



Special Needs

6 Ways to Engage Every Learner Using UDL

Universal Design for Learning can make your lessons more accessible and your lesson-planning more fun.

- By [Stephen Noonoo](#)
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In any given classroom, there are invariably learners who simply don't connect with what's being taught. Lectures can be easy to tune out. A textbook can feel dense and boring to finish. Even a video can pose limitations for learners with sight or hearing difficulties. When these are the only options available, some learners are bound to fall behind without requesting special support, while others will surge ahead. Differentiation is one way to bridge this gap, and another is adapting the curriculum to suit all learners, instead of adjusting it to support the needs of each one.

That latter approach, called Universal Design for Learning (UDL), operates under a handful of broad principles that mainly concern themselves with the what, how and why of learning. According to the [National Center on Universal Design for Learning](#), the principles and the guidelines scaffolded under them suggest providing a greater variety of options for how learners are taught information, how they express that they've grasped material and how they're continuously engaged and motivated to learn more. While UDL has been around for decades, recently it's been gaining traction with educators, schools, districts and entire states, [like Maryland](#).

UDL principles and guidelines are not step-by-step instructions. Instead, they serve as more of a framework or philosophy that can guide educators in developing and executing the goal of making learning more accessible for all students, whether they have learning or physical disabilities or simply like to learn things visually. To offer educators some practical first steps, we asked universal design pros and innovative districts to share the ways that every classroom can incorporate UDL into its lessons.

Start Small

The transition to UDL should be gradual. Luis Perez, an accessibility advocate and author of the UDL-inspired book *Mobile Learning for All*, said, “You’re not going to apply every single [guideline] to every single lesson. It depends on which ones are relevant to your learning goals.”

Perez suggested, “Start with a single lesson or activity and then build success from that, and then start to look at other parts of your curriculum.” He also suggested taking a look at the UDL guidelines from the 30,000-foot-view before exploring specific checkpoints. “For each of those checkpoints, you can drill down not only into the research, but there are examples and links to tools for how you can apply them.”

Perez also recommends starting with the free online book *Universal Design for Learning: Theory and Practice*, which is available from **CAST**, the organization that maintains the UDL principles. “As you read the book, you’re going to feel out the UDL principles and model,” he said. “For example, there’s a glossary, there’s lots of hyperlinks so that if you want to pursue a different topic you can go off on a different hyperlink in that direction. You can highlight, you can turn on text-to-speech. It gives you an idea of what UDL looks like in terms of instructional materials.”

Engage Everybody

Redefining a lesson for UDL doesn’t require the latest iPad app or tools designed with accessibility in mind. Instead, educators have brainstormed ways to incorporate music, video, clay modeling, trips outdoors or tossing a ball around class alongside the apps and software they might typically use. The intention is to stimulate every type of learner, regardless of the individual support they might require.

In some cases, teachers actually find this method easier than the just-in-time differentiation they were used to employing. Jeremy Weaber has spent 11 years teaching English and social studies to seventh-graders at **Perryville Middle School** in Maryland, which is part of **Cecil County Public Schools**, a district that began a big UDL push a few years ago. “A lot of what we did was working with differentiation and trying to differentiate things based on student needs once you know who your students are,” Weaber said. “Once I got into UDL, it’s more about planning ahead of time for any range of students. It’s a preplanning you could do at any point instead of waiting to find out who you have and then going to take care of their needs.”

Use Technology, but Don’t Rely on It

Perez said that UDL is first and foremost about pedagogy, but “technology gives you a richer palette of tools to choose from.” For example, if a student feels more comfortable hearing passages of text read aloud, he or she can turn on text-to-speech functions, which are built-in on most operating systems or available as freeware. Showing students how to invert screen colors, highlight or magnify text can also prove useful.

“I would begin with whatever device you have, go into the settings, and explore a little bit,” Perez said. “If you have a student who is struggling to understand the text and all of a sudden you make it just a little easier for a student to get through a reading assignment, then their engagement and their motivation might improve because they’re not dealing with that frustration anymore.”

