

Universal Design for Learning: Practical Strategies for Supporting Student Success

A UDL lens for MAIPSE Education Coaches

From the classroom to coaching: designing for learner variability

Presenter: Kimberly Griffith, PsyD
Bristol & Massasoit Community College

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Welcome

A little about my perspective

- Long-time supporter of the MAICEI/MAIPSE mission and principles
- Faculty member in multiple disciplines (since 2012)
- Experience teaching courses including:
 - **BIO117: Physiology of Wellness**
 - **CSS101: College Success Seminar**
- Work with students in a variety of academic, personal, and learning contexts

Today's focus

Looking at what UDL actually looks like in a college classroom and what it means for your work as an Education Coach. *(this is not the everything there is to know about UDL training)*

What is one word that comes to mind when you hear **UDL**?

Start Here: Think About a Class

Think about a class where you struggled.

Maybe you struggled because:

- the material was confusing
- there was too much reading
- instructions weren't clear
- you didn't know what the professor expected
- there was one high-stakes exam
- you couldn't keep up with the pace
- you didn't know how to ask for help
- life got in the way

Question: Were you the problem, or was there a barrier in the design?

From Student Deficits → Learning Barriers

Traditional question: **What's wrong with this student?**

UDL question: **What might be getting in the way of this student demonstrating what they know?**

Students vary in:

- backgrounds
- experiences
- strengths
- interests
- language
- prior knowledge
- processing
- communication
- executive functioning
- circumstances

There is no "average learner."

What Is UDL? : Universal Design for Learning

UDL is a framework for designing learning experiences that:

- anticipate learner variability
- identify potential barriers
- provide meaningful options
- maintain appropriately challenging learning goals
- support learner agency

Design the learning environment so that students have more than one reasonable pathway to access, engage with, and demonstrate learning.

CAST, the Center for Applied Special Technology, created and describes UDL as a framework for optimizing teaching and learning by anticipating variability and reducing barriers.

UDL Is / Is NOT...

UDL does NOT mean:

-  Lowering academic standards
-  Making everything easier
-  Creating a completely different course for every student
-  Letting students choose whether they learn
-  Eliminating accommodations
-  Assuming every student needs the same support

UDL DOES mean:

-  Keep the learning goal clear
-  Anticipate barriers
-  Build flexibility into the design
-  Provide multiple pathways where appropriate
-  Help students become more independent

The UDL Framework: Three Principles

1. ENGAGEMENT

The WHY of learning

Motivation • relevance • belonging • persistence

How do we help students become interested, motivated, and persistent?

2. REPRESENTATION

The WHAT of learning

Information • language • examples • understanding

How do students access and make sense of information?

3. ACTION & EXPRESSION

The HOW of learning

Practice • communication • demonstration • strategy

- How do students interact with learning and demonstrate what they know?
- CAST's current Guidelines 3.0 organize UDL around these three principles.

The WHY - Multiple Means of Engagement

Students are more likely to engage when learning is:

- meaningful
- relevant
- connected to their goals
- appropriately challenging
- socially supportive
- predictable
- connected to their interests

Why would this matter to THIS student?

Make It Matter: College Success Seminar example

Rather than teaching time management principles as abstract concepts, we work with:

THEIR life – content includes a long list of items and hours in a week

- work
- family
- transportation
- studying
- appointments
- sleep
- responsibilities

THEIR goals – exploratory activities

- What do you want from college?
- What does success look like for you?
- What are you working toward?

THEIR choices – not automatically assigned or prescribed

- Which strategy might work for you?
- What do you want to try?
- What needs to change?

UDL connection: Relevance + choice + autonomy → engagement

The WHAT - Multiple Means of Representation

Students don't all access information in the same way. In UDL, we aim to provide:

- text
- visuals
- diagrams
- examples
- demonstrations
- video
- audio
- models
- vocabulary support
- connections to prior knowledge

The goal isn't more stuff. The principle is: **There's more than one way to make meaning.**

One Concept ≠ One Delivery Method

Physiology of Wellness (BIO117) example

Instead of: **Textbook** → **lecture** → **test**

Students encounter concepts not only through a textbook, but also through:

- physiological diagrams / images
- lecture explanation, including short videos
- real-life examples (themselves, podcasts)
- discussion (*online asynchronous course requirements*)
- wellness applications (**not a research paper anymore*)
- visual models (so many more interactive models available for free now)
- personal observation/reflection (SMART Wellness Goal all semester)

Same learning goal. Multiple pathways to understanding.

The HOW - Action & Expression

How can students demonstrate learning?

Traditional approach: **Everyone demonstrates learning the same way.**

UDL asks: **Does the method of demonstration actually measure the learning goal?**

Possible methods include:

- written response
- discussion
- presentation, including multimedia
- project
- visual representation
- demonstration
- reflection after application

The method should still be aligned with the learning objective.

College Success Isn't Something Students Just 'Know.'

CSS101 example: Demonstrating Learning

Students may demonstrate learning through:

- SMART goals
- schedules
- reflections
- discussions
- resource plans
- self-assessments
- applications to their own lives
- planning activities

Why? Because the goal isn't simply: **Can you define time management?**

It's: **Can you use strategies to manage your own time?**

UDL connection: Authentic application + multiple ways of expressing learning

What Does This Mean for an Education Coach?

UDL As a Coaching Lens

When a student struggles, consider:

ENGAGEMENT

- Why might this matter to them?

REPRESENTATION

- Could they access the information another way?

ACTION & EXPRESSION

- Is there another way to practice or demonstrate the skill?

STRATEGY

- Do they know how to organize themselves to accomplish it? (advocacy)

MAIPSE + UDL: Why This Fits Our Work

MAIPSE Education Coaches provide direct classroom support and help students develop organizational skills, with the larger goal of increasing student independence. That makes UDL particularly relevant.

Our goal is not: How can I do this FOR the student?

Our goal becomes: How can I help the student identify the barrier, access the available pathways, and develop strategies they can eventually use independently?

UDL + coaching = Access → Participation → Skill → Agency → Independence

Reflection - Your Turn

What is ONE thing you will look at differently after today?

- Something you will notice differently about students.
- Something you will change in your coaching.
- Something you want to learn more about.

Final Thought: UDL Is Ultimately About Possibility

- We cannot remove every barrier.
- We cannot anticipate every need.
- We cannot create one perfect learning environment.
- But we can ask better questions.

Instead of: Why can't this student do it?

We can ask:

"What would make this learning more possible?"

Resources

CAST. (2024). *Universal Design for Learning Guidelines version 3.0*.

- The [official UDL Guidelines](#), including the three principles, guidelines, considerations, graphic organizer, and implementation resources.

Universal Design for Learning: Principles, Framework, and Practice, 3rd ed. Meyer, A., Rose, D. H., & Gordon, D. (2025).

- The current [foundational text from CAST](#). The third edition includes expanded discussion of UDL Guidelines 3.0, accessibility, implementation, and examples from postsecondary education.

Iris Center at Vanderbilt University

- Vanderbilt University provides a [free online training in UDL](#) which is based on CAST guidelines.

Cornell Center for Teaching Innovation - Universal Design for Learning

- An especially useful [practical resource with examples](#) organized around barriers, assignments, discussions, assessments, technology, Canvas/LMS design, and other common higher education situations.