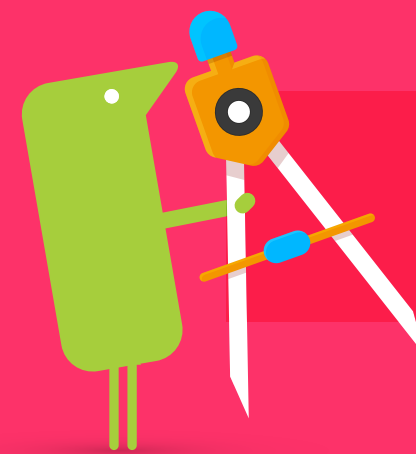# texthelp®

6 ways to **introduce UDL** into the classroom

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If you're an educator, help out in classrooms often, or simply have kids of your own, you probably know that **no two students are alike**. They come in all shapes and sizes, and have a wide variety of abilities, strengths, and interests. Even though almost everyone agrees with the above statement, however, we still tend to focus on "averages" both in and out of the classroom. Unfortunately, this isn't always the best metric for measuring progress.

For example, if you were to calculate the average height of a class, or look at the average score on a test, you'd likely find that few - if any - students were the average height or had the average test score. Instead you'd find that several students scored below (some possibly way below) average, while others scored above. So while the average does tell you something about the class as a whole, it doesn't account for how diverse classrooms have become.

That's why developing classroom materials and lesson plans for students "at grade level" can often cause problems - they may only be appropriate for a very small percentage of students. One way to solve this problem is to develop programs "for the edges" so that all students can benefit. To do this, we recommend closely aligning teaching strategies with the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL).

And while UDL is a common phrase in many schools today, we know it can be difficult to practically implement in the classroom. To help with this, we've put together a list of 7 ideas to make introducing Universal Design for Learning into your classroom just a bit easier.

1 Know your students' strengths and weaknesses

All students are unique, and the way they learn best can be as individualized as a fingerprint. Some may do better reading and working independently, while others excel after watching YouTube videos and working in groups. The goal is to understand their strengths and weaknesses, then use that when designing lessons.

Determining strengths and weaknesses can be as simple as asking students their learning preferences, or observing them over time and keeping notes on which methods work best for which students. There are also many surveys that can help you learn more about individual strengths and weaknesses. One caveat is that asking students their preference doesn't always equate to what's best for them. For example, just because a student says he prefers watching videos doesn't mean that is actually how he learns best.

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2 Use digital materials when possible

Although this is improving, many classrooms still use paper-based materials, including textbooks and worksheets, to present information and grade comprehension. **Incorporating digital materials into your classroom** can make implementing UDL much easier.

With digital content you can increase font size, easily look up definitions, use text-to-speech to read text aloud, and link out to more detailed information on almost any topic imaginable.

If your current classroom materials are not in a digital format, consider ways you can change this. For example, you could **replace outdated content with more up-to-date, digital content** available online.

3 Share content in a variety of ways

In addition to having content available in a digital format, it's also important to share that content in a variety of ways. This can help **ensure it fits with students' strengths and weaknesses** discussed previously.

For example, if you're teaching a unit on area and perimeter you may know that some students will do great simply reading the textbook, while others would benefit from watching a video or listening to a hip hop version of the lesson on **Flocabulary**. Once they've got the concept down, then let everyone get their hands dirty by working with manipulatives on their own or in a group to solve a real life problem.

Offering multiple means of representation (UDL's first principle) helps to ensure that students who struggle in one area do not automatically fall behind their peers.

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4 Offer choices for how students demonstrate their knowledge

Sharing content in a variety of ways is only half the battle. Engaging students by giving them access to audio, video, digital text, and interactive sites only to hand out a paper and pencil quiz at the end of the day isn't ideal.

Obviously some of this is out of your control as standardized testing (and practicing standardized testing) is a necessary part of education. When possible however, do your best to **give students options for sharing their knowledge**. This could be a demonstration, slideshow, speech, or video. Even using simple free tools like Google Forms provides an upgrade to standard multiple choice tests by making it digital (see advantages above) and helping you to streamline grading.

5 Low and No Tech options do exist

Even though digital content is important, it's important to know that technology is not required to implement UDL. Sure, it can help, but if you're in a classroom with little-to-no technology, that doesn't mean you can't implement UDL.

UDL is all about removing barriers. As mentioned, one way to do this is by providing a range of options when presenting content or asking students to demonstrate their knowledge. Instead of using technology you can still offer multiple means of representation with things like graphic organizers and handheld whiteboards that students can use as response cards. The goal is just to make sure that all students have a way to participate and learn.

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6 Take advantage of software supports

The number of apps, extensions, sites, and built-in supports available to students today is nearly infinite. If you have a student who needs a support to help with reading, writing, math, history, chemistry, or any other subject, chances are it exists.

Allowing students to take advantage of these supports is critical. Not only does it give them the ability to succeed independently both inside and outside of the classroom, but it also frees up your valuable time to help even more students.

Conclusion

Universal Design for Learning isn't new. There are loads of resources available online that can help you get started. You can start by reading **our blog**, then head over to the **UDL Center's website** to learn more about the topic and the research behind it. There's also a **short video** from Katie Novak that does a great job of explaining what UDL is and how it differs from Differentiated Instruction.

Just remember to start small. Implementing the principles of Universal Design for Learning doesn't happen overnight. By tackling UDL one step at a time, you can see what works and what doesn't for your unique students and classroom.

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