

Implementing Universal Design for Learning in Introduction to American Government

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Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is an approach to instructional design that encourages instructors to create learning environments that are accessible to students regardless of their disability status. The idea is that every student learns differently and when we design courses that anticipate and break down common barriers to learning, we help all students. This paper provides a brief overview of UDL and offers tips and strategies for its implementation. The paper also offers an American Government syllabus as an example resource.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is an approach to teaching that shifts the responsibility of creating an accommodating learning environment from the student to the instructor. “According to David Rose, one of UDL’s founders, ‘UDL puts the tag ‘disabled’ where it belongs—on the curriculum, not the learner. The curriculum is disabled when it does not meet the needs of diverse learners.’” (Council for Exceptional Children, 2011) The approach recognizes that all students, including students who do not have documented disabilities, have diverse needs, learning styles and barriers to learning. The approach is about considering these barriers and creating learning environments that anticipate and remove barriers where possible. The approach is also based on science around how learning takes place in [different parts of the brain](#), and a learner will be best served if instructors can activate these different neural pathways to learning.

In addition the UDL approach recognizes that while disability services are needed, seeking individual accommodations can also be stigmatizing to students. By creating an environment that is universally accessible, students with and without disabilities can focus on learning rather than overcoming barriers. Further, the idea of an average learner is a myth. In fact, there are as many learning styles as there are people.¹ The current approach puts the responsibility on students to go through what is often a time consuming process of seeking accommodations. Most students, regardless of whether they have a named disability, face some barriers to the traditional learning environment, therefore, creating learning spaces that anticipate these barriers can be helpful to all students.

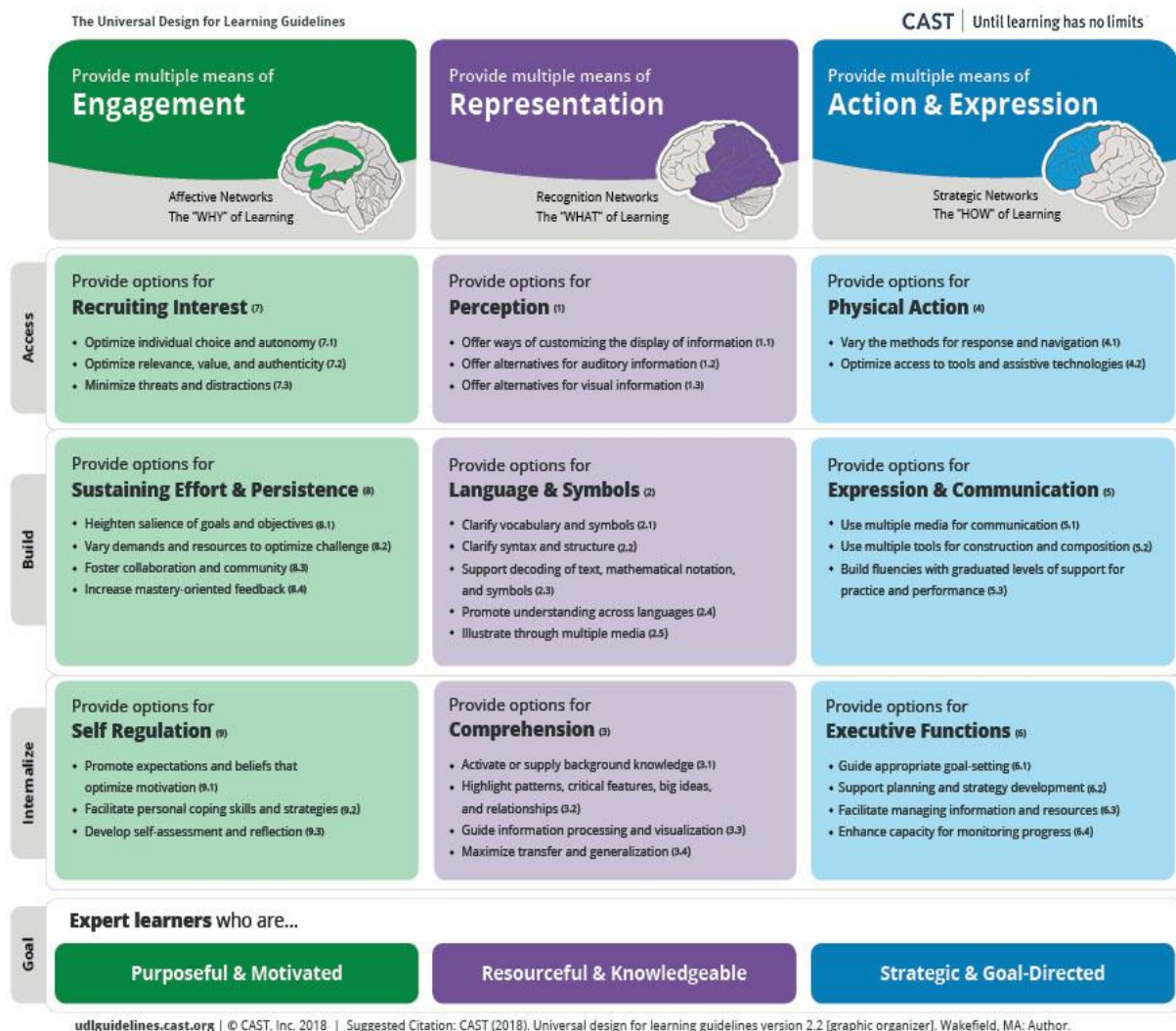
¹ See [The End of Average](#), Todd Rose’s 8 for 8, for a more explicit explanation.

