

Designing online courses through a UDL lens

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Course Information

Land Acknowledgement

The University of Manitoba campuses and research spaces are located on original lands of Anishinaabeg, Ininiwak, Anisininewuk, Dakota Oyate, Dene, and Inuit, and on the National Homeland of the Red River Métis.

UM recognizes that the Treaties signed on these lands are a lifelong, enduring relationship, and we are dedicated to upholding their spirit and intent. We acknowledge the harms and mistakes of the past and the present. With this understanding, we commit to supporting Indigenous excellence through active Reconciliation, meaningful change, and the creation of an environment where everyone can thrive. Our collaboration with Indigenous communities is grounded in respect and reciprocity, and this guides how we move forward as an institution.

Course Introduction

This course is designed for Manitoba post-secondary faculty and academic staff who want to deepen their understanding of the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework and support their ongoing professional development. You'll explore selected principles and guidelines from UDL 3.0, along with practical examples of how UDL can be applied in course design.

Course Format

This is a self-paced, asynchronous module that takes approximately 90 minutes to complete. You can work through the content at your own pace and return to it as needed.

Additional Resources

Throughout the module, you'll find links to supplementary resources. While these are optional, they're included for those who wish to explore topics in greater depth.

Support and Discussion

This module does not include instructor support or group discussions. However, your institution may offer additional resources or programming to complement this learning experience.

Kristen's Welcome Message Transcript

Welcome. My name is Kristen Hardy. I use she-her pronouns. As an image description for accessibility, I'm a white, fat, disabled, middle-aged, cisgender woman with dark blonde hair and black-rimmed glasses, wearing a blue blazer, seated in an office with shelves of books behind me. I live and work on Treaty 1

territory in in Wiiniibak, Manido Abi (or Winnipeg, Manitoba), which is on the ancestral lands of the Anishinaabeg, Anisininew, Ininiwak/Nehethowuk, Oceti Sakowin/Dakota Oyate, and Michif or Métis Peoples. This territory is also a place of significance for the Denesuline and the Inuit, some of whom have been living here for generations. As a settler-Canadian, I'm profoundly grateful to these nations and their people for caring for the land on which I live and work, and for shaping my own ways of seeing and understanding the world, including how I approach my teaching work. I'm a university instructor and an interdisciplinary researcher, and I've taught in a wide variety of fields in the social sciences and humanities. My own experiences, both good and bad, as a disabled student and educator, have helped to shape my awareness of the importance of accessibility in teaching and learning contexts. In this module, we'll be exploring the ways that the Universal Design for Learning framework can help us in making our courses and other teaching-related work more accessible. In working with students, we want to see all of them succeed. Successful learning can look many different ways, depending on what we're teaching and what students want or need to take away from our courses.

It may be practical skills, a general understanding of a broad field or discipline, in-depth knowledge of a niche area, or an appreciation for a form of creative expression. Teaching online introduces some new challenges, but also a range of possibilities, including many that have the potential to reduce barriers and increase accessibility. Incorporating approaches drawn from Universal Design for Learning, or UDL, is a way to minimize the need for special accommodations and proactively address access holistically, making the learning experience better and more accessible to both disabled and non-disabled students.

It can also make teaching more effective and facilitate greater enjoyment of learning. Most instructors can probably relate to how rewarding it feels to have a student tell them that they genuinely loved a course, that they've come to feel more confident in particular skills, or that they learned to see something in a new way.

Helping as many students as possible to achieve this kind of transformative learning experience is our shared goal, and UDL is a set of lenses and tools to help us achieve this. I hope you enjoy going through this module and that you come away inspired to continue to enhance the accessibility of your own courses.

Learning Objectives

By end of this course, learners should be able to:

1. Describe the UDL as a philosophy and approach to teaching and learning.
2. Explain how applying UDL principles facilitates access to learning and promotes student success.
3. Integrate UDL principles into teaching practices.
4. Analyze a case study of a course design and propose UDL-based improvements.
5. Formulate an action plan for implementing UDL, including short-term and long-term goals.

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The UDL Approach

The Origins of Universal Design for Learning

UDL's focus is on minimizing or removing barriers to effective learning. It has grown out of a philosophy and practice known simply as "Universal Design," or UD, which aims to shape our built environment into one where the widest possible range of human needs are met.

The concept was first developed by architect Ronald Mace, a wheelchair user who dreamed of fully accessible buildings becoming the default throughout society. However, interest in this approach quickly spread beyond the realm of those who craft the buildings and spaces that we live in and move through and was taken up in the design of a wide range of products and services, including digital systems and educational practices. In each context, accessibility may look quite different, but wherever it is found, UD remains governed by a commitment to proactively identify and remove barriers.

