MARY ANN TOBIN, PHD

STATEMENT OF PROFESSIONAL PHILOSOPHY

By implementing and modeling Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and other pedagogical practices based in cognitive psychology, I collaborate with educators to design or enhance active learning experiences. In my individual and group consultations, face-to-face workshops, and online short courses, I assist educators to move beyond complaints about what students can't, don't, or won't do in order to devise ways to inspire their students to want to do it.

Our students value real-world, job-related, and problem-solving learning experiences that prepare them for their professional and personal lives in the Experience Age. Throughout their lives, they can expect to use and develop innovative tools to meet unprecedented challenges to an ever-evolving *status quo* in diverse settings. Thus, they must master the theories and practices of their chosen fields, along with the technologies that support their everyday life and work activities, and they must develop ways to successfully interact with others from multiple cultures. Therefore, we must change our own *status quo*, particularly regarding our teaching and communication methods, in order to prepare our students to meet those challenges. We must adjust our assumptions of what the average college student should know or be able to do before we meet them because, in keeping with Todd Rose's arguments, the average student is a mythical creature. Our students arrive with widely disparate educational, intellectual, emotional, physical, cultural, and socioeconomic differences, and we must design equitable learning environments in which each of them has a genuine opportunity to learn and to practice to do the things we value as a society.

I do so by applying the UDL framework to my own workshops and online courses, thereby showing other educators how to do it, too, so they can provide students with multiple ways to engage with each other, with the course content, with their instructors. UDL relies on ideas and scientific data from architecture, neuroscience, and advances in technology to minimize the systemic barriers to learning that our students encounter, whether they be physical, emotional, or intellectual challenges or those related to differences in language, distance, time, or travel schedules. Enabling us to more effectively select and adapt evidence-based teaching and learning strategies, UDL makes course content and learning spaces more accessible, interactions with students more equitable, and learning objectives more achievable.

Additionally, UDL-inspired courses meet most students' learning needs and preferences, even before they can ask for them. Therefore, it reduces the anxiety of responding to individual students' requests for accommodation as they are submitted, one at a time.

Within my own implementation of UDL, I rely heavily on research-based strategies vetted by The Learning Scientists, including spaced practice, retrieval practice, and interleaving, all of which are based in cognitive psychology. These strategies enable us to address what Joan Middendorf, Leah Shopkow, and David Pace call "bottlenecks to learning" or "intellectual bottlenecks" (Decoding the Disciplines). UDL also assists us in mitigating procedural bottlenecks like ambiguous instructions, unclear rubrics, and documents that are unreadable or inaccessible on the various digital devices that 95% of undergraduate students report using to access course materials and complete learning and assessment tasks (ECAR Study of Undergraduate Students and Information Technology). Similarly, UDL helps us create the type of learning environment described by the authors of *How Learning Works*, i.e. one that accounts for students' prior knowledge, helps them acquire new knowledge, and motivates them to learn more, even after graduation.

Because it enables us to design learning experiences that reduce systemic barriers to learning that disproportionately affect under-represented, underprepared, differently abled, and working student populations, UDL is inherently inclusive, which is the primary reason I practice it and advocate for its application in higher education. The main goal of its practitioners is precisely the same as the mission I set for myself as an instructor and as an instructional consultant: improve the learning of all students by reducing the barriers they encounter to that learning.