

Universal Design for Learning (UDL): Making learning accessible and engaging for all students

In today's dynamic, diverse classrooms, Universal Design for Learning (UDL) offers all educators and students an exciting opportunity to use strategies and technologies that bridge the gap in learner skills, interests, and needs. By accommodating students' different learning styles, UDL is able to transform instruction into a more engaging, meaningful experience.

—NEA President Dennis Van Roekel

Educators know that a one-size-fits-all approach does not work when it comes to designing curriculum, instruction, and student assessment. Not all children learn the same way. Not all children express themselves in the same way. And, not all children engage in learning in the same way. Students come to the classroom with a variety of needs, skills, talents, interests, and learning styles.

For many learners, the typical curriculum is littered with learning barriers and roadblocks. In contrast, a universally designed curriculum is responsive to today's diverse classrooms and designed from the outset to meet the needs of the greatest number of students. It allows teachers to choose from a menu of tools and strategies embedded in the curriculum and instructional materials.¹

Universal Design and Universal Design for Learning

The term “universal design” refers to the movement within architecture and product development to create places or things that are accessible to as many people as possible, including those with disabilities. Curb ramps, video captioning, and speakerphones are examples of universal design elements that we see every day around us.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a research-based framework and set of principles to provide ALL students with equal opportunities to learn.² UDL calls for proactive design of accessible and usable standards, curricula, instructional methods and materials, and assessments.³ By using UDL principles in the general education classroom, teachers have the flexibility to create learning situations that are user-friendly and engaging for all learners. Curriculum barriers are reduced; instructional assistance is readily available; students gain knowledge, skills, and enthusiasm for learning; and their learning is validly assessed.

What are the principles of UDL?

There are three primary principles of UDL:

- Provide multiple and flexible methods of **presentation** to give students with diverse learning styles various ways of acquiring information and knowledge;
- Provide multiple and flexible means of **expression** to provide diverse students with alternatives for demonstrating what they have learned;
- Provide multiple and flexible means of **engagement** to tap into diverse learners' interests, challenge them appropriately, and motivate them to learn.⁴

UDL provides access to the general education curriculum for all students

Brain research tells us that learning requires linking concepts and making meaningful connections and interconnections between new information and what is already known.⁵ Using UDL principles to develop standards, curriculum, and instructional materials helps to embed flexibility into key aspects of the general education curriculum, such as goals, teaching methods, instructional materials, and assessments. Students are able to link what they know with new concepts, connect their interests with classroom topics, and express what they have learned in meaningful ways. UDL allows ALL learners to use their skills and interests to fully engage in the learning situation.

Increasing physical access and eliminating physical barriers to educational sites is an essential step in universal design but genuine learning requires much more than physical access—it requires cognitive (or intellectual) access too.

For example, one way to apply the principle of multiple means of presentation to instructional materials is to use a digital text of a novel with a built-in array of tools to help the reader understand the book. A student who has difficulty reading printed text can use a text reader feature, while a student who needs help with reading comprehension can use embedded vocabulary definitions, explanations of highlighted abstract literary concepts accessed by clicking on the highlighted word, foreign language translations, or animated coaches that assist with answering comprehension questions.

How does UDL fit with other initiatives and strategies?

UDL is a natural complement to strategies such as differentiated instruction that matches instruc-

tional strategies to students' learning needs.⁶ UDL also enhances the impact of initiatives, such as inclusive education; response to intervention (RTI)⁷, which provides targeted and intensive instruction to struggling students; and P21 projects that focus on teaching essential language arts, mathematics, technology, and behavioral skills viewed as 21st century skills. For example, instructional materials that include digital texts and media resources encourage students to learn and use 21st century skills. And, when the curriculum and instructional materials are designed from the beginning with UDL principles in mind, the need for time consuming adaptations and retro-fitting of materials is eliminated.

Is UDL just for students with disabilities?

Absolutely not. UDL was first mentioned in regard to making instruction accessible for students with disabilities, but it is a format that gives ALL students the opportunity to learn. For example, video captioning is of great help to students with hearing impairments—and also is beneficial to students who are learning English, students who are struggling readers, students with attention deficits, and even students working in a noisy classroom.

Using UDL as a framework, general and special educators, related service providers, and paraprofessionals insure that all students have meaningful access to grade level curriculum; valid, accurate assessments; and opportunities for meaningful participation.

What legislation calls for the use of UDL?

Universal design is defined in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004 (IDEA 2004) and the Higher Education Act of 2008 (HEA). IDEA 2004 allows states to use IDEA professional development funds for instruction on

UDL, while HEA suggests that teacher preparation programs include information about UDL principles in college coursework.

What models or exemplary programs exist?

Six local districts in five states (Indiana, Iowa, Kentucky, Massachusetts, and Ohio) were identified by Project Forum as exemplars of UDL in practice.⁸ Instruction materials and strategies include increased use of digital texts and resources, assistive technologies (such as smart boards and digital cameras), and low-technology options (such as highlighters and pencil grips). Teachers are encouraged to shift away from a one-size-fits-all approach to more creative and flexible teaching and learning methods. In addition to mandated standardized assessments, districts use formative assessments, such as portfolios, and on-going web-based assessments, such as *Read 180* and *AIMS Web*. As a result, student learning, performance, and engagement has improved and high stakes accountability test scores have reportedly increased.

Promoting UDL is everyone's responsibility

NEA helped establish the National Task Force on UDL, which advocates for policies promoting the availability of universally designed standards, curriculum, and instructional strategies. Key policy initiatives to promote UDL include:

- local and state vision statements that address accessible learning for all students;
- state academic standards reflecting UDL principles;
- local school board policies encouraging the adoption of UDL principles for curriculum and instruction;

- school leadership champions to foster local and district implementation;
- federal and state funding for professional development on UDL;
- teacher preparation coursework emphasizing the application of UDL;
- programs to encourage peer coaching/mentoring on UDL;
- incentives to increase the use of UDL principles in textbook development;
- broad-based marketing of UDL as “best practice” to benefit all students;
- funding for upgraded technology infrastructure and purchase of technological tools;
- funding for the development of universally designed state and local assessments.

In some cases, providing universally designed curricula, instruction, and assessment will require additional funding. However, there are many ways to achieve the principles of UDL by repurposing already existing funds, particularly for professional preparation and development. Using UDL principles can enhance achievement for all students. That's why promoting UDL is everyone's responsibility.

References

¹ CAST, *UDL Questions and Answers*, www.cast.org/research/faq/index.html#q2.

² D. Rose and A. Meyer, *Teaching every student in the digital age: Universal design for learning*, Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2002.

³ K.M. Sopko, *Universal Design for Learning: Implementation in Six Local Education Agencies*, Alexandria, VA: Project Forum, National Association of State Directors of Special Education, 2008.

⁴ D. Rose, and A. Meyer, 2002.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ T. Hall, N. Strangman, and A. Meyer, *Differentiated instruction and implications for UDL implementation*, www.cast.org/publications/ncac/ncac_diffinstructudl.html.

⁷ N. Strangman, C. Hitchcock, T. Hall, and G. Meo, et al., *Response-to-Instruction and Universal Design for Learning: How Might They Intersect in the General Education Classroom?*, 2006, www.idonline.org/article/13002.

⁸ K.M. Sopko, 2008.

Resources

CAST, a nonprofit research and development organization, works to expand learning opportunities for all individuals, especially those with disabilities, through UDL.

www.cast.org

National Task Force on UDL also offers more detailed examples of UDL and resources.

www.udl4allstudents.org