

Best Practices with UDL



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Joshua Gaul Welcome to EdgeCast. I'm Josh.

Dr. Laura Romeo And I'm Laura.

Joshua Gaul Today we're going to talk about accessibility some more. But today we're going to talk about best practices, specifically the Universal Design for Learning framework, and why that's important.

Dr. Laura Romeo Okay, so when we dive into this whole idea of Universal Design for Learning, or UDL for short, picture it like this big umbrella covering a bunch of things underneath. As designers and instructors, this framework is our go to support system for learners. In my experience, every classroom has its own mix of learners, each with their own unique needs, and UDL is just a way that strategically builds out support for success.

Breaking it down just a little bit further. UDL is basically a set of guidelines that helps us shape how we create and deliver lessons. The goal should be to make sure we're meeting the needs of every type of learner participating in our classroom. Think about UDL as the key to flexibility. It should offer students a range of choices and clear away any obstacles in their path for learning.

It's all about setting up the right support so that everyone can succeed. And plus, from the teacher side, UDL keeps the bar really high for achievement standards.

Joshua Gaul Now, certain rubrics that instructional designers follow, like Quality Matters or OSCQR or some self made rubrics of different schools, have a lot of these concepts built into them already, but there's a lot more to UDL than just putting in alt tags on images or making sure videos have captions.

Dr. Laura Romeo Right, so certainly more principles and components to UDL than just those accessibility elements that you mentioned. Learning about, understanding, and correctly using the UDL framework is not really a skill that's innate to educators. It's something that has to be practiced and fully embraced for successful implementation.

In my years of research, I found that mastering UDL is a gradual process that requires breaking it down into manageable chunks to achieve a level of proficiency or mastery typically comes with experience and the commitment to incorporating UDL principles into teaching practices. I feel like a good starting point would be for us to understand the different parts of UDL framework, beginning with the three universal design for learning guidelines.

Joshua Gaul So as you mentioned, Laura, UDL is divided into the three major categories. The first of which we're going to talk about is providing multiple means of engagement. You know, learners have different approaches in how they like to be engaged or motivated to learn. There's a variation in neurology, culture, personal nature, and nurture, and all that.

There's not one means of engagement that's optimal for all learners. It's not a one size fits all thing. So UDL tries to break that down with a number of different strategies within this overarching umbrella, as you said.

Dr. Laura Romeo Yeah, so engagement is going to go beyond just keeping students interested. It's going to create and foster genuine motivation for a student to learn and really build in those aha moments that you'll see in the classroom.

UDL recognizes the limitations of a one size fits all approach. It's going to help us as we start to think about and shift our teaching methods to better support the diverse ways that students engage with content. So whether it's through interactive activities or real world applications or multimedia, ultimately the goal is to create an inclusive and motivating learning environment where students really fully engage themselves in the content.

Joshua Gaul You find an avenue to help students relate to the material that you find a way for them to find their own avenues. You know, I love when students are already negative and don't want to know the topic, you know, I'm not interested in this topic. But then you can find ways to engage them through designing their activities differently, or offering them variation on how they can engage with it.

They can take ownership of their own learning, like an autonomous approach.

Dr. Laura Romeo Yes, you reminded me of a personal experience that I had whenever you were talking about how students come into content negatively. I was teaching an undergraduate science methods course and on the very first day of class, there were multiple students that walked in and made it very clear that they did not like the subject of science and they had a really hard time relating to that content in their past experience.

So as an instructor I was sitting back and thinking to myself, okay, I have all of these preconceived notions that are ultimately, like, truly acting as roadblocks to my students' engagement and what I need to teach them. I realized that the traditional approach of lectures and labs that had been designed in the past for this content is not going to be the best way to offer instruction, so I had to find a way to make my students relate to the material. So we turned to TikTok. All of them are really familiar with this platform and I felt like giving them the familiarity and comfort that they had with this platform, I was able to kind of weave in the science content into their preferred space and various ways throughout the semester.

Of course, I couldn't just nix lectures and labs, but gave them some different ways for them to kind of make the course more accessible and engaging.

Joshua Gaul So representation is the idea of how students perceive the content and comprehend information that's presented to them. There's not one way to present content and activities that's optimal for all learners. So the learning and the transfer of learning occurs when multiple representations are used because it allows students to make connections within as well as between different concepts in their own ways.

Dr. Laura Romeo Right, so when we talk about multiple means of representation, it's essentially 'the what' of learning. While engagement focuses on 'the why', getting students on board, representation really goes into how we process content within the UDL framework. It's about gathering facts, determining relevance, and then organizing information in our own learning networks. This is going to extend how we categorize what we see, hear, and read. So as an instructor or a designer, as we build out our content, it's important to consider different ways of how to present it - instead of relying just solely on black and white text or digital resources, we should think about how to incorporate audio clips or visual elements like comic strips that really tie back to our main points that we're trying to get across to our students.

This diverse presentation is not only going to cater to different learning styles, but also is going to circle back around to enhancing our engagement.

Joshua Gaul Yeah, my brain pretty much lives in this, in this part of the umbrella, you know, the son of an English teacher, the only kid on the planet who loves to diagram sentences.

So this is where language and symbols and patterns fit, you know, making sure that everything is clear and concise, not using nine words when you can use four. Simplifying things so that students can understand things across languages, you know, clear syntax and structure, and make sure that there's multiple means of media, multiple types of media.

