

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.

Q&A for Common Core Standards

Is UDL included in the common core?

UDL is included in the section of the Common Core Standards called “application to students with disabilities”. In this section the authors referred to the definition laid out in the Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008 (PL 110-135). The reference to UDL in this section may give the impression that UDL is just for students with disabilities. However, UDL not only applies to students with disabilities, it applies to all other learners as well. All students can benefit from the types of instruction used to reach learners “on the margins,” as the learning needs of all individuals vary a great deal. As such, UDL should be used within inclusive general education classrooms.

Although this is the only specific mention of UDL, there are many concepts embedded throughout the Common Core Standards that are aligned with the UDL framework.

What aligns with UDL?

There are many ways in which the Common Core Standards align to the UDL framework. Curricula (goals, methods, materials, and assessments) designed using UDL put an emphasis on creating effective, flexible goals, and the Common Core Standards provide an important framework for thinking about what goals will be most effective.

UDL emphasizes that an effective goal must be flexible enough to allow learners multiple ways to successfully meet it. To do this, the standard must not embed the means (the how) with the goal (the what). What do we mean by this? One good example is from the Mathematics standards: “apply and extend previous understandings of multiplication and division and of fractions to multiply and divide rational numbers.” (Common Core State Standards for Mathematics, Grade 7, The Number System, 7.NS, item 2, p.48) This standard is flexible enough that all learners can meet this goal because it does not specify how it must be done.

What might not align with UDL?

Unfortunately there are also areas of the Common Core Standards that do not align with UDL, or would not be very good goals for a UDL curriculum unless certain terms (e.g. writing, listening, speaking and explaining) are interpreted in their broadest sense to make the standards flexible enough to remove barriers for certain students. Previously we mentioned that the teachers should not confuse the means and the goals. There are certain standards that do just that.

For example: “Tell and write time in hours and half-hours using analog and digital clocks” (Common Core State Standards for Mathematics, Grade 1, Measurement and Data, 1.MD, item 3, p.16). The problem with this standard is that it requires students to write time. This presents some learners with a barrier because the act of writing is difficult for them. In this case, “express” would be more appropriate than “write”, as it allows flexibility and avoids confounding the expectation with tasks that are superfluous to the actual goal. Or, the standard would align with UDL if “write” were interpreted to permit other forms of expression.

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.