Five Steps to Get Started Using UDL
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Introduction
This series covers five steps teachers can use to design lessons using Universal Design for Learning:

1. Have a clear goal
2. Design using the principle of Engagement
3. Design using the principle of Representation
4. Design using the principle of Action and Expression
5. Reflect on your students' outcomes and how they interacted with the goal, supports, and strategies.

UDL is not necessarily linear which means these steps can be read independently or the reader can choose to review them all at once. Other than following the cycle of effective lesson planning (Figure 1), the actual use of the UDL framework becomes a practice of reviewing the guidelines and identifying supports and strategies that align with those guidelines with a focus on creating the most accessible environment possible for all of your students.
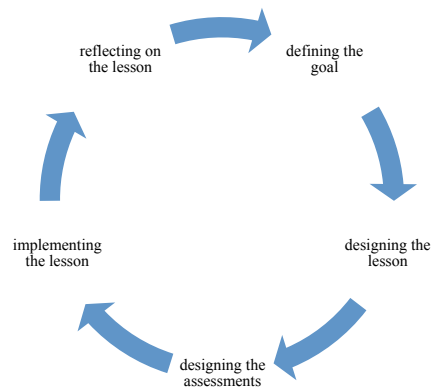

Figure 1. Cycle of effective lesson planning.

An instructional environment is typically defined by the four walls of a classroom. The environment expands, though, when we consider any space where learning takes place. This might include hallways, libraries, cafeterias, outdoor settings, and even sites located off of school property like museums. Through the principles of Engagement, Representation, and Action and Expression, UDL helps us consider all of the ways we can make any learning environment as accessible as possible for all students.

Step 1: Have a clear goal

This series covers five steps teachers can use to design lessons using Universal Design for Learning. This first step is about writing clear, UDL-friendly goals.

Every lesson has a goal, but how that goal is written influences how the goal is met. Typically, goals are written to include three pieces: Methods/means + Skill/knowledge + Topic. Using the following goal, we can examine how to write a more flexible goal.

> Original goal: Students will work in groups to create informational posters about smoking cessation.

The topic of the lesson is smoking cessation and the task is for students to inform others about the topic. Next, we see that the lesson goal requires that students work in groups and create posters. These are the means, methods, or ways that the goal is going to be met. UDL design encourages teachers to leave specific methods out of the goal (Coyne et al., 2009). Leaving them out allows teachers to plan and provide multiple options.

> Rewritten goal: Students will work collaboratively to create products about smoking cessation.

The topic (smoking cessation) and the desired outcome (informing others about the topic) stay the same. By using the term "collaboratively," the teacher can use a variety of methods to build this skill set (see Step 3). By using the term "products," the teachers can include multiple ways for students to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding about smoking cessation (see Step 2).

Why is all of this flexibility important? Why do we offer students so many ways to collaborate and demonstrate their knowledge? Put simply, the desired outcome of the lesson is for students to pull together information about smoking cessation in a way that the teacher can see each student understands and can communicate his or her knowledge and thoughts about the topic. Goals that limit the way students reach that outcome creates a barrier for them and the teacher. For example, group work can be a barrier for some students; poster creation can be a barrier for others. Because students cannot sufficiently communicate their understanding or knowledge, teachers experience a barrier around appropriate and adequate data collection. To move beyond barriers, teachers can provide selected options that align with the goal and support all students in achieving that goal.

Finally, the goal should be posted where all students can see it and it should be explicitly referenced at the beginning, during, and at the end of the lesson. The goal communicates what the students should achieve by the end of the lesson. The more effectively students connect with the goal and understand its influence on what they need to learn, the stronger their outcomes (Nelson, 2014).

Step 2: Design using the principle of Engagement

This series covers five steps teachers can use to design lessons using Universal Design for Learning. This second step is about the principle of Engagement.

More and more, we are learning how important the "feel" of the learning environment is in relation to student outcomes. When students feel connected, safe, and valued, their outcomes improve (Meyer, Rose, & Gordon, 2014). The principle of engagement can help you create this kind of environment.

How do you hook your students' interest to new topics? Do you create themed bulletin boards, use music, or enlist students to create intro videos about the topic? How do you help them monitor their efforts and feel good when they stayed connected to their learning? Do you use success-focused checklists and teacher check-in's? How do you let them know your expectations are high but obtainable? Do you create and specifically review rubrics that clearly outline the expectations related to projects and collaborative group work?

Once you take stock of what things you are already doing, look at how frequently you are doing them, and whether you vary the strategies, structures, and supports. Turn to your colleagues to learn about the ways they positively and effectively engage their students and see how you could weave those options into your environment.

At the lesson level, go back to the goal in Step 1, "Students will work collaboratively to create products about smoking cessation." Two major points of engagement relate to this lesson: the topic of smoking cessation and the act of collaboration.

Using the same questions above, you can narrow your focus to the lesson.
- How will you hook your students into the topic of smoking cessation?
- How will you help them monitor their efforts and feel good about the products they are creating?
- How will you let them know that your expectations for the project and their collaborative work?

Effectively implementing the principle of engagement requires us to see one another as emotional beings and to recognize that emotion drives everything we do.

Step 3: Design using the Principle of Representation

This series covers five steps teachers can use to design lessons using Universal Design for Learning. This third step is about applying the principle of Representation.

Physical design of space and how students learn in that space is a great place to start your journey with representation. If visitors were to walk into your space, what would they see? What does your space communicate? Would your guests know what topic you teach? Could they see that you offer information in a variety of ways? If yes, then they would be able to see how you represent the topic to your students?