Universal Design has been strongly influenced by disability activism, especially by what is known as the social model of disability. Beginning in the 1970s and 80s, the social model marked a revolutionary shift in how disabled people understood themselves and advocated for their own needs. Most famously expressed by British sociologist Mike Oliver, the social model rejects the idea that there is "something wrong" with disabled bodies and minds. Instead, this model identifies the problem as one of barriers – barriers in how we construct the world and the things in it, in people's attitudes toward disability and disabled people, and in how activities, including teaching and learning, are designed and carried out. By removing barriers, the social model asserts that people of all ability types and levels experience increased access and independence. This is sometimes referred to as the [curb-cut effect](#), referring to the ways that sloping curbs ("curb cut") at the end of sidewalks provide improved access for both disabled and non-disabled people.

But UD is not only about disability. As in architecture, where accessible buildings can better meet the needs of many people, including older adults, children, people of different sizes and statures, and those who push strollers or bring groceries home. Universal Design for Learning benefits students who may not have a disability label, but who may struggle for any number of reasons. While people's access requirements are so diverse and wide-ranging that even the most-accessible design practices cannot fully meet the needs of every person, planning from a UDL perspective can significantly increase the number of learners who are able to fully participate and learn effectively. And when the barriers that some learners faces are reduced or eliminated, everyone has the potential to benefit.

UDL and Indigenous Approaches to Education

UDL has an important relationship with Indigenous and decolonizing approaches to education. These connections include values, approaches, and practices within Indigenous approaches that dovetail with the UDL model. Educators who take progressive and inclusive approaches within colonial educational institutions today have often been inspired by their exposure to Indigenous pedagogies and ways of thinking and knowing. This inspiration, however, may sometimes go unacknowledged or even unrecognized – but the spirit that animates a UDL approach has long been central within the ways that many Indigenous societies approach teaching and learning.

Indigenous communities are heir to millennia of collective knowledge and experience with creating approaches to education that are accessible, meaningful and sustainable. All post-secondary faculty today can benefit from open-minded consideration of Indigenous pedagogical knowledges and practices. In doing so, we also help to actualize the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action concerning education by helping to shape our teaching and learning practices into ones that support the development of “intercultural understanding, empathy and mutual respect”. ([Call to Action #63](#))

While institutional efforts at decolonizing education often emphasize Indigenous symbols and practices, the potential for transforming how we teach and learn really lies in the worldview, values and principles that have long shaped Indigenous ways of living, learning and knowing. The benefits of this knowledge go far beyond simply better meeting the learning needs of our Indigenous students. Rather, they prompt us to reconsider the limitations of a monocultural model designed with a limited group of learners in mind, and to think about [how learning can be made more accessible and more meaningful for students of diverse backgrounds, with unique skill sets and goals.](#)

We will return to reflect on the connections between Indigenous education and UDL approaches later in the module.

What does UDL offer us as educators?

The UDL framework offers educators guidance for proactively approaching course design and teaching to reduce access barriers for all learners. Formulated in 2008 by the US-based nonprofit organization Center for Applied Special Technology, or CAST, the UDL principles and approach have continued to undergo development and refinement. Version 3.0, which you will find in this module, was updated and released in 2024.

At the core of the UDL model, as set out by CAST, are three basic principles, accompanied by more-specific considerations that flow out from these, all centred around the goal of fostering learner agency. While we will not be able to explore the many details of the UDL model in this module, we will spend some time thinking about the three principles, and some additional resources will be made available if you wish to explore the model more deeply on your own.

Also, it is important to acknowledge that educators, like all workers, may face restrictions and limitations on their agency in designing and delivering their courses. Whether these are institutional regulations, departmental or professional-accreditation requirements, or simply time constraints for instructional faculty with heavy teaching loads, they often prevent faculty from offering the learning opportunities that they would wish to deliver in an ideal world. But there is still value in thinking about teaching work through a UDL lens, because sometimes even small changes can produce big differences in students' learning experiences.

Fundamentally, UDL builds on an expanded notion of what 'access' means, beyond just making sure that disabled learners have opportunities to participate in education (as vital as this is, of course). The phrase "holistic access" is often used today to position accessibility as something that concerns all people. Most of us are familiar with at least some basic access measures that our institutions may offer, such as braille versions of course materials or ASL interpretation for Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing students.

But a holistic approach to access requires thinking about an even wider variety of barriers, especially as learner demographics. For example, in the context of higher education, financial costs can be a significant barrier to many students, especially those from working-class backgrounds. Likewise, rigid deadlines and limited library hours can present significant barriers for students who must work to be able afford to pursue their studies. Family responsibilities, especially for students who are single parents or who have elder-

care obligations, can conflict with attendance policies or force learners to choose between meeting education-related responsibilities and providing the support that loved ones require.

If you have been teaching online for some time, you may have already noticed that many students who face such barriers gravitate toward online courses and programs, as these can provide greater flexibility. But, in designing and delivering courses, we need to be reflexive or self-aware about our own practices and how they can facilitate the access students require to succeed in higher education.

Self-check

Pause for a moment and check your knowledge of the content you have just read.

Which of the following best describes how the UDL model understands the concept of access?

