UNIVERSAL DESIGN FOR LEARNING:
WHY IT'S WORTH ANOTHER LOOK

As an instructor, you have likely heard of Universal Design for Learning (UDL). Perhaps you consigned it to the Land of Idealistic Pedagogies, or filed it perpetually in your Cabinet of Strategies to Try—Someday. These are common (and fair) reactions. UDL can sound intimidating. After all, it does claim to be universal. But in reality, your instructor toolbox probably already includes more UDL strategies than you may realize. Let's look at what UDL is designed to do, its benefits for you, and how to get started.

A common misconception about UDL is that it is just about accessibility: ensuring that content can be accessed by individuals with disabilities or language barriers. UDL is actually an ingenious approach for using strategic steps to create expert learners (see figure 1). A frequent complaint from educators across the board is that students lack ownership of their learning. Expert learners are self-motivated, resourceful, autonomous learners who apply metacognition in their own learning and their personal abilities and limitations. The journey to becoming an expert learner is facilitated by UDL strategies incorporated into a learning environment.

EXPERT LEARNER DEFINITIONS

Strategic, Goal-Oriented Learners: They formulate plans for learning, devise effective strategies and tactics to optimize learning; they organize resources and tools to facilitate learning; they monitor their progress toward mastery; they recognize their own strengths and weaknesses as learners; and they abandon plans and strategies that are ineffective.

Resourceful, Knowledgeable Learners: They bring considerable prior knowledge to new learning; they activate that prior knowledge to identify, organize, prioritize, and assimilate new information. They recognize the tools and resources that would help them find, structure, and remember new information; and they know how to transform new information into meaningful and useful knowledge.

Purposeful, Motivated Learners: Their goals are focused on mastery rather than performance; they know how to set challenging learning goals for themselves and how to sustain the effort and resilience that reaching those goals will require; they can monitor and regulate emotional reactions that would impede or distract from their successful learning.

Figure 1.

Let's review some UDL fundamentals. UDL is learner-centered with components of accessibility, collaboration, and community and incorporates strategies to level the playing field for all learners. Students face different barriers in the acquisition of knowledge, in generating knowledge, and in applying knowledge. Rogers-Shaw, Carr-Chellman, and Choi explain the strategies involved with UDL, the first being to provide multiple means of representation of content, giving learners a variety of ways to acquire information and knowledge (2018). The second strategy is to provide learners multiple means of engagement to challenge and motivate them (student engagement strategies). The third strategy is to provide learners with various alternatives for demonstrating what they have learned or what they know.

UDL focuses on the *why* of learning, the *what* of learning, and the *how* of learning.

- **REPRESENTATION (THE WHAT):** To facilitate the growth of resourceful, knowledgeable learners, present information and content in a variety of ways; offer content in a variety of formats.

- **ENGAGEMENT (THE WHY):** To facilitate the growth of purposeful, motivated learners, stimulate interest and purpose for learning; offer voice and choice for learners.

- **ACTION & EXPRESSION (DEMONSTRATION OR THE HOW):** To facilitate the growth of strategic, goal-directed learners, differentiate the ways that students can express what they know; offer options for deliverables like reports and projects.

When you incorporate ways to eliminate barriers to content, engagement, and expression, you empower your students for success in your courses. By implementing strategic changes in the learning environment, you can effectively instruct a diverse group of learners. This is especially important in online courses, where the lack of face-to-face interaction makes individual student struggles harder to spot and resolve.

"EDUCATION IS THE KEY TO UNLOCK THE GOLDEN DOOR OF FREEDOM."

- George Washington Carver

UDL benefits you as an instructor, too. Ultimately, UDL can reduce the time you spend answering student questions. Applying UDL principles can help minimize frustration for both you and your students. It can have a positive impact on personal and program reviews. Although UDL requires an investment of time and effort up front when designing your course, it can make online course delivery much less stressful,more rewarding, and even more fun. The best part of all is seeing your gradebook reflect your students' mastery of your course content.

ULTIMATELY, UDL CAN REDUCE THE TIME YOU SPEND ANSWERING STUDENT QUESTIONS DUE TO CONFUSION.

You are an expert learner: you wouldn't have made it this far in your career, or even chosen this career at all, if you weren't! Cultivating expert learners among our students makes Miami and your program shine and helps students stand out in the workplace and in their communities. Most importantly, UDL repays the time you invest in it by making you shine as an instructor.

How do you get started? No course needs to go from zero to universal overnight; it's best to take a small steps approach. Try implementing a few strategies at a time, then using your notes, student evaluations, and other feedback to decide what worked and what strategies to add next time. Here is a list of introductory ideas and links to resources that will aid your journey of continuous improvement.

GET STARTED STRATEGIES:

- Develop well-aligned Course and Unit/Module Outcomes, refer to our learning library article: Learning Outcomes and Course Mapping: How To Avoid Detours and Slow-Downs.

- Provide multiple ways for students to access content. Incorporate tutorials, reinforcement videos, reinforcement infographics, podcasts, audio clips, and other resources. Listen to this podcast from Teaching in Higher Ed. for more inspiration. View this short video to explore how technology can enrich the learning environment, and learn what to consider when selecting materials and designing assessments.

- Allow students more choice in their learning environment and deliverables, encourage individual goal-setting, and reevaluate how you provide feedback and grades.

RESOURCES FOR A DEEPER DIVE:

- CAST-The UDL Guidelines
- Universal Design in Higher Education-Promising Practices
- Universal Design for Learning - video

BEST PRACTICES:

- Inclusive Instructional Design: Applying UDL to Online Learning
- Using LMS Data to Inform Course Design
- Universal Design for Learning: Strategies for Blended and Online Learning

REFERENCES

Rogers-Shaw, C., Carr-Chellman, D. J., & Choi, J. (2018). Universal Design for Learning: Guidelines for Accessible Online Instruction. Adult Learning, 29(1), 20–31. https://doi.org/10.1177/1045159517735530