



# UDL Intersections

## Universal Design for Learning and Differentiated Instruction

Frequent questions about the commonalities between “Differentiated Instruction” and “Universal Design for Learning” have prompted the examination of these two frameworks. The purpose of this brief is to describe the differences and highlight the intersections between them.

### What is Differentiated Instruction?

*Differentiated Instruction* (DI) has at its core the goal of making learning accessible for all students. DI recognizes that learners differ in terms of interests, readiness, and learner profile (including factors such as culture, gender, and environmental preferences). In order to address these differences, teachers need to make instructional decisions based on formal and informal data related to the specific students in a classroom. Teachers can then select from a range of strategies to differentiate content, processes, products, or the learning environment in order to help each student acquire essential concepts, principles, and skills.

### What is Universal Design for Learning?

*Universal Design for Learning* (UDL) is based on the evidence from neuroscience that no two brains learn in the same way; learner variability is the rule. The UDL Guidelines (see the National Center on UDL: <http://www.udlcenter.org/>) provide a structure to support the design of curriculum to address this neurological variability. By providing multiple means of engagement, representation, and action and expression in the curriculum from the beginning, all students can become “expert learners,” which includes being resourceful, strategic, and purposeful toward a goal.

### Intersections

Both the UDL and DI frameworks recognize that each learner is different (DI) or variable (UDL). Setting clear goals and matching assessment to

instruction, especially through ongoing, formative assessment is essential for students to reach goals. In addition, both DI and UDL provide flexibility in terms of how students work to reach learning goals.

DI emphasizes the central role of the teacher in customizing instruction at the classroom level in order to identify and support the interests, learning needs, and characteristics of specific students or groups of students. This responsive learning process can be applied to learning tasks and/or assessments to engage students and to provide appropriate and authentic learning and assessment opportunities for each student. Students often have choice and flexibility in assignments and in how they demonstrate what they have learned.

UDL provides an overarching framework for designing a flexible curriculum for the broadest range of students by building flexibility into learning tools and experiences from the beginning, thus making customization at the point of instruction feasible. The UDL Guidelines provide suggestions, based on research in the learning sciences, for how to design curriculum effectively with flexible options that can support a student becoming an “expert learner” (resourceful, strategic, and purposeful) in any context. Options are available for all students as they work to reach the same, high-level goal.

To meet the needs of all students, both UDL and DI recognize that cornerstones to learning address key aspects: UDL—engagement, representation, and strategies for action and expression; DI—readiness, interests, and learner profile. It is essential to have some flexibility in the materials and methods offered to students in support of their goals. However, UDL emphasizes proactive design of the environment and curricula while DI emphasizes responding to individual needs. Together, they can provide a powerful combination of strategies to meet the needs of all students as they work to reach the goals of instruction successfully.