



Lesson Planning with UNIVERSAL DESIGN for Learning

Intentionally using UDL principles upfront means making fewer adaptations later—and reaching more students.

Lee Ann Jung

Ms. Talbert felt great about the lessons she had planned for her high school seniors using Universal Design for Learning, a framework for differentiating learning experiences. Her learning intentions were for students to evaluate sources of evidence and use evidence they gathered to support claims. The lessons built from activities like combing through social media and news sources to find claims that weren't adequately supported to making their own claims supported by evidence. Ms. Talbert included issues and topics that were on students' minds. She clarified



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vocabulary and used multimedia, print, and audio as ways to access the content.

Later in the year, her students explored and analyzed the effects of baseless claims made online through fast-spreading social media. Finally, the class moved into discussions and debates. The class discussion became close to tense at times when students had conflicting opinions, all supported by evidence they deemed credible. But with Ms. Talbert's feedback and guidance, the groups used the class norms of collaboration to work through the dialogue in a productive manner. She beamed with pride as she watched the groups navigate difficult topics, strong opinions, and conflicting evidence.

Not everyone spoke in class or led discussions—but Ms. Talbert knew some students showed their best work by writing, others by speaking, and others through producing a creative product. She provided all these options for students to show their learning over time and was open to students' additional ideas of how that learning could be shown.

Why We Need Universal Design for Learning

Like Ms. Talbert's, every classroom is filled with individuals who vary wildly—and interestingly—in who they are as people. Their many experiences and genetics make them who they are—each one unique and wonderful. Some are strong with math, others are talented artists; some light up when it's time for science, and others love nothing more than getting lost in a fictional work. Some students speak multiple languages, but struggle in the language of instruction that is new to them.

For every student who loves a particular subject, there is another who is afraid of it, and another who finds it uninteresting.

Students not only vary in their skill level and preferences for academic content, but also in their social-emotional skills, development, and learning. This diversity in our classroom can pose instructional challenges, but it's also an asset! It presents the opportunity for students to learn from and with one another, gain an understanding of the interdependence within society, and

celebrate one another's unique qualities. Diversity is in no way a limitation as long as we keep it top of mind when designing instruction and assessment.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL), originally designed by the organization CAST, is a framework that guides proactive design of classroom instruction and learning opportunities to make them effective for a broad range of learners.¹ UDL offers guidelines on how we can make our

Providing students with options for how to express their learning gives each student the chance to show their best work.

instruction and classroom environments welcoming, responsive, supportive, and flexible, so that the fewest students possible require additional support or adaptations.

The developers of the framework organized UDL strategies into three categories: (1) multiple means of engagement—how we engage and sustain students' interest and persistence; (2) multiple means of representation—how we ensure our instruction is accessible and improves students' understanding; and (3) multiple means of action and expression—how we support students to show their learning in multiple ways. Such strategies, individually, are neither new nor revolutionary. But UDL, informed by these three principles and connected to neurological and educational research, offers an actionable framework that educators can use to increase the accessibility and power of every lesson we design.

Planning for Multiple Means of Engagement

Every teacher can relate to occasional difficulty in gaining students' interest. What if, when a student is having trouble engaging



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in the classroom, instead of attributing the problem to the student, we reframed it as *our* problem with engagement, asking ourselves what the students' behavior might say about our teaching?

If we presume variability in students' interest and plan our engagement strategies with the *least* engaged student in mind, we'll probably engage all the students in the class. Figure 1 shows some smart strategies for universal engagement.

Planning for Multiple Means of Representation

Fifteen years ago, you may have had a phone, a camera, a calendar, a video recorder, a device for listening to music, and a computer for accessing the Internet. For traveling, you may

have used a GPS or map and books for translating languages. Now, all these needs are met with one device. Because we have a customizable device with many options and functions, fewer people need specialized equipment. And while some still may prefer a physical calendar, say, we'd be hard pressed to find many people who own and use all those items.

Think of multiple means of representation—how we make our instruction accessible to all students—as a smartphone with many features and apps. Without a base of multiple means of representation planned into each lesson, teachers become exhausted trying to continually figure out how to differentiate content and deliver support to meet individual needs and maximize

strengths. By investing effort in multiple means of representation during lesson *planning*, we minimize special adaptations, because we've designed up front for many types of variability. Figure 2 shows some strategies for doing so.

