

REFLECTIVE PAPER 2
MY MOST SIGNIFICANT LEARNING DURING MY PROBATIONARY PERIOD
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As my probationary period draws to a close, I think it is very important to take time to reflect on the tremendous amount that I have learned this year, about both myself and my students. I also find myself reflecting about the principles of Universal Design For Learning (UDL) and how I can employ this framework to create the most equitable, accessible and inclusive teaching/learning environment for my students.

One of the most important lessons I learned about myself this year is to appreciate the value I have as an educator, and to embrace my unique voice and teaching style. The term “warm demander” (cited by Andratesha Fritzgerald in the UDL course) really resonated with me. This refers to a teacher who is warm and welcoming to learners, but who also supports them in working towards rigorous learning goals. Having moved through the ranks in an era where extremely strict and imposing chefs were the norm, I was often fearful that my warm approach was somehow not as valid. I have now come to understand that this is not the case at all. In fact, my student engagement is at a very high level, with many comments in my student feedback citing that they appreciate my level of passion/investment in their success, my kindness and approachability.

Another key personal realization for me this year came after having examined myself using the Wheel of Power/Privilege in the New Faculty Academy. This was the first time I had really disseminated my own personal intersectionality, and how my power and privilege relates to my personal circumstance. Being white, able-bodied and cisgender for example, I have to acknowledge the immense and unearned privilege that I have, while at the same time acknowledging that many of my students will not have this same privilege. Consequently, I have had to reframe how I view all of my teaching practices, as we don't often see the biases of these practices until we can try to view it through the lens of others. At the same time, I can acknowledge that some unique aspects of my intersectionality (being queer and having grown up in a home with economic insecurity for example), have helped me to become a more compassionate educator as well.

This year, I also learned to welcome the vulnerability of inviting critique and feedback from my learners. I made a concerted effort to be proactive instead of reactive with my teaching methodology. At the beginning of each course, I informed students of a link to an anonymous Microsoft Form, where they could give feedback or suggestions at any time throughout the course, instead of simply waiting for the SFQ results at the end. This is game-changing for a couple of reasons. It gives students choice and agency with regard to their learning, which is very empowering for them. I find when students have more control over their learning, they engage more. It also allows me to examine, in real time, what is working best for my students, or what needs to be amended, so I can optimize their learning experience.

I also realized this year how rewarding and affirming it is for me to be more involved in community building initiatives at George Brown, outside of the classroom. My work with the Student Nutrition Access Program (SNAP) and my involvement with the GBC PRIDE activities this year allowed me to become more connected with myself, deepen my connections with students and effect positive change. The ability for me to be a mentor for the students, be it through encouraging sustainability (SNAP), or being an openly queer role model for our often marginalized 2SLGBTQIA+ students (speaking on this year's Pride Panel) has given me such a sense of pride and fulfillment. Discovering how much these things "fill my cup", and realizing that I can make a difference, however large or small, I will continue to get involved as much as I can going forward.

When I reflect upon what I learned about working with my students and what I learned about UDL principles, I find the two are inextricably linked. You cannot consider one without the other.

One of the most important lessons UDL has taught me is that there is no such thing as "the average learner", and that learner variability is the rule, not the exception. We have such a diverse student population with regard to cultural backgrounds, social identities, accessibility needs, neurodiversity and lived experiences. This of course directly affects how each student perceives the curriculum, how they express themselves, and how comfortable they feel in the classroom. I have thought a lot about what my students from marginalized communities have had to contend with in their educational journeys: racism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, sexism, classism - to name just a few. I have also reflected on how historically, classroom colonialism has created a huge power imbalance for students, where greater value has been placed on certain types of learning, knowing and communicating over others, and where representation in curriculum has been extremely eurocentric. It is crucial to acknowledge that because of my privilege, I may have unconsciously perpetuated some of this power imbalance. Knowing this, it is my job as a professor to create a classroom that minimizes this inequity and affords every single learner the same opportunity for success. With this and UDL principles in mind, I have set some goals for myself going forward.

From the first day of class, I want to create the safest space possible for my learners. I also want them to know that I value them as individuals with unique perspectives. I love the idea of "ice breaker" activities at the beginning of a course, so students can learn more about one another, and I can learn more about them as people. I am also introducing a "class contract", which is a collaboratively created framework we agree upon as a group, establishing our guidelines and non-negotiable expectations for an inclusive and respectful classroom. I will reiterate that I welcome their ongoing feedback, so that my students can be involved in their own learning process - there can always be adjustments or accommodations made according to their needs.

I learned so much about the 3 principles of UDL: Multiple Means of Engagement, Action/Expression and Representation. We tend to teach others the way we learn best, and view our curriculum through the lens of our own identity; but learning is not "one size fits all", so pedagogy has to evolve. Materials used to convey curriculum need to include multiple

perspectives and modalities. I am also committed to delivering the curriculum in a variety of ways, so my learners have choice, and are afforded the most accessibility possible. For example, for practical lab classes, students have recipes (screen reader accessible), videos (with captions), pictures (with alt text) and live demonstrations to convey the same lessons/expectations each week. I am also aware that the idea of assignments being submitted only in written essay form is not equitable at all. The assumption that this method of presenting information is superior, is very rooted in colonialism. Giving the student options to express themselves (using video with captions, blogs, etc) is very empowering and takes into account learner variability. Digital accessibility for learners is also not always equitable for a number of reasons, so this also has to be taken into account, and accommodations made. In terms of evaluation, in addition to summative assessments, I will continue to provide comprehensive mastery-oriented, formative feedback throughout each class. I believe it is so important to encourage work, effort and good habits over simply fixed grading. I think it is equally important to reiterate that mistakes are a critical part of the learning process.

I really love this quote from the UDL course:

“Inclusion is not bringing people into what already exists; it is making a new space, a better space for everyone.”

It is my goal to continue to seek out as many opportunities as I can to further my own learning journey toward championing these ideals as I continue my career here at George Brown College.