If somebody prefers to read blocks of text, that's fine, give them blocks of text. But there should also be a video version or an audio clip that demonstrates it that comes with the transcript and captions.

Dr. Laura Romeo Yeah, that's right. So from visuals to hard copies, what you were saying, providing options, that's really going to make sure students can process information in ways that suits them best.

It's all about recognizing that close connection between engagement and representation in the learning process.

Joshua Gaul So this is the area in UDL where the syllabus is the most important because the syllabus lays out the patterns, you know, the scaffolding can provide checklists and pathways where students can understand where they are. If I start here and I go this direction, that leads to my learning of this. You know, it breaks down critical features and shows how the larger ideas tie to the smaller ideas and get them all together. Students can see the network of ideas and concepts and knowledge and see how everything fits together in the giant web.

Dr. Laura Romeo Yeah, so your point about syllabi and learning materials really reminds me that this principle is about making things student friendly. When I'm designing content or providing instruction, I really try to take a step back and ask myself, will they get what I'm saying? So we need to keep in mind the jargon that we might be using is important, sometimes content specific, but also make sure our content speaks to everyone.

It's really critical to fair representation and again, getting everybody engaged.

Joshua Gaul So here's where we get to the actual doing part, you know, learners differ in the way they navigate learning environments and express what they know. There's not one means that's optimal for all learners. All of their, the action and expression that students go through take strategy, practice, organization, and this is where other learners can differ quite a bit.

You know, some may be able to express themselves well with writing. Some may be better with video presentations. Some may be better just recording themselves in audio. So finding ways that students can demonstrate their learning in different ways that doesn't pin everybody into the same activity is key here.

Dr. Laura Romeo Yeah, I feel like we've said this multiple times, but I'm going to say it again. Accessibility shouldn't be a one size fits all. It's about meeting diverse learning needs. So to sum up, engagement is 'the why', representation is 'the what', and now action and expression go into 'the how'. It's about how learners demonstrate what they've learned, which is a really critical part of content design and implementation.

This for designers involves planning tasks, organizing ideas, and offering flexible ways for students to express their knowledge.

Joshua Gaul Building on what we were talking about earlier about scaffolding, this category goes beyond showing the pathway. It's about estimating effort, managing time, and setting goals.

Using multiple tools for construction and composition will enhance fluency through practice and performance. It's a tool focused approach, emphasizing the importance of tools that meet accessibility standards and embracing UDL in the actual resource delivery.

Dr. Laura Romeo Yeah, exactly. This guideline really aligns with student autonomy, learning autonomy, allowing students to choose how they learn and demonstrate their knowledge, recognizing again that a one size fits all exam might not work.

It's about giving options for expression, like maybe some students might work best and might show their understanding through planning a PowerPoint and presenting that or using alternative methods.

Joshua Gaul It's true. And offering these options leads to more student buy-in, which makes the course more meaningful and removes barriers.

You know, this inclusivity enhances self confidence, it promotes growth, and it improves overall performance rates. You know, students enjoy the course more.

Dr. Laura Romeo So I think the significance of the UDL framework and honestly, accessibility really boils down to one core principle, which is supporting our learners, whether it's in the instructor's chair or whether it's designing instructional content. The key question is, "Did I cater to all of my learners, making sure that they can thrive in the course and walk away with valuable knowledge?" – recognizing learner variability is so pivotal when we're designing and instructing, not every student is going to fit into the same mold. It's going to be about embracing differentiated instructional practices and again, acknowledging that diverse academic and behavioral need for every student that walks into our class, including abilities and disabilities.

I think when we take a step back and we really equip ourselves with the UDL guidelines and the strategies, we're going to lay a solid foundation by implementing these strategies and upholding those UDL principles in our teaching practices. It's going to start to create and build and support an inclusive and flexible learning environment – whether it's in person or digital. So ultimately, again, it's all about our students and setting them up for success and making sure that they're learning journey is going to be one that's enriching and fulfilling for them.

Joshua Gaul So not just you and I, Laura, but everyone on our Edge team really understands the necessity of UDL as a framework that allows us to understand and apply accessibility no matter what schools we're working with.

So all the schools that we currently work with or will work with doing things like instructional design, course reviews, assessments, and everything else, we always make sure that one of the hats we have on is the UDL hat, so not every student learns the same way. If I'm working with a faculty member and every module has a seven to ten page written assignment, maybe I can suggest to her to think of a different activity type that's just beyond writing a paper every two weeks. Maybe we can do a better job connecting objectives to activities and spelling that out in as many ways possible in the syllabus and the overviews and the course itself. You know, this is part of our day to day mission to support our consortium members' missions.

Dr. Laura Romeo Yeah, so in my role as an instructional designer at Edge, I'm also always trying to think about the fact that instructors are people too, each with their own unique learning needs.

The UDL framework isn't just for students. It applies to our daily interactions, including our dealings with instructors, clients, and employees. So representing Teaching and learning in ways that benefit all is really a key aspect of accessibility.

Joshua Gaul Well, we've covered a lot today, quite a bit, scratching the surface of this really expansive topic, but we're going to pause there.

So thank you all for watching and listening. While there's so much more to explore, you know, we'll save it for future episodes, so stay tuned for our next discussion. Until EdgeCast logging off.