Giving options for multiple ways you present information to students is not the same as segmenting students using the long-debunked notion of different learning styles. It simply means that, in instruction, you always present content in various ways that resonate with students' different strengths and preferences for processing information—based on what you know of each learner and what you've seen in their learning experiences.

FIGURE 1. Strategies for Engagement

1. Start by connecting with students using positive interaction.

- Use warm facial expressions and eye contact.
- Individually greet and acknowledge students with warmth.
- Show students empathy and support.

2. Demonstrate clarity of intentions and criteria for success.

- Describe purpose for upcoming learning, in writing and orally.
- Clarify vocabulary by highlighting words and lead groups to discuss these words' meaning.
- List, describe, and provide examples of success criteria for the learning.

3. Connect the purpose of the lesson to something of current relevance and value to students.

- Tell a story your students can relate to.
- Relate the lesson to a current event or pop culture for students' age group.
- Dialogue about the purpose of the lesson (beyond posting or reading the purpose).

4. Provide students choices—from simple to significant—for their learning.

Have students

- choose roles within small groups.
- choose learning activities or assignments from a menu.
- select the topic for their reading, research, or writing.
- codesign a lesson.

5. Make the learning space safe for taking risks and making mistakes.

- Let students choose where they sit and whether to work in a group or alone.
- Avoid public displays that compare performance or behaviors.
- Use small groups, where taking risks may feel safer.
- Ensure "participation" includes options other than speaking in a large group.

6. Use novelty to gain students' interest.

- Use humor.
- Start with a thought provoking or controversial statement and dialogue.
- Use a short video that captures interest.

7. Design activities that involve active exploration.

- Include opportunities to investigate, reflect, make, create, or dialogue.
- Have students move about the room during learning.

8. Design for small group instruction.

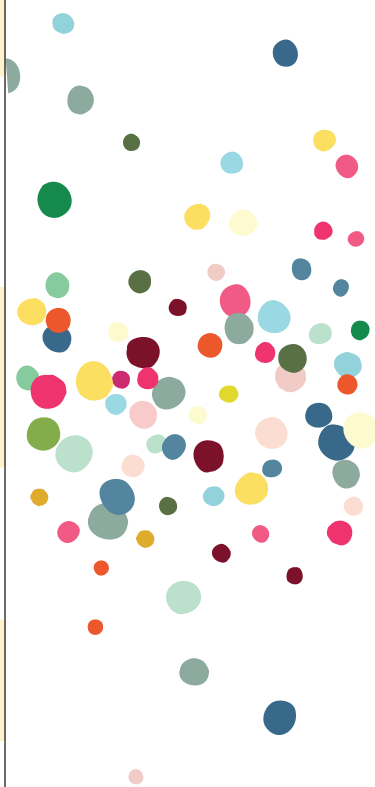
- Use short, whole-group instruction followed by stations.
- Let small groups determine their own norms of collaboration and goals for learning.
- Have flexible groups so students work with a variety of learners, with choice in group membership.

9. Use strategies to balance participation.

- Use "no hands up" think time before inviting contributions from the whole group.
- Use a talking stick.
- Rotate assigned roles of "talker" and "questioners."

10. Offer strategies for students to cope with frustration, anxiety, and low confidence.

- Offer mindfulness exercises (or apps) to help students cope with difficult learning.
- Help students break learning into smaller chunks.
- Have students reflect on a time when the learning was difficult, listing strategies they used then and applying them to current learning.



Planning for Multiple Means of Action and Expression

There are many ways to measure a student's learning of any given skill or understanding. But too often, we use a single, teacher-designed assessment for all students. The premise is that a standardized assessment makes for a fairer assessment. In fact, giving a single option for showing learning advantages those students with strengths in that option. Some of our students are talented presenters but lack confidence as "test takers." Some find tests easy but are afraid of speaking in front of the class. Some have strengths in writing or graphic design. For many, the idea of something being timed produces a great deal of stress and interferes with showing their learning.

This variability in performance under different conditions affects educators' ability to see what students understand and can do if they only use a single type of assessment. For example, if the only option we give is a timed test, then students who have test anxiety or need more time for processing can't show what they know. The validity of the test is compromised *because* we didn't offer another option. The assessment is less fair *because* it's standardized.

