



UDL Intersections

Universal Design for Learning and Universal Design

Sometimes we hear the terms “Universal Design” and “Universal Design for Learning” used interchangeably. Although these two terms are related, they have different meanings. The purpose of this brief is to define the differences between these two terms and highlight their intersections.

What is Universal Design?

According to the Assistive Technology Act of 1998, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and the Higher Education Opportunity Act (HEOA):

The term “universal design” means a concept or philosophy for designing and delivering products and services that are usable by people with the widest possible range of functional capabilities, which include products and services that are directly accessible (without requiring assistive technologies) and products and services that are interoperable with assistive technologies¹.

UD guides the development of products and built environments offering access to the greatest number of individuals from the outset without requiring costly or clumsy retrofitting. UD is well established in architecture – ramps and automatic doors are some examples. In education, the goals of a UD approach are to increase accessibility for all and minimize the need for customized instructional materials and classroom accommodations.

What is Universal Design for Learning?

According to the Higher Education Opportunity Act (HEOA):

The term “universal design for learning” means a scientifically valid framework for guiding educational practice that--(A) provides flexibility in the

ways information is presented, in the ways students respond or demonstrate knowledge and skills, and in the ways students are engaged; and (B) reduces barriers in instruction, provides appropriate accommodations, supports, and challenges, and maintains high achievement expectations for all students, including students with disabilities and students who are limited English proficient (20 U.S.C. § 1003(24)).

UDL is a framework for teaching and learning that includes proactive planning of curricula (goals, assessments, methods, and materials) and takes into account the variability of all learners.

Based on research from the learning sciences (e.g., education, psychology, neuroscience), UDL’s three principles guide educators to (1) offer flexible options to engage learners in the learning environment, (2) present information in multiple ways, and (3) provide multiple ways that students can demonstrate what they have learned.

Intersections

UDL echoes UD, and both frameworks address *physical* accessibility in education by offering options for perception.

However, UDL also emphasizes additional aspects of learning, such as how learners process information and build deeper comprehension of content, utilize their executive functioning, organizational skills and progress monitoring abilities, engage in the learning environment, and define self-assessment and self-reflection strategies.

Applying the UDL principles to lesson and curriculum design, educators make decisions about a range of methods, materials, and media needed to scaffold and support learning for all learners. In addition, UDL helps to build student independence and self-regulation through a gradual release of scaffolds and supports.

¹ See 20 U.S.C. §1401(35)(IDEA); 20 U.S.C. §1003(23)(HEOA), and Assistive Technology Act of 1998, as amended, 29 U.S.C. §3002