

Transcript Video 4 Principle 3: Application of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) Principles

Welcome to the video on applying UDL principles to an inclusive syllabus design.

Syllabi function as organizational tools in curriculum design. In this video, we will explore how you can apply the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) to strengthen the organizational structure of your curriculum so that it supports all students in becoming successful learners.

As Anne-Marie Womack of Tulane University emphasizes, “Agency, for all students, comes from access” (p.500). If we want all and not just some students to succeed in our courses, we need to frame accommodations not as “the exception we sometimes make in spite of learning, but rather the adaptations we continually make to promote learning” (p. 494). In other words, when using a UDL framework for your course and syllabus design, “accommodation is the norm, not the special case” (Womack, 2017, p. 499).

What do you see in these images? What is the problem here?

When we treat everyone equally, for example, by giving each person the same thing, such as the boxes in this picture, we don’t acknowledge the diversity of people, how everyone is different and has unique needs. While this might seem fair, such a one-size-fits-all approach actually excludes many people.

And while some people – or in the case of learning situations, some students – may not need any support (no box), most students will need a little bit of support (one box), and some students will need a bit more support (two boxes) to be able to participate and succeed. Now we are moving towards equity and a fairer and more just approach to providing access.

You could say that this approach is one of providing individual accommodations to students as they need them. This is how we achieve compliance with the American with Disabilities Act by providing what is called reasonable accommodations.

Let’s trouble this approach a bit. While we have enabled everyone to participate now, there’s still the problem of the fence. In other words, the cause of the problem is still there. When we provide accommodations, such as the boxes, we don’t remove the barriers.

Providing accommodations only for students who have documented disabilities through Disability Services, is problematic in many ways.

1. It can take time for a student to go through the process of registering with Disability Services. Students can fall behind while they wait for accommodations to be implemented.

2. Many students who may be legally eligible for accommodations do not register with Disability Services, or they do not take advantage of the accommodations they could receive.
3. Students have to “come out” to their instructors and many don’t want to do that because they fear stigmatization.
4. Disability Services doesn't know about specific barriers to learning present in particular courses so accommodations can't be tailored to the specific learning context.
5. Many students encounter learning barriers in their classes without having a disability by legal definition, such as students of color, non-native speakers of English, LGBTQ+ students, students from a low socio-economic background, first-generation students, and more.

How we can take this a step further?

The ballpark without a fence allows everyone to have access to the game without the need for accommodations. That is what UDL is about....taking it step further and thinking about ways to remove as many barriers as possible from the learning environment.

In other words, UDL is not about lowering the bar. UDL is about removing, or at least reducing, barriers to learning that exist in our own classes for a wide variety of students. UDL is about providing access so that all of our students can access the curriculum, participate and be successful.

So what is UDL?

Universal Design for Learning or UDL is a research-based framework for designing curricula—that is, educational goals, methods, materials, and assessments—that enable all individuals to gain knowledge, skills, and enthusiasm for learning.

UDL offers a two-pronged approach by reducing barriers to learning and providing rich supports.

At the heart of UDL is designing curriculum with a focus on learner variability. Applying UDL principles to your course and syllabus design means taking a multimodal approach to learning that offers options and choices for learners.

Common elements of a UDL experience include:

- All learners knowing the goal
- Intentional, flexible options for all students to use
- Student access to resources from the start of a lesson
- Students building and internalizing their own learning

If you want to take a deeper dive into UDL, please check out the EXPLORE section.

Through your syllabus you have an ideal opportunity to illustrate how you designed the course with learner variability in mind. Through a UDL-informed syllabus, you communicate how you will meet the needs of diverse students by providing a variety of options and choices and flexibility for presenting content, accessing and processing course content, participating in the course, and demonstrating learning.

For example, indicate how you will present content in multiple ways beyond printed texts (i.e., through various modalities or formats, including images, graphics, videos, blogs, podcasts, or websites that feature real-world applications of content); allow choices about topics for readings, assignments or projects; and provide options for students to demonstrate their learning that go beyond quizzes, exams, or written papers (i.e., through oral presentations, projects, performances, or products).

In addition, a UDL-informed syllabus provides explicit information that will help students plan, prioritize, and see the larger picture of how course content, learning objectives, learning activities, and assignments connect. Create a detailed course schedule, preferably in a concise table format, that provides information about what students can expect to learn, what they will need to do to be prepared for the class session, and when assignments will be due. Let your students know what resources and supports are available to facilitate their success.

Building-in extended deadlines is one example for providing flexibility. Fixed deadlines and strict mandatory attendance policies often function as barriers to student success. Just think about how extended time is a common disability accommodation.

Consider providing an instructor-set range and student-determined deadlines. Let your students know that assignments should be turned in by a particular date. Add an extended deadline during students can still submit an assignment for full credit. Allow students to turn in assignments until the end of the semester for partial credit.

In sum, a syllabus that reflects UDL design principles allows students to see how you intend to create a flexible, supportive, engaging and motivating learning environment that will provide them with multiple pathways to success.

Time to pause again so that you can look at your syllabus and assess.

How universal is your course design? Consider the following:

1. How do you design the course with learner variability in mind by providing students with multiple paths for learning and success?
2. How do you provide options, choices and flexibility for accessing and processing course content, participating in the course, and assessing skills and knowledge?
3. How do you communicate this through your syllabus?

Check out the next video to find out what it means to use inclusive and motivating language to create a warm syllabus.

References:

CAST. (2018). Universal Design for Learning Guidelines version 2.2. Retrieved from <http://udlguidelines.cast.org>

Womack, A. (2017). Teaching is accommodation: Universally designing composition classrooms and syllabi. *College Composition & Communication*, 68(3), 494-525.