



UDL Intersections

Universal Design for Learning and Universal Design

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 factors such as culture, learning style, and gender. In order to address those differences, teachers need to approach each student by their unique readiness, interest, and learning profile (see resource...). Teachers can select from a range of strategies that may be appropriate responses to help each student reach the 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 norm. 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 representation, action and expression, and engagement in the curriculum from the beginning, all students can become ‘expert learners’ which includes being resourceful, strategic, and purposeful towards a goal.

Intersections

Both the UDL and DI frameworks recognize that each learner is unique (DI) or variable (UDL). Setting clear goals and matching assessment to instruction, especially through ongoing, formative assessment is essential for students to reach the goals.

DI emphasizes the central role of the teacher to modify content and processes in order to address the needs and learning styles of each student. This responsive learning process can be applied to all activities and assignments and content can be modified so that the materials have relevance and are authentic for each student. There can be flexibility in the assignments and ways students demonstrate what they have learned. DI evaluates a learning style of each student in the construction of activities.

UDL provides an overarching framework for thinking about the design of curricular materials (goals, assessments, materials, methods) for the broadest range of students from the beginning. It is a conceptual shift from thinking about ‘fixing the student’ to ‘fixing the curricula.’ The UDL Guidelines provide suggestions, based on research in the learning sciences, for how to effectively design curriculum 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 DI and UDL recognize that cornerstones to learning include personal interest (DI) or engagement (UDL), experience (DI) or representation (UDL), and culturally shaped ways of seeing the world (DI) or strategies for action and expression (UDL). It is essential to have some flexibility in the materials and methods offered to students in support of the goal. However, UDL emphasizes proactive design of the environment and curricula while DI emphasizes responding to the individual needs. Together, they can provide a powerful combination of strategies to reach the needs of all students as they work to successfully reach the goals of instruction.