

Rethinking Assessment: Inclusive Assessment & Standards:

Case Study Structure & Content Case Study from Rathmines College

Title: Redesign of a written-only assignment in Personal & Professional Development (L6)

Organisation: Rathmines College of Further Education (CDETb)

Background:

Rathmines College is a college of Further Education and Training in Rathmines, Dublin 6. We have over 700 learners in the areas of business, accounting, journalism, media, administration, liberal arts, law, and software development. We also offer a one-year repeat Leaving Certificate programme. Our learners are diverse with approximately 65 different nationalities represented in our learner body each year. Approximately 55% of our learners are under the age of 24 and a further 40% are between 25 and 50. In addition, approximately 10% of learners each year have a disability or learning need or are neurodiverse.

In September 2020, four teachers in Rathmines College completed the 10-week AHEAD UDL (Universal Design for Learning) Digital Badge course. Subsequently, the principles of UDL were shared with teaching staff through staff meetings and staff newsletters, and the college's quality assurance processes were updated to support and encourage the implementation of UDL principles in QQI assessments.

Aims:

- *What was the rationale for the initiative?*

The learners were a group of QQI Level 6 (Advanced) Business Students in 2020-21. English wasn't the first language for many (at least half) of this student group, so written assignments were especially challenging for that cohort. This consideration coincided with Maeve O'Sullivan, the subject tutor for Personal & Professional Development (PPD) undertaking the online course in Universal Design for Learning (UDL) for FE tutors, as mentioned in the Background section above.

- *What were the aims for the initiative?*

To enable the students in this group with relatively poorer written English to have an alternative means of meeting the LOs and grading criteria in their first assignment, and therefore ensuring a fairer assessment removing a barrier which the fluent English speakers did not have to encounter.

Implementation:

- *What steps were taken?*

The previous assignment brief was redesigned to allow for a choice of either writing and submitting in an essay format or participating in a 'round table' group discussion as an alternative. This embodied the 'Plus One' philosophy of UDL, whereby an extra choice of assessment method was offered to all students.

- *Who was involved/consulted?*

The college's QA person was consulted, along with the head of the L6 Business Department, the class tutor, and the students themselves. On the UDL side, O'Sullivan submitted this redesign as her assignment for the UDL course, so she would also have consulted with both her UDL Group Facilitator and the members of her peer group.

- *What was the timeline?*

Once the decision to add to the number of methods of assessment was made, the undertaking of same was relatively quick. It just involved adding the second option (the group discussion) to the original one (written essay) and talking the students through both options. Obviously, the methods of submission were different, with the essay-writers submitting their documents via Moodle, and those who chose to partake in the group discussion/s having their work video-recorded. The total timeline from the rewriting and issuing of the assignment brief to the submission deadline was a month

Outcomes:

- *What were the key outcomes?*

Only one student in the group of 18 chose the essay option, which was the only option for this class group the previous year, i.e. 2019-2020. The vast majority of students were delighted to have a second option and embraced it fully, not just the overseas students. See feedback in Appendix A*

- *What was the impact?*

The assessment was less stressful and probably more successful for the majority of students in that group. Almost all of them received a Merit grade or higher in this assessment, which I don't think many of them would have achieved, had they had to write an essay instead.

- *Are there any future plans for the initiative?*

In this specific case, the PPD Level 6 module has changed now, and O'Sullivan is no longer teaching it. More tutors in RCFE have now completed the same UDL course, as mentioned above, so the offering of alternative assessment option for our students has now become more common, and this is arguably needed more than ever, since our student body has become even more diverse than at the start of this decade.

Reflections:

- *What worked well?*

Being able to offer an alternative assessment option for this PPD assignment resulted in a better chance of a better grade for most students, and less stress for them also. For business students, a round-table discussion is probably a more sector-appropriate activity than an essay. That way they can discuss concepts and learn from each other as well.

- *What were the biggest challenges?*

There weren't too many challenges, to be honest. The main aspect is being creative about coming up with a 'plus one' idea. Offering this 'plus one' does take more time, in relation to both redesigning

the assignment brief and grading the assessment. In addition, organising, as in this example, the video-recording of a group discussion and then watching it again is more time-consuming than opening a Word document and reading the essay in it.

- *What could be improved?*

If I was running this assessment again, or a similar one, I'd add a third option of a PowerPoint presentation.

- *What did you learn from it?*

I think I learnt more about the importance of having an 'even playing pitch' for all students by varying the means of delivery and assessment to suit a wide range of learners.

My awareness of the importance of removing barriers to students' understanding and achievement also increased.

When it comes to UDL, I find that a knowledge and understanding of it shifts your thinking in a way towards (hopefully) more creative teaching and assessment options which suit more learners.

How UDL principles inform teaching, learning and assessment in Rathmines College:

- ✓ Greater awareness of the benefits of a UDL approach to teaching, learning and assessment
- ✓ Increased use of rubrics and consultation with students when designing assessment
- ✓ We are getting better at providing learning materials in different formats and at using TEL tools to improve accessibility and provide multiple means of engagement, representation and action
- ✓ More awareness of using examples and case studies that are culturally and socially relevant to our learners
- ✓ Two teachers have started the Masters in Diversity and Inclusion in FET through Trinity College and are feeding their learning back to the management team
- ✓ Two members of the management team, including the Deputy Principal and the Assistant Principal for Academic Standards, have completed the UDL Digital Badge and are committed to building an inclusive learning environment
- ✓ All assessments briefs are internally checked before they are issued. This helps tutors to be confident that the assessment brief is meeting QA requirements and that where different assessment options are offered, the equivalences are appropriate e.g., a 1500-word essay or a 7-10 minute presentation
- ✓ Graded learner work is moderated on a sampling basis, informally and formally. It is challenging to find the time for multiple moderation workshops, but all new assessors are paired with an experienced tutor for moderation
- ✓ Pre-validation, moderation and internal verification of assessment briefs and graded learner evidence help ensure transparency and consistency in assessment. They reassure tutors that learner evidence produced in different formats is being graded appropriately and that variety can be facilitated without compromising on standards
- ✓ We make a conscious effort to encourage and celebrate innovation in assessment, and to ensure that tutors feel safe and supported when they try something new

- ✓ QQI External Authenticators are briefed on the UDL approach to assessment and their feedback to date has been very positive
- ✓ “Do the best you can until you know better. Then, when you know better, do better (Maya Angelou). UDL is a mindset that helps us to ‘do better’ as it challenges us to reduce barriers and keep accessibility at the heart of our work with learners.

Appendix A

*Feedback from students on the two alternative assessment options for the PPD assessment

1. Round-table discussion option (15 / 18 students)

“I chose a round table discussion because even though English is my first language I do not feel very confident with my writing skills. Writing an essay for me would be very stressful.”
- JO

“I personally think that this innovative idea was better for me because English is not my first language. Round table discussion provided me to know what other people are thinking and what is their point of view about the topic. In the round table conference all the participants had equal footings and in a better position to express and confront the issues.” - NK

2. Essay option (1 / 18 students):

“I chose the written essay option for a few reasons. I personally feel that I am much more competent in getting a message across in written form rather than verbally, but this is something I want to continue to work on. Putting my feelings on the subjects into text, for me anyway, eliminates the possibility of me getting nervous in the discussion & either fumbling my words or forgetting essential parts of information. Personally, I just find it the less stressful option” - BW