Reach Everyone, Teach Everyone: Universal Design for Learning in Higher Education
by Thomas J. Tobin and Kirsten T. Behling.

As America’s two-year colleges become increasingly more diverse, we, as first-year composition instructors who often are tasked with teaching all entering students, are faced with a unique challenge. In my almost six years teaching at two-year colleges, I’ve seen a wide variety of students in my classroom, and I’ve heard similar reports about the variety of students from my colleagues, often with questions or concerns about how to reach all of these students. One approach that I’ve found helpful is Universal Design for Learning (UDL), which was first introduced in K–12 education by the Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST) in the early 1990s and has slowly been making its way to higher education.

Reach Everyone, Teach Everyone: Universal Design for Learning in Higher Education, written by Thomas J. Tobin, the conference programming chair at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, and Kirsten T. Behling, the director of student accessibility services at Tufts University and an adjunct professor at Suffolk University, presents a twenty-first-century take on the idea of UDL. It begins with the same ideas promoted by CAST: engaging with content and people, representing information, and expressing skills and knowledge. Then it takes the ideas a step further by providing practical ways to implement them in college classrooms. While the authors champion the same idea of preparing to teach all students in our classes as UDL proposes, they propose that instead of focusing just on specific accommodations that must be made for specific disabilities, we should design our college classes to reach our broad population of students on the devices that most of them find indispensible: their phones.

The book begins with an introduction to UDL and its history in higher education, much like you would find in Sheryl E. Burgstahler and Rebecca Cory’s Universal Design in Higher Education. Tobin and Behling review the basic steps that college faculty should take to make sure that their classes are accessible for all learners as well as a few of the laws that support UDL in higher education. Their argument in this section centers around the idea that “CAST’s theory that learner variability is best addressed by inclusive design is supported by brain-based science and decades of evidence from the K–12 world,” which is something with which most postsecondary instructors are not familiar due to being hired because of their subject-area expertise (29). Tobin and Behling also argue that most colleges presume “that people who need special access must make their needs
known in order to be accommodated,” which is troubling, especially considering that the majority of students who could benefit from accommodations either don’t know how or choose not to make their needs known (45).

The book then quickly transitions into the second section, “Reframing UDL,” in which Tobin and Behling outline their entire argument for designing the 21st-century college classroom through the premise that we should all be reaching out to our students on their phones. They base their theory on the concept that Google calls “micro-moments” and the idea that all content must be chunked for each consumption (77). Looking at this from an industry mindset, Tobin and Behling argue that we should be employing the suggestions that Laura Adams et al. offer in their 2015 publication, “Your Guide to Winning the Shift to Mobile.”

Tobin and Behling also use college student personas throughout to provide examples of how their theory would play out in various college classrooms, such as Fatimah, who can watch her instructor’s videos after her kids go to bed because they have captions or who can listen to her instructor’s podcasts while she is driving (73), or Stan, whose accounting professor posts her lecture notes as text files, along with screencast videos that show her working through various problems and talking about the steps (93). The authors’ commentary about mobile accessibility, as well as the specific examples they provide, is invaluable for anyone who teaches postsecondary students.

The third, and final, section of the book is all about how to adopt UDL on college campuses. Each chapter in this section focuses on the concept of “one assignment, one program, one modality, one mind-set” and encourages readers to spend time with ensuring the usability of that one thing before moving on. For example, the authors remind us that “UDL relies on the concept of construct relevance to ensure that we are actually testing students on only the skills that we want them to demonstrate—and that we aren’t unknowingly testing learners’ abilities in dimensions that are not related to the subjects we want them to learn” (179). Tobin and Behling also stress measurable objectives and embracing the online environment to reach more students.

As someone who is relatively new to teaching online, I have struggled with how to translate universal design for learning into the digital landscape. While searching online for resources last fall, this book came up, and I read it in one sitting. As someone who both requires accommodations for college coursework and who provides accessibility training for other college faculty, I found this book to be engaging and informative. I’ve been telling all of my colleagues about it, and I’m excited to share it with two-year college writing faculty now. Reach Everyone, Teach Everyone is published by West Virginia University Press and is a pretty quick read at 312 pages, but the contents are invaluable. It is available in paperback or eBook through major retailers.

Works Cited
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