What is Universal Design for Learning?

UDL is a concept that was inspired by [Universal Design](#) in architecture. When spaces are created with accessibility in mind, they benefit all. The classic example is a “curb cut” in a sidewalk. These are designed specifically to allow for access for people with certain types of assistive devices such as wheelchairs, but they also benefit people pushing strollers, people who are unsteady when they walk, bikers, and everyone else. Just like much of the default physical infrastructure can create barriers for many people, the traditional learning environment is the same way. Since the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), the built environment, especially, in public spaces must accommodate people with documented disabilities. Universal Design for Learning is also recognized by the federal government and incorporated into [education policy](#) first in 2008 and then later for higher education in 2016.

Universal Design for Learning has three main components developed by [CAST](#) and: “multiple means of representation of information, multiple means of student action and expression, and multiple means of student engagement.” The approach is that instructors should provide redundancies around these principles. Each principle is connected to a different aspect of learning science.

Figure 1. Below: CAST's infographic that presents the [three principles of Universal Design for Learning](#)



Multiple Means of Engagement

In Figure 1, we can see that multiple means of engagement refers to the idea that learning environments should provide for choice and autonomy. When students are able to engage in materials in a way that is inherently more autonomous, they may be more intrinsically motivated or interested in the material. In addition, the material may feel more relevant and valuable to the student. We often see commentary on education with

the remark: “When will I use this in real life?”, but if students are allowed to forge their own pathways, student motivation may increase.

Practically, multiple means of engagement is about providing choice and multiple ways for students to participate in the learning process. For example, student participation may be graded on more than one type of participation. Students can participate through classroom discussion, small group work, paired projects, online participation, or meetings with the professor. Another example would be to incorporate choice into assignments. This choice could be about picking a topic, (choose a country or region), or the type of assignment that a student completes (write an essay answering this question or answer this question in another format).

By including multiple means of engagement, student strengths are more likely to be utilized, potentially creating a greater sense of confidence. On the other hand, multiple modes of engagement may also challenge students in a productive way. A student who excels at written communication may benefit greatly from having to elaborate on their thoughts in an oral or audio component of an exam.

