



NOVAK EDUCATION

TEACHER'S GUIDE TO UDL



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WHAT IS UDL?

If you are new to the term "Universal Design for Learning," more commonly referred to as UDL, you may be wondering what it is. UDL is an educational framework developed by CAST, Inc based on decades of neuroscience research and is endorsed by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). This framework is being adopted by teachers, schools, and districts around the globe and is considered best practice for teaching ALL students in an inclusive learning environment. UDL empowers students by putting students in charge of their own learning.

Why is it best practice?

UDL helps teachers provide flexible pathways for students to reach firm, grade-level, rigorous goals. It allows students to personalize their learning experience and take ownership of their learning as they work toward those goals. By using the UDL principles to design and deliver instruction, teachers provide students with the opportunity to build learner agency. We achieve this by designing for:



MULTIPLE MEANS OF ENGAGEMENT

Engagement is more than attention. To be truly engaged, students must feel safe and respected for who they are by their teachers and peers, and must have the tools and beliefs necessary to stay motivated even when things get difficult. To build engagement, teachers must make lessons relevant to students' lives, create conditions where students feel a sense of belonging and purpose, provide them with strategies for working together with their peers, and offer methods for persisting when they are challenged.



MULTIPLE MEANS OF REPRESENTATION

Students have different strengths and areas for growth. To truly build knowledge and comprehension, teachers must offer multiple ways for learners to perceive information, interpret language and symbols and relate new knowledge and skills to existing knowledge and skills.



MULTIPLE MEANS OF ACTION & EXPRESSION

To boost critical thinking, problem solving, and creativity, we must offer students flexibility with how they express themselves and perform tasks as they demonstrate their knowledge and skills. We can also help them boost their productivity and time management by offering options to help support their strategy development.





GETTING STARTED



If you feel like you aren't able to meet the beautifully diverse needs of the learners in your classroom, UDL is for you. But you may be overwhelmed when looking at the [Guidelines](#) and wonder where in the world you are supposed to get started.

It's important to remember that UDL is an expansive framework that can't be learned in a day. Think of it more like the skill of learning to speak a new language. It takes time, will come more naturally to some than others, and is learned little by little. Taking small steps can help you move forward, whereas trying to do it all at once may feel impossible.

This Teacher's Guide includes resources, planning tools, and inspiration for lesson design, pacing, and assessment to help you get started with your UDL journey or to move your UDL practice to the next level.

The core components of a UDL curriculum include goals, methods, materials, and assessments. Each section of this guide provides concrete tips for planning considerations for each component.





GUIDANCE FOR DESIGNING A UDL LESSON

Setting the Stage

Before you design your lesson, consider barriers that may be present in the learning environment. For example, if UDL is to be effective, students will have to understand how to manage their emotions, collaborate effectively, and use scaffolds available to them. You may need to design lessons so students understand how to collaborate, for example, before you can offer options for collaboration. The below considerations may help to identify common barriers you may want to proactively address when examining your learning environment.

ADVANCED CONSIDERATIONS



Do you consistently offer reminders, models, and scaffolds, to assist learners in managing and directing their emotional responses? For example, do you offer options for stress release such as fidget tools, mindfulness breaks, allowing students to listen to music, chew gum, etc.?



Does your classroom offer flexible spaces for students to work (i.e. standing desks, clusters to collaborate, or spaces for students to access resources if they need them?)



If you expect student collaboration, do you provide roles, use protocols, or design specific lessons about collaboration before providing students with the choice to work with partners?



Goal Setting Warm-up

At the beginning of every lesson, share the goal or standard with the students. Make it crystal clear. “When this lesson or unit is over, you will all know, or be able to do [insert goal].” If you have essential questions, it is important to share them as well.

In order to foster self-assessment and reflection, it is important to provide time for students to consider what they already know about the goal or essential question. The below tips include some warm-up ideas to activate student background knowledge.



ACTIVATE PRIOR KNOWLEDGE TO SUPPORT GOAL SETTING

If you have an adopted curriculum program, there are likely warm-up activities already. Consider if they create barriers for students. If they do, design some of the options from the below list before the warm-up so more students can participate.

