

Making Sense of Universal Design for Learning

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Over the past few years, a revolution in architectural design has made streetscapes and buildings more accessible to everyone. Now, a revolutionary approach called Universal Design for Learning is also changing how we think about education. This educational approach was pioneered by David Rose and his colleagues at the Center for Applied Special Technology.

Universal Design for Learning, or UDL: what is it? It's a way of addressing the different learning needs of students right from the start; thinking about the diversity of learners; and reducing barriers to learning.

Diversity could include differences in: background knowledge and experience; learning preferences; learning strengths and abilities; personal interests; and levels of engagement.

UDL means identifying potential barriers within the learning environment, so they can be reduced or eliminated. The result: increased accessibility; more success for more students.

Many Alberta schools are using Universal Design for Learning principles to create more learner-centred and inclusive learning environments. A UDL approach benefits all students, including students with disabilities. It helps blur the line between regular education and special education.

Universal Design for Learning is based on three main principles:

- multiple means of representation – giving learners different ways to acquire information and knowledge.
- multiple means of action and expression – giving learners different ways to demonstrate what they know
- multiple means of engagement – tapping into learners' different interests; challenging them appropriately; and motivating them to learn.

The UDL principles rely on the use of technology to ensure learning resources and environments are accessible and engaging for all students. Universal Design for Learning is a design intervention: it is about curriculum design; instructional design; and access to flexible learning resources. A truly UDL learning environment depends on many factors: flexible instructional practices; learner-centred curriculum; availability of digital learning resources; and support from school leaders.

Understanding UDL can help school leaders talk about inclusion, technology and student success with students, staff, families and community partners. The UDL framework can help learning coaches help teachers better understand the diverse learning needs of their students. The principles of UDL can also help inform future curriculum development to ensure learner outcomes, resources and assessments better meet the needs of a wider range of students. A Universal Design for Learning approach benefits all students: it can increase student engagement; help teachers to better support each and every student in their classroom; and enhance academic success.

For more information on supporting every student, visit the Alberta Education website.

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