

Universal Design for Learning (UDL)

What is Universal Design for Learning?

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is an approach to designing curriculum and learning experiences so that all students can be successful. It originated from the concept of Universal Design found in architecture. Universally-designed environments have features that minimize or remove barriers and allow access for all possible users. For example, ramps and curb-cuts are used by people pushing strollers or pulling luggage, those with temporary injuries, individuals who use wheelchairs or motorized scooters, and even some who may simply prefer ramps to steps.

UDL applies this same concept of “designing to meet the needs of all” to education. UDL builds flexible features into curriculum, thereby removing barriers and inviting engagement for the widest range of students, while maintaining high standards. For example, the use of captioned video may be a necessary support for a student who is deaf, but may also be helpful to students who are English Language Learners, students with attention difficulty, or any student viewing in a noisy environment. When collaborative teams use UDL principles in planning curriculum, the result is more accessible lessons and increased opportunity for participation by all learners.

Which learners can benefit from UDL?

Today’s classrooms and learning environments must meet the needs of increasingly diverse groups of learners. UDL allows all students, regardless of abilities, interests, and linguistic or cultural backgrounds, to access core content using a variety of means. UDL assumes that there is no “typical” learner, and addresses individual learner differences by planning ahead to engage diverse learners in instruction in a variety of ways, including the use of flexible digital tools that have become so commonplace at home and in school.

What are UDL principles and guidelines?

UDL principles, developed by the Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST)*, are based on the neuroscience of learner differences and research on effective instruction. They call for **varied and flexible ways** to:

- Represent or access academic content (the “what” of learning),
- Plan and execute learning tasks, including expression (the “how” of learning), and
- Become and stay engaged in learning (the “why” of learning)

Using these principles, CAST has further developed practical UDL Guidelines to assist educators in designing curricular materials, methods, and assessments that address the needs of increasingly diverse learners.

“A universally-designed curriculum is shaped from the outset to meet the needs of the greatest number of users, making costly, time-consuming, and after-the-fact changes to the curriculum unnecessary.”

National Center on UDL

www.udlcenter.org/aboutudl/udlguidelines/introduction

UDL Guidelines

To build in multiple means of:	Allow students to:	Some examples:
<i>Representation</i>	Interact with content in flexible ways	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alternatives to auditory or visual information • Text to speech or interactive scaffolds • Means to activate background knowledge • Multiple entry points into a lesson
<i>Action and Expression</i>	Provide flexible options to show what they know	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offer options in mode of physical response • Allow options of tools for composition or problem solving like spellcheckers, or calculators • Provide differentiated models or mentors
<i>Engagement</i>	Provide options to stimulate student interest and motivation for learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide choices in context, rewards, sequence or level of challenge. • Vary activities and sources of information to personalize, or make culturally or socially relevant. • Offer options for goal-setting or self-monitoring

Adapted from information found at National Center for UDL website. For more information go to www.udlcenter.org/aboutudl/udlguidelines.

Does UDL require the use of technology?

The use of technology allows for teachers and students to have flexible ways to interact with content, demonstrate knowledge and skills, and maintain high levels of engagement. Digital text, interactive web activities, podcasts, online chat, and the burgeoning number of Web 2.0 tools and social media are all examples of UDL uses of technology. However, technology is only one type of many powerful tools teachers can use to reduce barriers in instruction. For example, teachers can use

the principles of UDL to prepare a well-designed lesson that:

- provides options for students to learn through various senses (e.g., looking, touching, smelling)
- illustrates key concepts in a variety of ways
- scaffolds information (e.g., modeling, graphic organizers)
- provides an array of tools (e.g., options for writing, building, demonstrating)
- includes various ways for students to represent their learning (e.g., drawing and

models, charts and posters, oral reports or skits)

- engages students' interest by providing choices and connecting to student experiences
- provides options for developing self-assessment and reflection

Is UDL the same as differentiated instruction?

Differentiated instruction and UDL are both effective ways to address the needs of students with a wide range of abilities. Differentiated instruction does so by making changes in content, process, and product to meet the needs of individual students. UDL focuses on developing curriculum to be flexible and accessible from the start, rather than retrofitting existing goals, materials, and assessments. UDL is a proactive approach to differentiating instruction.

What does UDL look like in the classroom?


Implementation of UDL will reflect the diversity of the students, curriculum, and environments involved. Because there is not one correct way to

implement UDL, educators should take advantage of a variety of web resources that illustrate the possibilities in UDL.

Videos from the National Center on UDL screening room provide a variety of examples of lessons in the classroom at varied levels. They also include a helpful discussion of how the UDL Guidelines were used in the lesson. The instructional strategies will be familiar to most teachers. The rationale for how these strategies, in combination, address the varied needs of the students in the classroom demonstrates the power of UDL in designing lessons.

How can I learn more about UDL?

Explore the CAST* website at www.cast.org and the National Center on UDL website at www.udlcenter.org.



“If a child can’t learn the way we teach, then we need to teach the way they learn.”

Ignatio Estrada



* CAST (www.cast.org) is a nonprofit research and development organization that works to expand learning opportunities for all individuals, especially those with disabilities, through Universal Design for Learning.

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