

Tips for Implementing Universal Design for Learning in the Classroom



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Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is an approach to improve and optimize teaching and learning for all learners by setting clear, rigorous goals; anticipating barriers; and proactively designing to minimize those barriers.

You may know of Universal Design in architecture. It's an approach to design that works to ensure products and buildings can be used by anyone, regardless of their level of ability. When a building is designed for flexibility, it can serve everyone, with or without disabilities.

Consider the Universal Design approach in learning. What difference would it make if educators looked for barriers in the design of the curriculum, rather than in the learners? What if we built in flexibility in teaching and learning?

When we design for the average learner, we miss reaching nearly everyone because **no one is average**, at least not in every area. When we design for variability, we are minimizing barriers and increasing access for all our learners.

Variability is contextual. That means a learner may need the design to be different depending on the topic, the environment, or the time or day of instruction.

Every learner brings their own background, strengths, needs, and interests. To meet each learner effectively, the needs of the learner should be addressed through choices and access to provide authentic learning experiences. Designing for individuals in the margins helps everyone by providing support and challenge for all!

Variability is the Norm 1

Research shows the ways people learn are as unique as their fingerprints. Variability in learning is the norm so curriculum needs to be designed from the start to meet the diverse needs of each learner. Some students may do better reading and working independently, while others excel after watching videos and working in groups. The goal is to understand our students' strengths and weaknesses, then use that when designing lessons so every student has an opportunity for success.

2 Embrace Digital Materials

With digital content, you can increase the font size, easily look up definitions, use text-to-speech to read text aloud, and link out to more detailed information on almost any topic imaginable. This is particularly useful for students needing dyslexia reading tools.

Share Content in a Variety of Ways 3

Offering multiple means of representation (UDL's first principle) helps to ensure that students who struggle in one area do not automatically fall behind their peers. UDL recognizes that if students can't access information, they can't learn it. So, in a UDL classroom, materials are accessible for all types of learners. Students have many options for reading, including print, digital, text-to-speech, and audiobooks. There are also options for text enlargement for digital text and choices for screen color and contrast. Videos have captions, and there are transcripts for audio.

4 Provide Assignment Options

Offer choices for how students demonstrate their knowledge – multiple means of expression. Give students options for sharing their knowledge. This could be a demonstration, slideshow, speech, or video. In a traditional classroom, there may be only one way for a student to complete an assignment. This might be an essay or a worksheet. With UDL, there are multiple options. For instance, students may be able to create a podcast or a video to show what they know. They may even be allowed to draw a comic strip. There are tons of possibilities for completing assignments, as long as students meet the lesson goals.

Take Advantage of Software Supports 5

Allowing students to take advantage of curriculum-supporting apps is critical. Not only does it give students the ability to succeed independently both inside and outside of the classroom, but it also frees up your valuable time to help even more students.

6 Technology is not Required to Implement UDL

It's important to know that technology is not required to implement UDL. It can help, but if you're in a classroom with little to no technology, that doesn't mean you can't implement UDL. UDL is all about removing barriers, providing a range of options when presenting content, asking students to demonstrate their knowledge. Instead of using technology, offer multiple means of representation with things like graphic organizers and handheld whiteboards that students can use as response cards. The goal is to make sure that all students have a way to participate and learn.

Post Lesson Goals 7

Having goals helps students know what they're working to achieve. That's why goals are always made apparent in a UDL classroom. Sharing your syllabus or goals and objectives for the class at the beginning of the semester is a great way to implement UDL.

8 Promote Flexible Workspaces

UDL promotes flexibility in the learning environment. That's why in a UDL classroom, there are flexible workspaces for students. This includes spaces for quiet individual work, small and large group work, and group instruction. If students need to tune out the noise, they can choose to wear earbuds or headphones during independent work.

Provide Regular Feedback 9

With UDL, students get feedback — often every day — on how they're doing. At the end of a lesson, teachers may talk with individual students about lesson goals. Students are encouraged to reflect on the choices they made in class and whether they met the goals. If they didn't meet the goals, they're encouraged to think about what might have helped them do so.