This isn't to suggest that we give students options for the *level* of proficiency they show, only for the *way* they show it. We can have the same expectations for skills and understanding shown through a class presentation, say, as through a paper, test, or other measure. (Note that even when we use

FIGURE 2. Strategies for Multiple Means of Representation

1. Teach metacognitive strategies for learning within context of this concept or skill.

- Use analogies and metaphors.
- Teach notetaking and study strategies.
- Present a mnemonic orally and visually to help students remember new information—or help students create a mnemonic, such as a song.
- Connect the concept to something students already know, using several modalities.
- Chunk material into smaller pieces.
- Create study guides with strategies for learning embedded.

2. Use multiple means to represent content, concepts, and skills.

- Use slides with photographs and text, or a video, to enhance a mini-lecture.
- Give students the option to listen to text, read it, or both.
- Present content through a graphic organizer.
- Use illustrations to support comprehension.

3. Provide help with vocabulary, syntax, notations, and symbols.

- Use translations for English learners.
- Provide support for decoding text.
- Clarify the meanings of symbols and notations.
- Use scaffolds to support syntax and sentence structure.

4. Gradually release support to promote independence.

- Model and use examples and non-examples.
- Use guided practice and collaborative learning experiences.
- As assessments show students gaining capability with a skill, move to independent practice.

5. Create experiences for deliberate practice, spaced over time.

- Help students select the level of difficulty that's just beyond what they're confident they know/can do, but that can be achieved with practice and concentration.
- Provide learning experiences that allow and require students to persist with concentration across many days, with time between each experience—such as problems that include provocative questions, conflict, and contradictions.
- Let students identify and select conditions under which they concentrate and persist best.
- Minimize distractions during times of deliberate practice and concentration.

6. Give formative feedback.

- Provide clear, ungraded feedback on products of learning and the process of learning.
- Guide students to evaluate their own learning.
- Conference with individual students about a product or process; help them generate a plan for what to do next.
- Share feedback in ways that show confidence in the student's ability to learn.
- Connect feedback to specific learning goals.

7. Use formative assessment to change instruction.

Use formative assessment of students' work and learning to:

- inform the strategies you use in the remainder of the unit.
- determine whether students are ready for more independent practice and learning.
- make decisions about flexible grouping.
- make decisions about supplemental instruction for small groups.

What if, when a student is having trouble engaging in the classroom, instead of attributing the problem to the student, we reframed it as our problem?

alternative measures, it's still important to document the need for extended time for students with disabilities, who will need this accommodation for state or national testing.)

Figure 3 shows many of the nearly countless ways we can have students demonstrate their understanding and skills. If the idea of giving students many different options for showing their learning feels overwhelming, teachers can start by identifying the typical assessment for an upcoming unit and selecting one alternative. Regardless of whether educators take this on full force or start small, the need for this practice is pressing.

Realizing Their Brilliance

Many teachers recognize that each of their students is (wondrously) different, in how they take in information, how they practice and engage with content to learn it, and in how they show their learning. UDL gives teachers a way to present information in many formats, as Ms. Talbert did in her unit, so instruction can hit as many students' preferred ways of learning as possible. And UDL strategies make the most of assessment, since the purpose of our day-to-day classroom assessment is to inform teaching and learning. Providing students with options for how to express their learning gives each student the chance to show their best work. The resulting assessment types lend much more valid information and give teachers more precise direction on how to maximize learning for each child.

Without providing multiple means of presenting concepts and information, we won't reach all students. And without providing

FIGURE 3. Strategies for Multiple Means of Action and Expression

Ways Students Can Demonstrate Their Learning

- Videorecorded presentation
- Live presentation to the class—or to a teacher or external audience
- Infographic
- Multimedia presentation
- Individual conference with a teacher
- Written answers to given questions
- Lesson taught live to another person
- Physical model student constructs
- Illustration or other visual art product
- Diagram or graph
- Essay, story, or other written product
- Skit or play
- Revision or improvement of an existing product
- Solutions to given problems
- Newly created problems
- Service activity related to the content/skill
- Being interviewed on the content
- Verbal response to given questions, or responding with a gesture or image
- Musical performance

options for expression, we may never fully realize the brilliance many of our students have—brilliance often disguised by a counterfeit definition of how success in school must look. **EL**

¹CAST. (n.d.). [About CAST](#).

Author's note: “Ms. Talbert” is a hypothetical teacher and situation. The strategies outlined here for engagement, representation, and expression are drawn from UDL resources, the professional research literature, strategies I've used, and my observations within classrooms. For additional strategies for applying UDL in lesson planning, visit <http://udlguidelines.cast.org/>.

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