What Is Universal Design for Learning (UDL)?

The term Universal Design for Learning (UDL) means a scientifically valid framework for guiding educational practice that:

- provides flexibility in the ways: information is presented, students are engaged, and students respond or demonstrate knowledge and skills
- 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.

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UDL at a Glance

Overview

UDL is an educational framework based on research in the learning sciences that guides the development of flexible learning environments that can accommodate individual learning differences.

Recognizing that the way individuals learn can be unique, the UDL framework, first defined by the Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST) in the 1990s, calls for creating curriculum from the outset that provides:

- **Multiple means of representation** to give learners various ways of acquiring information and knowledge,
- **Multiple means of expression** to provide learners alternatives for demonstrating what they know, and
- **Multiple means of engagement** to tap into learners’ interests, challenge them appropriately, and motivate them to learn.

Curriculum, as defined in the UDL literature, has four parts: instructional goals, methods, materials, and assessments. UDL is intended to increase access to learning by reducing physical, cognitive, intellectual, and organizational barriers to learning, as well as other obstacles. UDL principles also lend themselves to implementing inclusionary practices in the classroom.

Origins

The concept and language of UDL was inspired by the universal design movement in architecture and product development, originally formulated by Ronald L. Mace at North Carolina State University. Universal design calls for "the design of products and environments to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design". UDL applies this general idea to learning: that curriculum should from the outset be designed to accommodate all kinds of learners.

However, recognizing that the UD principles created to guide the design of things (e.g., buildings, products) are not adequate for the design of social interactions (e.g., learning situations), researchers at CAST looked to the neurosciences and theories of progressive education in developing the UDL principles. In particular, the work of Lev Vygotsky and, less directly, Benjamin Bloom informed the three-part UDL framework.


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