

UDL Tips for Designing Learning Experiences

How can we design learning experiences so that they are meaningful and challenging for all learners? Whether you are designing instruction for in-person classroom experiences, online synchronous experiences, remote asynchronous experiences, or anything in between and beyond, Universal Design for Learning (UDL) can help us anticipate learner variability and make instruction flexible and useful for all.

Start with a clear goal.

When sharing any kind of learning material, ensure the goal is presented so that learners can perceive and understand it. Having a clear goal or purpose for your assignment or experience helps learners know what they need to achieve and can help caregivers in remote settings as they provide support for learners.

For example, instead of posting an activity with directions, include the purpose or goal of that assignment as well.

Ask yourself:



- In this learning opportunity, do learners know what they are working to achieve?
- Have I crafted my goals clearly and in everyday language that my learners can understand?

Encourage flexible means to achieve the goal.

The “means” to achieving a goal include the different ways learners perform tasks, engage with the material, make meaning of it, and show what they know. In any learning experience, reflect on whether it’s possible to give learners flexible materials or methods to achieve a common goal. Remember, too many options can also be overwhelming. If you don’t know what options to include, ask your learners for ideas.

For example, if learners typically write to express their understanding, include another option for them to record their voice instead. If you typically use reading to build background knowledge, try including a video option that contains the same key ideas.

Ask yourself:



- In this learning opportunity, how are there flexible options for learners to achieve the goal?
- Are there some options that are consistently available, so learners can always rely on them for access and use?
- Are all of the options I provide accessible to all of my learners? Are there barriers some of them might encounter?
- Have I overwhelmed my learners with too many options? Are there ways I can optimize the choices I provide?

Ensure all learners can access the materials and environment.

When we create or choose the materials and environments with which our learners interact, accessibility must be part of our decision-making process. Not considering accessibility means that we may unintentionally exclude some of our learners from the opportunity to learn and participate. Being intentional in our design choices and anticipating possible barriers to access ensures that our learners can fully participate and benefit from the learning experience.

For example, follow the [POUR principles](#) when designing learning experiences to consider whether your materials and environment are perceivable, operable, understandable, and robust for all.

Ask yourself:



- Have I considered accessibility in the physical or virtual materials I use in this learning experience?
- Have I considered accessibility in the physical or virtual environment for this learning experience?
- Is my learning experience inclusive of all my learners? Are there any access barriers I can eliminate?

Make learning personally relevant.

When goals are relevant and matter to your learners, they are more likely to engage in the task and put forth effort — even when it gets challenging. For any learning experience, encourage learners to explore the real-world applications of the goals.

For example, invite learners to share real-world connections they've made to the learning experience or questions they may have about real-world applications. When possible, include opportunities to connect with your community. Letters to politicians or news outlets, video chats with experts, and multimedia blog posts can be great ways to share new understandings and make connections with the world around us.

Ask yourself:



- In this learning opportunity, how is the goal important to or of interest for my learners?
- What examples from my school or community can I include that connect to this learning goal?
- Are there opportunities for real-world applications during my learning experience?

Promote expert learning.

Expert learners are purposeful and motivated: they know how to minimize threats or distractions, collaborate, and self-reflect on their progress. They are resourceful and knowledgeable: they are able to gain the necessary background to apply new concepts in real-world scenarios. In addition, expert learners are strategic and goal-directed: they know how to set their own goals and use resources to make progress or to adjust after a mistake (Ertmer & Newby, 1996). This is possible in any learning environment, and through any learning experience. It's our responsibility as educators and learning facilitators to make sure each of our learners feels empowered to reach their full learning potential.

For example, invite learners to share ways they made personal connections, constructed their own understandings, collaborated, or used resources to achieve the goals.

Ask yourself:



- In this learning experience, are learners gaining disciplinary skills and habits of mind?
- How have I encouraged different but robust learning pathways for all of my learners to meet the goals?

Additional Resources

- [UDL Knowledge Statements](#) from Learning Designed
- [Critical Elements of UDL Implementation](#) from the UDL-IRN
- [How Are the UDL Guidelines, Framework, and Knowledge Statements Connected?](#) from Learning Designed, UDL Core Credential, Level 2
- [The Goal of UDL: Becoming Expert Learners](#) from CAST
- [UDL Expertise](#) from the Goodwin University Institute for Learning Innovation
- [Getting Started with UDL](#) from CAST's UDL On Campus
- [Five Things Educators Can Do To Buy Accessible](#) from the AEM Center at CAST

Reference

Ertmer, Peggy & Newby, Timothy. (1996). [The expert learner: Strategic, self-regulated, and reflective.](#) Instructional Science. 24. 1-24. 10.1007/BF00156001.

