Jay Dolmage, “Places to Start: Moving Towards Universal Design in the Classroom”

- If we think of the Goldilocks and the Three Bears story, Universal Design is the “just right” of the three bears
  - Some other approaches to disability in the classroom include:
    - “Steep Steps”: assumes that the purpose of the academy is to figure out who should and shouldn’t have privilege
    - “Retrofit”: acknowledges that there are some inherent inequalities in the academy, and tries to remediate that
  - “Universal Design” (UD) says: I don’t need to know who is in my classroom; I can assume my classroom is going to reflect the diversity of society at large; I assume diversity in all forms (race, gender, sexuality, disability, etc.). It requires an approach different from making “temporary fixes” based on the bodies in the room.
- First year composition (FYC) is one of the few places we actually HAVE that kind of diversity and intersectionality
  - So UD is really great way of thinking about what we do in FYC
- Already a lot of the things that we think of as just “good teaching” especially in composition is already universal design
  - For instance, “allowance for error”: How can we allow students to “get it wrong” the first few times without risking total failure?
- There are criticisms of UD: it can become a checklist, rather than an action. But on the other hand, it can be a place to start, a place to engage an ongoing practice.
- Another way of keeping yourself aware of how you’re meeting your students’ needs is Small Group Instructional Diagnosis (SGID):
  - Around midterm, another teacher comes into your class with the goal of finding out what could change for the better
  - This anonymizes the students’ feedback, and gives them a safe space—and it gives you as a teacher a chance to show students that you actually care and will respond to their feedback.
  - It shows students that your teaching is a process.
  - It also makes the pretty good writers more willing to engage in making changes (and these are the students who are actually most at risk of learning nothing)—because they see that you’re willing to make changes yourself
  - Jay explained that he has learned not to try to justify why he decided not to respond to certain comments that come out of SGID
  - An example of a teaching practice that Jay developed based on feedback from SGID: writing reminders down rather than just vocalizing them.
- One key concept of Universal Design is redundancy:
  - Write it out; say it again; send it as an email
    - This extra work can be “farmed out”: students take turns taking notes and posting them
    - At University of Delaware, we also have the advantage of UD Capture
- Another principle of Universal Design: the law of unintended consequences:
The weird thing that you didn’t think was for everybody turns out to be the most popular and useful.

In the history of design we’ve see this often: stuff we now take for granted that is now universally used, but was originally intended for a smaller population.

Questions from attendees and answers from Jay:
Q: Does redundancy ever lead to not paying attention?
A: Depends on goal: if the goal is engagement in that moment, then redundancy will be different (give ways to write about it, talk about it, move around [stations]). But yes, not paying attention can still be a problem. Students may choose the path of least resistance (and thus least learning).

Q: Classroom activities: how can we engage strategies that may work for students but not for us? How can we break out from insisting that students write the way we do?
A: Our classes can be a safe space for experimenting in new writing processes. For example, Jay highly recommends activities based on Patricia Dunn’s Talking, Sketching Moving and Learning Re-Abled:
- Each student draws a scene (based on the materials they’re using for their writing)
- Put all the drawing up on the wall, and walk around and look at one another’s drawings
- Each student gives a “tour” of their piece of art
- Then you tell the student: When you gave us the tour, you wrote a passage. Now you have a paragraph—go write it down!

Q: What are some things you do to increase accessibility in your classroom?
A: Jay has a list of suggestions for all types of classrooms. (This list can now be found on the Composition Program’s website, onehundredoten.org, under “Resources.”) But also:
- In a writing classroom, accessibility often has to do with redundancy, not relying on students understanding what gets said immediately. As a result, you might consider:
  - Doing peer reviews online
  - Moving some discussions online (you may be surprised—students who won’t speak up in class will engage in writing)
  - Being comfortable with silence—especially after asking a question. Shows students you’re willing to wait for what they have to say, because it’s valuable.
  - Collaboratively generating rubrics/grading criteria with students

Q: Do you have any tips for making the classroom accessible for someone who is not able to be there physically the majority of the time?
A: You may need to ask yourself: are there other ways to imagine “presence” other than physically being there?
- This might be a way to come to terms with the idea that face-to-face is not the only or even best way to learn.
  - So you can ask yourself: What are some different ways for students to be “present”?
  - You can ask the student:
    - How can we get on the same page with this? What would work for you?
    - What are some replacement ways to “be there” for your peers if you miss class?
- What are some other non-talking roles that are valuable for class participation?

**Q:** How can I help students in my class with dyslexia?

**A:** Some ideas:

- Dyslexic-friendly font: downloadable for MS Word
- Ask yourself as a teacher:
  - In addition to reading, what are other ways of getting into dialogue in the classroom?
  - How can we do some group reading? Model together how to read a text.