- Do you hate writing your standards on the board every day? Assign a standard to each student - for homework or classwork, have them work with peers, families, etc. to research why the skill/content is important and have them write an opinion/argument piece about it to share with the class when standard comes up - encourage creativity, voice, and satire in higher grades.
- Consider giving a diagnostic assessment before you teach the lesson. This will allow you to see how much students already know. This can be done quickly using Google Forms if you have technology available or you can provide more time for students to grapple with the contents under study so you have a better idea of the variability in the class.
- Google or Doodle: Provide 5 minutes for students to work alone or with partners to list everything they already know about the topic under study. If they don't know anything, provide them with a resource (i.e. a Chromebook with Google), images, or text to at least give them some background or encourage them to use AI to build background knowledge.
- Use a KWL chart that students use to reflect on an upcoming lesson. They can work alone or with partners or create a class brainstorm.
- Image brainstorm. Project an image that relates to the content under study and ask students to tell you everything they can about the visual. They can discuss or respond with words or pictures.



Be sure to share the goal in multiple ways. Say it orally, write it on the board, or include it on handouts, assessments, etc... If anyone walks into the room, every student should be able to answer the question, “What are you doing today and why?”



METHODS & MATERIALS

Mini-Lesson (~10-15 minutes)

A mini-lesson is a period of direct, explicit instruction. Although the specifics of a mini lesson vary, many education experts agree that a mini lesson should last no more than 10-15 minutes, and should contain four basic components: connection, teaching, active engagement, and link.



CONNECTION

It is important to share from the beginning how the goal is relevant, authentic, and meaningful to students. Explain why the lesson will be important. If you incorporated a warm-up activity, you've already got this covered!



TEACHING

Teacher-directed instruction, or at least framing of the options or structure of the lesson that will follow, is critical in a universally designed lesson. Use it as a foundation before encouraging students to personalize the next steps to challenge and support themselves. Try not to rely on a single representation. For example, if you lecture, use visuals or a multimedia presentation to support.



ACTIVE ENGAGEMENT

Provide a short period of time for students to do something, as a form of informal, formative assessment. For example, if you modeled two math problems, ask them to complete their own. Other short and sweet ideas for active engagement are below.

Short and sweet options for active engagement

- Turn and talk, “think, pair, share,” or numbered heads together
- Mini-white boards
- Hand signals like “Fist to five” or “thumbs up, thumbs down.”
- Quick writes or completing short formative assessment
- Concept mapping
- Previewing a chapter or selection
- Note-taking
- Completing outline/graphic organizer

Note that not all students have to actively engage in the same way. You could project a 2-minute timer and prompt students, “Would you rather turn and talk or write the answer?” For more Would You Rather ideas, check out [this resource](#).



LINK

Be clear about linking back to the goal and then directing students to applied practice or more independent work. For example, you may say, “Now that you understand the goal of the lesson today, you will have an opportunity to make a choice about how to better understand the topic...” Consider taking time for them to create a goal of what they still need to learn or work on.



After the mini-lesson, have students create personal goals for how they will learn the content, express their learning, and challenge themselves throughout the process.

Self-Differentiated Learning (~20+ minutes)

This is the magic of UDL, where you have to consider how to create a “buffet” of methods and materials so students can choose the strategies or materials they need to learn. This is challenging as you have to ensure that each student is challenged and supported. You may set this up as stations, a choice board, in a hyperlink document, or by simply sharing with the students what options they have. The key here is to focus on the goals. It is also important to remember that too much choice can actually create barriers, so when providing options and choices, 2-4 is the sweet spot (Patall, Cooper, & Robinson, 2008).

If all students need to learn content (i.e. animal adaptation, photosynthesis, characterization, proper stretching, etc.) consider the possible representations that would allow them to build that knowledge. Below are some possible options and choices to provide to students so they can share what they have learned. If every student has to “do” something (i.e. write an argument or solve an equation), you will provide different options and tools.

ACCESS A TEXT

(textbook, primary source document, article, audiobook, etc.)

