

Q&A for Educators

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 provide access to grade level curriculum?

Many people think of access in the purely physical sense. For example, a student in a wheel chair might use an elevator to access higher floors in a building. Although, this type of access is very important, access to learning is far more complex. The UDL framework addresses this complexity by encouraging thoughtful planning of flexible curricula (goals, methods, materials, and assessments) from the start, which meet the needs of all learners.

For example, only providing students with paper text could be problematic, but providing students with flexible digital text is one way to make instructional materials more accessible to all students. A student who has difficulty accessing printed text due to a visual impairment or dyslexia could still 'access' the same text by using text-to-speech feature. While a student who needs cognitive access could use comprehension supports, such as vocabulary definitions, highlighted abstract literary concepts, foreign language translations, or animated coaches that assist with answering comprehension questions.

An important part of UDL is realizing that these supports are also important for students who might be facile with text. For example, a proficient reader might prefer to listen to the text by using the Text-to-Speech function. In short, lots of students benefit from the flexibility and accessibility built into curricula designed using the UDL framework.

What is the role of educators in UDL implementation?

Educators are key to UDL implementation. They can promote the use of UDL by:

- Serving on curriculum selection committees and encouraging school districts to purchase curriculum materials that incorporate UDL principles;
- Adopting UDL principles in designing and planning curricula for their classrooms;
- Demonstrating and sharing how to use UDL principles with their teaching colleagues;
- Requesting professional development on UDL for all educators in their school or district;
- Collaborating with colleagues on experiences with UDL and how to better implement UDL in the future.

What legislation calls for the use of UDL?

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004 and the Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008 have provisions for Universal Design and Universal Design for Learning. There have also been considerable efforts to include UDL in the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), commonly referred to as No Child Left Behind (NCLB).

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.