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UDL: what it is and how to use it for inclusive education

How do we use Universal Design for Learning to create courses that provide all students with an equal opportunity for success?

Creating a course that is effective and engaging for all students is anything but simple. With this in mind, adopting the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) offers many benefits for both faculty and students.

In this article, we'll take a look at what UDL is, what principles it's based on, and how to leverage it to create training courses that suit every type of student.

What is Universal Design for Learning (UDL)?

Universal Design for Learning - UDL (or PUA, Universal Design for Learning) is an approach to teaching aimed at providing equal opportunity for success for all students.

The fundamental principle of UDL is that there is no such thing as an "average" student and that, indeed, **each individual learns differently** based on multiple factors: physical, emotional, behavioral, neurological, and cultural. The purpose of Universal Design for Learning is therefore to improve the educational experience of all students by introducing more flexible methods of teaching and assessment and by creating truly inclusive lessons that accommodate all types of students.

In other words, UDL promotes the use of a variety of teaching methods in order to remove any **barriers to learning** and have students learn in ways they are most comfortable with.

Rather than a one-size-fits-all solution, courses designed with UDL therefore offer broad flexibility. This is important because the learning process occurs extremely differently from one person to another. Indeed, each learner has specific **modes of engagement**, specific **methods of acquiring information**, and different **means of expression** with which to demonstrate what they have learned.

While some enjoy reading a text, others learn by doing; while some prefer to complete tasks manually, others prefer to use digital learning materials; etc.

Benefits of UDL

Designing a course according to the principles of Universal Design for Learning - UDL allows you to:

- rely on a structure designed to reduce **barriers to learning**;
- ensure that students have everything they need to achieve their **learning objectives**;
- **present information in ways that suit the student**, rather than asking the student to adapt to the content provided;
- increase **engagement** of all students;
- make students more knowledgeable and **confident**.

The basic principles of UDL

Universal Design for Learning - UDL is based on 3 basic principles:

1. Provide multiple means of engagement

Several studies confirm the close connection between cognitive processes and **motivational systems**. A motivated learner understands why they should learn what they are learning and recognizes its relevance.

However, one means of engagement is not appropriate for all students in every context. Here, then, are some ideas for providing more options for their engagement:

- Give the student the opportunity to **make choices**. For example, choices about how the learning objective will be achieved or the tools and supports to be used;
- **highlight the usefulness and relevance** of the topic to the student;
- minimize potential **threats and distractions** in the learning environment;
- create a **climate of acceptance and support**;
- foster **collaboration**;
- provide activities that allow for active student **participation** and experimentation;
- emphasize the **role of effort and practice** rather than intelligence or ability as factors in success;
- provide **ongoing feedback** that encourages perseverance rather than competition;
- appropriately manage students' **frustration or sense of inadequacy** (e.g., when they experience learning difficulties or suffer from comparison with other students).

2. Provide multiple means of representation

Providing students with multiple ways to assimilate content (textbooks, videos, audio files, etc.) allows them to choose the materials that best suit their needs, promoting their educational success.

This is useful not only for students with disabilities, but also for all students, as everyone differs in how they perceive, retain, and process information. For more on this topic, read also **Learning Styles: how do your students learn?**

To that end, we recommend that you:

- offer ways to **personalize the enjoyment of the materials** (e.g., by giving the option to change the size of text, images, and graphics; adjust the contrast and colors used; adjust the volume or speed of speech; etc.);
- offer **alternatives to audio materials** (e.g., by providing written transcripts, subtitles, visual analogues; etc.);
- offer **alternatives to visual materials** (e.g., by providing textual or spoken descriptions, physical objects and models, auditory cues, etc.);
- provide **glossaries, vocabularies, and tools** to help students understand archaic expressions, slang, complex symbols;
- highlight or emphasize **key elements** of the materials provided;
- highlight **previously learned skills** that may be useful in understanding new topics covered;
- **break down information** into smaller elements;
- provide supports for **memorization** and transfer of learned content.

3. Provide multiple means of expression

Once students have acquired the information, it is time for them to express and show what they have learned. How?

- Provide **multiple forms of verification** so that students can express what they have learned in ways that are most appropriate to them (e.g., they might choose to take a written test or give an oral presentation or do group work);
- offers students a choice of **assessment methods**;
- incorporate technologies that facilitate **communication** and participation;
- Provide alternatives for **interaction with learning materials**;
- optimize access to **assistive tools** and technologies (e.g., provide alternative keyboard commands for mouse action).

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