

Q&A for Higher Education

About UDL

What is Universal Design for Learning?

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a framework that provides ALL students equal opportunities to learn. It encourages teachers to design flexible curricula that meet the needs of all learners.

Using UDL principles in general education classrooms makes curriculum and instruction accessible and engaging. Curriculum barriers are reduced; learning is supported; students gain knowledge, skills, and enthusiasm for learning; and their learning is validly assessed.

What are the benefits of UDL?

Students come to the classroom with a variety of needs, skills, talents, interests and experiences. For many learners, typical curricula are littered with barriers and roadblocks, while offering little support. UDL turns this scenario around by encouraging the design of flexible, supportive curricula that are responsive to individual student variability.

UDL improves educational outcomes for ALL students by ensuring meaningful access to the curriculum within an inclusive learning environment. In addition, UDL complements existing school reform initiatives, such as Response to Intervention (RTI) and Understanding by Design (UbD).

What are the principles of UDL?

- Provide multiple means of representation to give students various ways of acquiring, processing, and integrating information and knowledge.
- Provide multiple means of action and expression to provide students with options for navigating and demonstrating learning.
- Provide multiple means of engagement to tap individual learners' interests, challenge them appropriately, and motivate them to learn.

Using the three principles of UDL, teachers can create goals that promote high expectations for all learners, use flexible methods and materials, and accurately assess student progress.

What is being done to promote the implementation of UDL?

The National UDL Task Force works to incorporate the principles of UDL into federal policy and practice initiatives. Recommendations of the Task Force on teacher and faculty preparation to use UDL strategies were incorporated into the recently passed Higher Education Opportunity Act. Recommendations have been made for the reauthorization of ESEA (NCLB) and will also be made for IDEA. In addition, the Task Force seeks increased dissemination of information about UDL by the U.S. Department of Education and other federal agencies. See the UDL Toolkit at www.osepideasthatwork.org/udl/.

The National UDL Task Force is comprised of more than forty education and disability organizations. A complete list can be found at www.udlcenter.org/aboutudlcenter/partnerships/taskforce.

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Isn't UDL just for students with disabilities?

Absolutely not. UDL certainly benefits students with disabilities. However, all students can benefit from the types of supports that curricula designed using UDL provide. For example, video captioning is of great help to students with hearing impairments, because it provides them with a visual representation of speech. This support is also beneficial to English Language Learners, struggling readers, and even students working in a noisy classroom.

In what ways does UDL promote access in higher education?

Increasing physical access and eliminating physical barriers to educational sites or materials, (e.g., providing accessible textbooks) 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, providing digital text of a novel with built-in comprehension supports is one way to apply the principle of multiple means of representation to instructional materials. A student who has difficulty accessing printed text due to a visual impairment or dyslexia could use the text reader feature, while a student who needs cognitive access could use comprehension supports. These supports could include vocabulary definitions, highlighted abstract literary concepts, foreign language translations, or animated mentors that assist with answering comprehension questions. Using UDL as a framework, faculty, specialized and technology instructional support personnel can ensure that all students have meaningful access to content, valid, accurate assessments and opportunities for meaningful participation. For examples of UDL applications in college classrooms consider additional exploration at www.elixr.merlot.org/case-stories/understanding--meeting-students-needs/universal-design-for-learning-udl "or" www.udlonline.cast.org/home.

UDL is a natural complement to teaching and learning initiatives in higher education that promote the use of technology in learning, research on how people learn, and good teaching practices (Bransford, Brown & Cocking, 2000 & Chickering & Gamson, 1986). Instructional materials can include textbooks, digital texts and media resources, and web-based tools that encourage student learning and

participation. Eliminating time-consuming adaptations and retro-fitting of instructional materials, UDL allows for efficient use of time and resources and the ability to infuse instructional approaches that can reach more learners.

How is UDL articulated in the Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008 (HEOA)?

The Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008 (HEOA) provided both a formal definition of UDL and guidelines for providing UDL training to future teacher educators. The HEOA defined UDL as,

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) means a scientifically valid framework for guiding educational practice that — (A) provides flexibility in the ways information is presented, in the ways students respond or demonstrate knowledge and skills, and in the ways students are engaged; and (B) reduces barriers in instruction, provides appropriate accommodations, supports, and challenges, and maintains high achievement expectations for all students, including students with disabilities and students who are limited English proficient. [HEOA, P.L. 110-315, §103(a)(24)].

Teacher preparation that includes UDL better assures that opportunities are provided to strengthen the course with effective instruction and technology activities. Student performance increases as all students acquire greater knowledge and demonstrate progress when UDL is fully embraced and implemented.

Where can I find more information?

Please visit our website at www.udl4allstudents.com or contact Ricki Sabia at rsabia@ndss.org.

The National Center for Universal Design for Learning also contains information about UDL, resources for UDL implementation, and research. It also includes a community section.