

*Equality in educational opportunities and the subsequent of knowledge makes the members of a society more knowledgeable, which in turn paves way for a mature and egalitarian civil society. Such equality in education does not start and end just by enrolling every student in the Institutions and they attending the classes. Indeed, many inequalities arise in the classroom during the teaching learning process. This happens because of certain unwarranted assumptions, treating every student with the same yardsticks (albeit -in the name of equality), committing certain systematic design errors, among other reasons. All the above anomalies are results of conveniently ignoring the existence of differences among the students. The one - serve-all system of singular educational planning and design does not cater to the diversity of students. The students differ in a variety of ways -both cognitively and demographically. The traditional system of education, (though not intentionally) does not serve equally to the varied student community. In its process of teaching and assessment, the traditional educational system does exclude certain sections of the students who do not naturally comply with its methods and the scheme of things. In this context the need for inclusivity of all students in educational planning and design has become the need of the hour.*

## 1. INCLUSIVENESS IN EDUCATION

Inclusive education at the outset, understands that students come from a variety of background and that they have varied needs. In this connection, inclusive teaching offers different methods of teaching that will serve the needs of the students and make them feel valued. In its process Inclusive teaching ultimately provides a learning environment in which all students will have equal access to learn.

## UNDERSTANDING THE STUDENT

As already said, the educational system itself removes certain students from the fold of studentship in the very process of offering education. This exclusion of students happens due to the factors that include -

### 1.1 Differences among the students

Lack of understanding about the many differences among the students is one major reason for lack of inclusivity. Students come in with different abilities and backgrounds like

- i. Bookworm
- ii. A listener
- iii. A visual thinker
- iv. First generation learner
- v. Dyslexic
- vi. Hyper intelligent
- vii. Non-English speaker
- viii. Rural Background Students
- ix. Highly creative

- x. Practical minded
- xi. Idealistic
- xii. Of a higher age
- xiii. Inclined towards writing
- xiv. Inclined more towards speaking
- xv. Social Learner
- xvi. Reserved
- xvii. Other demographic-social difference

## 1.2 Ill-founded Assumptions about students

The following ill-founded assumptions about the students also contribute to the exclusion of certain students from the teaching learning process

- a. All the students will ask clarification of doubts
- b. Some students are not intellectual
- c. Some students are just satisfied with whatever course they have obtained
- d. Students from certain backgrounds will behave in certain ways
- e. Writing is an indication of lack of intellectual abilities
- f. Older students are slow learners
- g. Students with physical disabilities are slow learners

## 1.3 Other Psychological factors

There are some other factors from the fields of psychology and neuroscience that underline the variability among students in the following ways

- a – Learners differ in their emotions and their motivation - Affective network
- b - Learners differ in what they perceive and understand through their senses - Recognition network
- c - Learners differ in how they organise and communicate their thinking - Strategic network

## 1.4 Biases that exclude certain students

The assumptions enumerated in the above sections lead to certain self-serving biases namely -

A - Stereotype threat – When certain students or sections of students are stereotyped by the teacher, the students conform to the very stereotype in which they are unfairly judged.

Example – Stereotype - last benchers are poor performers

Stereotype threat - The last benchers are demotivated and they show no interest in good performance

B - Implicit bias - The teacher who is against any assumptions of stereotyping may himself exhibit certain of the biases unwittingly.

The factors discussed in the previous sections, namely – 1.1 Not recognising the differences among students, 1.2 Assumptions about the students, 1.3 Learner variability, 1.4 Certain biases – all contribute to the exclusion of certain students in the teaching learning process. Some students, who are subjected to the above factors, get disinterested in education and they are treated unfairly by the teachers, they are tested in an unfitting manner and ultimately, they get ejected out of the mainstream education process. These factors also lead sometimes to microinsults, micro assaults, separation of the disadvantage/misunderstood students from other students. The sorrow is that, all this is happening in the teaching learning process itself. Thus, there is an urgent need to remove such exclusion of certain students and to have inclusivity of all the students in the teaching learning process.

## 2. MEASURES FOR INCORPORATING INCLUSIVENESS

Inclusiveness in education tries to take all students into account and values every student equally. An inclusive teaching learning environment can be fostered with the help of the following measures -