- Can you provide the text or allow students to choose their own text from a classroom library, or an online site like Newsela, or can they find their own resources online to build knowledge?
- If they choose the same text, can you provide options to read to self or to read to a partner or can you encourage the use of speech-to-text or record your voice to provide an option to listen to audio?
- With English learners, can you provide them with options to translate the text?

WATCH A VIDEO

- If students have devices, they can watch videos with headphones, allowing them to customize their viewing experience. If not all students have devices, you can set up a station with one device and a video.

TEACHER DIRECT INSTRUCTION

- Consider hosting a small group. Note: Sometimes, when given the option, a large number of students choose direct instruction. If that is the case, the small group may be students working independently while you continue to work with the majority of the class. Alternatively, if students need additional practice or remediation, you may pull a small group of students for intervention during this self-differentiated learning section or use a blended learning model so all students access teacher instruction in a station rotation. To learn more about how UDL and blended learning intersect, you check out [UDL and Blended Learning](#) or [The Shift to Student-Led](#), co-written with Catlin Tucker.



Tip: When you first begin to implement UDL, you don't have to provide options in every component of your lesson all at once. Start with incorporating flexibility in one component, for example, using active engagement strategies, and as students become better at making choices, you can add more like extending flexibility to self-differentiated learning.



ASSESSMENT

Self-Differentiated Assessment (~20+ minutes)

Assessments are an expression of student learning. When designing assessments, it's critical to consider exactly what students need to know and do and then strip away any specific methods that have been tied to the goal. Essentially, when reviewing your standards, you will ask yourself, "How will students provide evidence that they met the goal? Can they have choices?"

Try to move away from requiring all students to use the same materials to learn and express what they know. Because of variability, they will not all need the same supports and they should be empowered to know themselves as learners and choose what they need. It is still possible to do this with adopted curriculum by using the considerations in the below tips and asking yourself the following questions:

- Is it possible to include choice in how my assessment is represented, how my learners can show what they know, or how my learners engage in the assessment process?
- How do the flexible options still support the intended learning objectives that need to be measured?



TIPS & TRICKS

ASSESSMENT TIPS FOR UDL

- Start with just your traditional assessment, and ask students to propose other ways of showing that they met the standard or additional resources they need to complete it. Be sure that all options are assessed using the same success criteria and rubrics.
- For content standards, consider what opportunities would work for all content standards and just make a single handout that you can use throughout the year (explain in writing, in video, in a podcast, in an artistic or multimedia expression, etc.) To bring your choice boards to the next level, [check out this resource](#).
- Even if every student receives the same assessment, provide options and choices for the scaffolds they use. Consider providing access to graphic organizers, exemplars, accessibility devices (Google Read and Write), math reference sheets, their notes, etc. Ask students to review the scaffolds available and note which would be beneficial to help them work toward assignment goals.
- Encourage revisions and retakes after students reflect and explore additional resources to encourage perseverance.



Before providing options and choices for assessments, take the time to identify mastery or success criteria. This will help you and your students to determine if additional pathways are construct-relevant.

TIME SAVING TIPS

- **DON'T GRADE EVERYTHING.** If assessments are done well, they will show mastery of standards. If you must grade, encourage peer review (once a student has mastered a concept, they become a feedback master!) or self-assessment.
- Most importantly, always use the same rubric that aligns with the standards if students are working on multiple assessments. Remember you are measuring mastery of the standards - not the product!



CONCLUSION



In conclusion, designing a UDL lesson involves proactive consideration of barriers, setting clear goals, and providing a variety of options for student engagement and learning. By using the advance considerations on page 4, activating prior knowledge through warm-up activities on page 5, and structuring a mini-lesson with connection, teaching, active engagement, and link components, teachers can create a foundation that supports students in making responsible decisions as they learn and share their learning. Ultimately, UDL lessons can help ensure that all students have access to and can engage in learning in a way that works best for them.

REFERENCES

Patall, E., Cooper, H. & Robinson, J. (2008). The Effects of Choice on Intrinsic Motivation and Related Outcomes: A Meta-Analysis of Research Findings. *Psychological bulletin*. 134. 270-300.



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