Representation goes beyond how we present information to our students, though. It also guides us to consider how our students comprehend all of that information. We need to awaken our students' knowledge or provide them with background information. We need to help them find patterns within the information, move through the information, and then discover how to use what they learn to inform other parts of their life and learning.

Once you take stock of what you are already doing relative to the principle, look at your frequency, and whether you vary the strategies, structures, and supports. Turn to your colleagues to learn about the ways they positively and effectively represent new or complex information to their students and see how you could weave those options into your environment.

Returning to the lesson goal in Step 1, "Students will work collaboratively to create products about smoking cessation." Students will need to comprehend and understand what smoking cessation is. In some settings, most if not all of the students will have background knowledge of smoking. However, this background needs to be seen as separate knowledge from understanding why smoking is not a healthy activity. Using a variety of resources, teachers can find pictures, graphs, videos, songs, numerical data, and other representations of this information. Through this principle students can learn how to take what they know, combine it with new information, and consider how it impacts them.

The other part of the goal focuses on collaboration. The act of collaboration is a great way for students to learn about representation. Teacher can structure activities with a variety of ways for students to choose to represent information they learn. Students also have the opportunity to see value in presenting their ideas in a variety of formats so others who learn best in different ways can understand them.

Step 4: Design using the Principle of Action and Expression

This series covers five steps teachers can use to design lessons using Universal Design for Learning. This fourth step is about the principle of Action and Expression.

This principle leads teachers to consider all of the ways students can show what they know. They do so by considering physical supports (e.g., using a keyboard instead of a pen to write out a response) and the access the students have to those supports. The principle of Action and Expression is used to plan both formative and summative assessments to ensure all students have the opportunity to demonstrate their understanding. This principle also recognizes that students need guidance in understanding how to set goals, strategize and plan, manage information, and monitor their progress, all of which are known as executive functions.

Rubrics can be helpful tool for students and teachers when a variety of assessment choices are offered. A well written rubric clearly defines expectations around content and the appropriate use of the tools made available for the assignment. Teachers who use rubrics find it helpful to review the rubric with students at the beginning of each class or at different times during the lesson. This practice ensures students understand what they are being asked to do. The rubric becomes a scoring tool and a great way to offer specific and helpful feedback to the students.

Be sure to take stock of what you are already doing relative to this principle: look at whether you provide different ways to access tools—anything from pencils to interactive white boards; investigate the ways you encourage students to communicate or express their knowledge; and observe how you support your students' ability to build on their executive functions. Next, turn to your colleagues to learn about the ways they positively and effectively assess their students' knowledge and skills, and see how you could weave those options into your environment.

Returning to the goal, "Students will work collaboratively to create products about smoking cessation," we are reminded that no defined or specified products are listed within the goal. This openness allows the teacher to design the lesson in a way that all students will be able to demonstrate their knowledge.

Some of these products might be videos, posters, PowerPoint presentations, Prezi presentations, blog posts, or models. When planning this part of the lesson, increase your students' executive functions by supporting their ability to strategize the amount of time and types of resources they will need to create these products. Help them determine whether the information they are including within the products fully communicates their knowledge about smoking cessation. And ensure students have access to the tools necessary to complete their products.

Step 5: Reflecting on Your Lesson

This series covers five steps teachers can use to design lessons using Universal Design for Learning. This fifth step focuses on Lesson Reflection.

Although not a part of the UDL framework, reflection is a necessary part of education and perhaps the most often overlooked. Reflection is what provides teachers with new directions and an improved understanding of their lessons and students. And because UDL strives to establish purposeful, motivated, resourceful, knowledgeable, strategic, and goal-directed leaners (CAST, 2011), it is even more valuable when your students are involved in the reflective process. When students have the opportunity to take more ownership in their learning, their outcomes improve (Nelson, 2014). Reflection is a simple way to provide that opportunity.

The following lists questions to ponder when reflecting on the lessons you design in concert with the UDL framework.

- Did I write a goal that identified what skill or concept students would learn but left out how they would learn it?
- Did I post the goal?
- Did I reference or have my students reference the goal at the beginning, during, and at the end of the lesson?
- In what ways did my students demonstrate their connection to the lesson?
- Did I provide my students the opportunity to share their reflections on the lesson?
- In what ways did I represent the topic or concept to my students?
- What additional ways came to mind as I was teaching the lesson?
- What additional ways did students suggest I represent the skill or concept?
- How did the students demonstrate their knowledge of the concept or skill?
- Did students have the opportunity to suggest how they might demonstrate their knowledge or skill?
- What additional ways to assess my students on this knowledge or skill came to mind as I was teaching this lesson?

Teaching is a cyclical practice propelled by decision-making; many of those decisions directly impact students. By using the UDL framework as a decision-making tool, teachers can design lessons and environments more likely to meet the variety of needs present within every classroom.

The reason for reflection is to identify the strengths of your lesson and the environment you have created so you can replicate those pieces in the future. You also identify opportunities to alter or add in options to those lessons and your environment. Though reflection is done at the end of a lesson, it establishes a path for the creation of future lessons and an investigation of the constant environment. Reflection incites improvement.

Suggested Citation

Nelson, L. L. (2015). *Five Steps to Get Started with UDL.* Lawrence, KS: SWIFT Center.

References

CAST (2011). Universal design for learning guidelines version 2.0. Wakefield, MA: Author.

Meyer, A., Rose, D.H., & Gordon, D.T. (2013). Universal design for learning: Theory and practice. Wakefield, MA: National Center on Universal Design for Learning.

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