- i. Get to know the students
- ii. Creating a Welcoming atmosphere
- iii. Respectful treatment
- iv. Creating a sense of belonging by being warm and open
- v. Setting Expectations of behaviour
- vi. Understanding and acknowledging the differences among students
- vii. Using varied teaching approaches
- viii. Providing multiple opportunities for students to express themselves
- ix. Increasing student participation
- x. Creating enthusiasm about the subject
- xi. Having an open window for students to meet and discuss
- xii. Paying attention to patterns of learning
- xiii. Obtaining regular feedback from the students
- xiv. Learn and try to remove any unwanted. Ill-founded assumptions and biases
- xv. Share personal experiences with the students
- xvi. Accommodating intellectual disagreements
- xvii. Acknowledge students for their work
- xviii. Call on only the volunteering student for questioning in the classroom
- xix. Encourage the students to discuss between themselves
- xx. Encourage students to clarify the doubts
- xxi. Plan the class
- xxii. Inform the students about the class outcomes
- xxiii. Inform the students about the progress
- xxiv. Don't give any negative information
- xxv. Don't say that only a few are good
- xxvi. Express that you believe in them
- xxvii. Normalize learning struggles by saying "this is a topic that all student struggle initially..."
- xxviii. Planning and creating the course and program that will create an inclusive environment
- xxix. Incorporate Universal design in teaching and learning

Thus, inclusiveness in teaching is done with the right ingredients of a -Designing the curriculum, b - Understanding the differences among students, c- Creating a respectful environment with Rules of Engagement, d - Teaching through feedbacks and e - reflecting on the professional teaching practices of the teacher.

### 3. UNIVERSAL DESIGN LEARNING

The transformative concept of Universal Design Learning - UDL accommodates variabilities of the students and tries to provide a learning platform that takes care of every student needs with respect to their learning and assessment. UDL can be harnessed to create Inclusivity in teaching and learning as it aims in offering a flexible design for teaching and assessment. The idea of UDL draws from the field of neuroscience. UDL is based on the three elements of Engagement, Representation and Action & Expression. These three elements are directly connected to the Active network, Recognition network and the Strategic network of the brain respectively. These three elements of the UDL deal with the three questions of student learning, the first element of Engagement deals with why a student has to learn something, the second element Representation deals with what the student has to learn and the third element Action & Expression deals with how the student has to learn something.

#### 3.1 Engagement

The first element of Engagement is regarding motivating the students to get involved in the learning process. This is done by creating choice, autonomy, offering culturally and socially relevant activities, activities that foster individual imagination. Engagement is also about providing clear inputs about the learning outcomes. Also, motivation to get involved is provided by varying the level of participation according to the student and providing sensory situations like charts, diagrams, etc.

This motivation for involvement must be carried to the next level of sustaining the involvement. Students have to be motivated to be regular and show persistence in attaining their objectives. Finally, engagement deals with the self-regulation of the student.

### **3.2 Representation**

Not all learners learn the same way. The second element of UDL – representation is about creating varied ways of presenting the course material so that the student can choose the one that suits him. The course content must be flexible so that is made available in many modes– like text, visual, aural, etc. Information has to be provided in various formats like charts, graphics, videos, text with images, etc. these multiple options makes the student to experience the learning in the best possible manner he or she wants. This does not restrict the student to one predetermined way of engaging in the learning experience.

### **3.3 Action and Representation**

The third element of UDL deals with the need for engaging the students with regard to their reaction to their learning. This element is about the flexibility in assessment s of the students. UDL acknowledges that each student is not alike and they might need more or less time in reproducing the content that they have learned. Also, UDL talks about assessing the students through technology that is customised to the needs of the student's reaction.

## **4. INCLUSIVITY IN INDIAN CONTEXT**

India is a land of multiplicities and the students in India come from a plenitude of backgrounds and social setups. Also, the country's society is hierarchical to a certain extent. All these leads to differences among the students and chances are there that, these differences may lead to exclusion of certain disadvantaged students from the main stream learning. Care has to be taken in designing the curriculum and engaging the students keeping in mind the demographic and social backdrops of these students. The teaching methods have to vary according to the needs of the students who are rural, first generation learner, and come from social and economically weaker sections. Likewise, assessment must be flexible keeping in the mind the various representational abilities of the students.

## **CONCLUSION**

The learners have differences among themselves in the ways they learn and represent themselves. In reality, such differences are not considered by the teaching community and teaching is provided only to a set of students who have certain commonalities. Such practices may lead to the omission of the other students who differ from the average, from the learning atmosphere. This premise leads us to consider Inclusivity in teaching as an important strategy, as they differ. Hence, a single method teaching and assessment may not be sufficient for all the sets of students. Thus, inclusive teaching talks about the need for engaging all the students by providing them flexible and multiple options for the learning and assessments. Approaches like Universal Design Learning can be incorporated to create inclusivity in education.

### **Courtesy –**

- CAST - <http://udlguidelines.cast.org/>
- Harvard University - <https://bokcenter.harvard.edu/inclusive-teaching>
- University of Plymouth - <https://www.plymouth.ac.uk/about-us/teaching-and-learning>
- Ohio State University - <https://ucat.osu.edu/bookshelf/teaching-topics/>