Multiple Means of Representation

Multiple means of representation refer to providing options for perception/reception of material. The logic behind this is relatively clear. When students are presented with information in more than one format, they may be able to absorb the material in a way that optimizes that student’s learning. For example, providing an audio transcript for a reading assignment might help students who have dyslexia, who live in a distracting environment (like a dorm), or who might learn better by listening than reading. If our goal is comprehension, does it matter if a student is reading or listening to the material? Further, a tricky concept may best be explained by providing a step by step video or

infographic. A colleague remarked that grades improved immediately in his classes for tricky assignments when he provided a YouTube video with step by step instructions for completing the assignment.

An advantage of providing multiple means of representation is that you can also use this as a way to represent different voices and perspectives, and offer students a chance to connect with the material. Students learn by developing schema and making connections.

Another form of multiple means of representation is creating redundancies in how the material is presented. Providing lecture notes or outlines ahead of time can allow students to engage with the material without having to worry about copying down every word on a slide.

Multiple Means of Action and Expression

This principle relates to the idea that we should provide tools for students to learn regardless of their learning style. How can we optimize learning for all? Within this principle, there are several ways that we can create more accessible materials including through the use of technology.

One way to do this is to make sure materials are affordable or open source. Some students just will not pay for prohibitively expensive materials. Can you offer a lending library where students can borrow books? Can you provide material available as an eBook or audiobook through the library? Perhaps you can allow student to purchase older editions of a textbook through a used bookstore.

Another way to approach this principle is through the use of assistive technology and accessibility checkers. Students should be able to access materials using a screen reader and if possible, it is good to provide a written transcript for audio materials. Both

Microsoft Word and Adobe offer ways to check documents for accessibility with minimal effort on the part of the instructor.

With these three principles in mind, instructors can create environments for student learning and success that recognizes that every student learns differently.

Implementing UDL using Pinch Points

Implementing UDL in the classroom may feel like a daunting task at first, however, there are a few strategies that instructors can use what will make the process relatively simple.

Implementing UDL does not require a total overhaul of your courses, nor does it require that every interaction and assignment be perfect for everyone. One way to approach updating courses with a UDL approach is to identify “[pinch points](#)” or areas where students tend to struggle in your course. Once you identify a pinch point, the next step is to determine how you might add multiple means of engagement, representation, or action and expression to the assignment.

Last year, in our capstone senior seminar, I noticed that students really struggled with writing a literature review. This year, I am adding more scaffolding to the assignment, offering more examples of successful student work and providing a video tutorial on writing a literature review (found on YouTube). To create redundancies in the process, students write the literature review in drafts, starting with graded outline, and a rough draft. I emphasize that the process is important and that a first draft is just that: a draft. The idea is to remove some of the stress from a difficult assignment so that students try rather than shut down.

Identifying pinch points can also result in providing students with opportunities for failure, an important part of learning. After an exam, an instructor can review the material that students struggled most with. The instructor can provide an opportunity for students to retake that portion of the exam in a way that allows them to recoup some lost points. If the end goal is learning and mastery of the concept then this is a good way to ensure that process is occurring.

Implementing UDL by using a “Plus One” Approach

Another strategy for implementing UDL is through the use of a [“plus one” approach](#). Plus-one means for each “interaction”, provide one other way for that interaction to occur. For example, maybe you can provide written and audio instructions for an assignment.

If you expect students to participate in class discussions, a plus one approach would be to “think, pair, share” prior to full group discussion. Students can discuss the prompt with a neighbor before sharing with the group. Another example would be to use polling or a “1,2,3 go” approach where everyone writes an answer and they all share it at the same time. This could work with a group chat or in a remote setting.

A Plus One approach for assignments could be to allow for different types of submissions or different modalities of assignment instructions. Implementation may feel daunting at first, but focusing on a few small changes can allow you to see what works best for you and your students.