Technology, however, is like any tool in that relying on it too much can actually defeat the purpose. Tina Greene, a kindergarten teacher turned UDL coordinator at **Bartholomew Consolidated School Corp.** (IN), a district that began working with UDL more than a decade ago, cautioned, “Just like a worksheet can be a barrier and a print text can be a barrier, technology can be a barrier for some students as well. UDL is not about technology but it is about using technology in an intentional way.”

Further Reading on UDL

Experts frequently cite the following books and resources as providing a solid grounding and significant insights into UDL principles and how to apply them in various environments.

CAST

Mobile Learning for All: Supporting Accessibility With the iPad by Luis Perez

Teaching Every Student in the Digital Age: Universal Design for Learning by David H. Rose and Anne Meyer

UDL Now! by Katie Novak

Universal Design for Learning: Theory and Practice by Anne Meyer, David H. Rose and David Gordon

Focus on the Whole Environment

Since UDL encompasses so many facets of education, focusing exclusively on curriculum, on supporting teachers or on providing accessibility options is too narrow an approach. Instead, Greene suggested cultivating a holistic learning environment from the ground up. BCSC has established goals, methods for achieving those goals, materials and resources that can be utilized and assessments to help measure progress. Students need accessibility in all those areas, and if it isn’t there, Greene said, “We don’t see a deficit in a student. We see a deficit in a curriculum or in a learning environment.”

For example, Rhonda Laswell, another UDL coordinator at BCSC who previously taught seventh grade at the district, said that to maximize opportunities for her students, she often required them to interact with any given lesson seven different times, in seven different ways. “So that would be text, some audio version, a video, an object lesson, a demo, a hands-on activity, a lab, an activity with a partner,” she said. “We’d do large group and small group activities. The information and the

content was given to them in multiple ways and then they were able to interact with that information and make it their own.”

Bring Students on Board

When schools implement UDL across the whole learning environment, students will notice and respond to the change, but they may not question much beyond that. Weaber said, “I think the kids see I’m doing things different than what they’re used to, but then I feel like when kids get used to something, it’s almost like a standard. I don’t know that they’ll say it’s much better because, to them, it’s still school.”

Explaining why and how their environment is shifting can help, but showing them is even better, Perez said. He cited an example from Katie Novak’s book *UDL Now!* in which she suggests taking a lesson or ordinary classroom activity and doing it twice: once in a traditional format and again using UDL principles so that students experience the contrast. “I think students need to see the rationale of why we are doing this,” Perez said.

In addition to translating learning goals into language appropriate for students, this year BCSC is piloting a new rubric, called “Schoolwide Learning Outcomes,” which is based on UDL concepts and is designed as a tool for students’ self-improvement. “[Students] are now beginning to assess themselves on the process of learning,” Greene explained, adding that they can use the tool to assess where they may need extra support. “Not only that, but it’s a tool that teachers can use to monitor where their students are as well, so they can make adjustments in the learning environment.”

Be Flexible

Cecil County’s Weaber said that the UDL implementation process, with its emphasis on experimentation, creativity and full-class inclusion, reminds him of when he was student teaching. Nowadays he’s much less likely to lecture at the front of the classroom when he can instead employ music, costumes or tours via Google Earth to add new context to places. In lieu of teaching a staid lesson on command vs. market economies, for example, he found YouTube videos of other students explaining the concepts through pop songs. Students listened to the songs a few times, then took notes. Later, Weaber reviewed the content to get feedback on the assignment and fill in any gaps.

While he has still clear goals and PD assigned by his district, UDL has become a lot more open for him. “A lot of UDL for me has been coming up with things as I’m driving in the car,” he said. “It’s brought the fun back to teaching for me, because I’ve expanded my toolbox.”

UDL, by its very nature, resists formulaic teaching and encourages new approaches to overcome unexpected obstacles to accessible learning. In fact, as Greene said, it’s more about iteration and improvement than meeting specific benchmarks. “When you talk about Universal Design for Learning as a framework, it’s not a checklist. You don’t ever arrive,” she said. “You are trying your

best to evaluate the variability of your students and provide options for everyone. That is a dynamic process that's ever-changing.”

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