Practical tips for implementing UDL

A typical class has several important components that make up the class. For the purposes of explaining how UDL might be applied in a college classroom (in person, remote, asynchronous), I will now review ways to start in the four areas: Physical Space or infrastructure, Syllabus, Assignments, and Delivery. For all of these areas, the following tips are suggestions that may or may not work for every person. The point of UDL is break down barriers to learning, but there is also a recognition that perfection is not possible.

Physical Space and Infrastructure

A great resource is [Washington University's Center for Universal Design In Education](#) which has excellent tips for creating infrastructure in physical and online spaces that are accessible. While we may not have too much control over the classroom we teach in or the technology available to us at our colleges and universities, there are things we can do.

Syllabus Design

A syllabus can set the tone of the class and can be a really good place to begin the implementation of UDL. While a syllabus statement on accommodations for people with disabilities is common, a plus one approach is to highlight this policy verbally. Within the syllabus statement, hyperlinks to disability resources allows students to access the resources more easily. Here are some other easy additions that can make the syllabus more accessible and universal.

- Recognize and acknowledge that not all students who qualify for disability accommodations get those accommodations. Include the university disability statement on your syllabus and add a section about how you might accommodate all students.
 - Create a process for accepting late assignments or at least a policy
 - Can students do retakes or retries?

- Include the diversity statement on your syllabus as well. Also verbally acknowledge this.
- Create and standardize policies that allow for failure. Learning takes time and practice.
- Create links to assignments and other resources directly in the syllabus to centralize and streamline the class.

Assignment Design

Assignments are an obvious place to implement UDL as well. Here is a starter list of ways to implement UDL in assignments.

- Allow for choice
- Offer different types of assignments - demonstration of knowledge and proficiency through multiple means of assessment (oral, written, audio, formal, informal, etc.). In political science, we tend to focus on written work, but students may benefit from displaying their content knowledge through different means of communication.
- Provide some room for learning in assessment. What is your redo policy on a particular assignment?
- Use low stakes quizzes and polls to check knowledge. This allows students to practice what they have learned in a setting that does not create too much work for the student or the professor and allows students to gauge their progress in an anonymous way.

Delivery of Materials

There are many ways to make the materials you present in class available in more than one way. Posting lecture slides, outlines or abridged notes prior to class is a good strategy. Another strategy is to provide participation or extra credit to class notetakers so students have a backup resource if they miss class. Students need time to reflect on the material. Incorporating reflection breaks is a good way to help students absorb knowledge. Most students cannot focus for too long, and providing breaks can make everyone able to better learn. A break can be a brief video, a discussion break. A break where students reflect by writing, or a moment to think about a question.

Delivery also encompasses things like considering if you have the technology that makes the space most accessible. Consider whether you need a microphone, and incorporate closed captioning into video demonstrations. Finally can you incorporate diverse perspectives and scholars into your materials? Tell students that you have made a conscious effort to do this, which will go a long way toward students potentially feeling valued in the classroom. Finally, repeating and reemphasizing important concepts helps all. Begin with an agenda, and recap at the end.

Finally, there are tools that can be extremely helpful in ensuring accessibility including apps that can check whether slideshows are accessible. A good rule of thumb is to use contrasting colors and limit the amount of text on a particular slide.

Universal Design in Introduction to American Government

Our College at Rowan University is training faculty in implementing UDL. In order to make this simpler for our adjunct faculty, who mostly teach American government, I created a template syllabus with ideas and materials that faculty can pull from as they see fit. This syllabus was initially created by a committee in order to provide an alternative to using textbooks in American Government. The idea was to create a more affordable and relevant interactive version of American Government. I then updated this syllabus to include ideas related to Universal Design. The Syllabus is linked below. The syllabus includes annotations and comments so that folks can identify places where UDL has been applied. Faculty viewing these resources can feel free to use what they like here.

Template American Government Syllabus with Choices for Instructor



Scan above or go to: <https://go.rowan.edu/UDLAG>

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