- a) Taking steps to meet the needs of disabled students, to help ensure that they have equitable opportunities to learn and contribute.
- b) Identifying and addressing potential barriers through thoughtful course design and planning, to minimize or eliminate them for all students.
- c) The result of offering online learning options for students for whom traditional in-person courses may not work well.

Learner Agency and UDL

The concept of learner agency lies at the heart of UDL efforts. Take a moment and think about this phrase.

- What does learner agency mean to you?
- Can you think of some examples of how students might exercise agency over their learning?
- What does this look like in your own teaching practice?

One way to think about this more concretely is as follows: If you were asked to write a letter of reference for a student, and the guidelines specifically asked you to comment on how the student demonstrated agency in their learning, what would you point to as evidence of this? Just for yourself, try writing a few sentences about this as you would in a reference letter, keeping one or more of your past students in mind.

What sorts of things did you mention? Perhaps your student demonstrated evidence of what we call metacognition, or the ability and willingness to think about the act of thinking itself - recognizing, for example, where they might need to shore up specific skills to be successful on a project or re-plan out their work in a different way when they encounter an unexpected obstacle. Maybe they chose an essay or presentation topic that would allow them to explore an aspect of their own identity or culture, integrating their own lived experience with their more-abstract learning. Perhaps they made use of specific institutional resources, like consulting librarians or exploring archives, that were not required by the assignment and yet enhanced their overall work. Maybe they offered support to their peers in the course without specific prompting, recognizing that fostering others' success is a worthy goal for both their own and others' learning.

There are many different ways that a student can demonstrate agency, and, as in these examples, the result is usually a superior learning experience and a more positive orientation toward the subject matter. Perhaps your own love for the subject that you study or teach was sparked similarly? Was there a specific course, project, or teacher who helped you to claim agency over your own learning and set you on the path that brought you to where you are now?

UDL seeks to foster the design of learning environments in which learning is purposeful, reflective, resourceful, authentic, strategic, and action-oriented – and all of these are linked with learner agency. At its foundation, the UDL framework is a significant movement away from what famed Brazilian philosopher Paulo Freire derisively termed [“the banking model of education”](#).

“Depositing” information into students as if they were passive containers and towards a more liberatory approach to education, which recognizes students as creative meaning-makers who have the potential to change themselves and the world around them. Facilitating ownership over learning increases engagement and commitment, fosters a desire for further learning beyond the course, and can even reduce some of the problems and stresses involved in teaching – more engaged and agentive learners are less likely to involve themselves in academic misconduct or turn in last-minute, carelessly produced work, for example.

Exploring UDL

In this chapter, we discuss the three principles of UDL, with examples in academic contexts, and connect the UDL framework with Indigenous perspectives.

Principles of UDL

As already mentioned, building on a commitment to fostering learner agency, the UDL approach is centred around three broad, overlapping principles. In brief, these are:

Multiple means of engagement

This principle responds to the “why?” of learning: “Why should I put in the effort to learn this?” asks the student.

When we think about engaging learners, we are reflecting on how we can connect with them through their interests, strengths, goals, learning preferences, experiences, and identities. We can think about this principle as addressing how we generate interest in our course content and skill-development goals, and how we can help learners to persist in their learning journey with enthusiasm and without discouragement in the face of challenges.

Here are some examples of how we might foster our students’ engagement:

- Including authors, speakers, artists, filmmakers, and others from a range of cultural backgrounds and social identities can help a wider range of students feel seen and represented. It can make a huge impact on a learner who is, for example, Indigenous, disabled, or transgender, to witness and learn from other members of their communities who are making notable contributions to a field. Likewise, for students whose identities are typically more centred in society, it is vital that they also encounter the expertise and perspectives of those of diverse backgrounds, to help them expand their own conceptions of knowledgeable and skilled leaders.
- Connecting our course content to the needs and priorities of learners or their communities is often the key to generating interest and engagement. For instance, how does studying economics or political science help us to see how inequalities in society (including the ones they themselves face) may be addressed? Or how does understanding chemistry or architecture offer us insights into the physical or mental health impacts of our environments on our own well-being? For those of us who devote our professional lives to studying or teaching in a particular field, we may already take these potential benefits for granted – but it is important that we explicitly help our students to realize these possibilities, too.
- Modeling our own joy and enthusiasm for learning can help students to see the areas we study and teach as vibrant and dynamic. Highlighting new discoveries, developments, or approaches used by those working in our field emphasizes that

we are not just transmitting static bodies of knowledge, but are engaged in evolving and even exciting projects of inquiry and growth.

- When asked, many students express an interest in helping others through their careers or volunteer work. We can actively engage learners in reflecting on how studying film or paramedicine or human resources can help them to understand and empathize with those whose lives and experiences are different from their own, and to see how those who create art, support people in difficult circumstances, or advise others can act in ways that are genuinely valued and helpful.

Multiple means of representation

This principle addresses the “what?” of learning: What content and activities can be used to support meaningful learning?

In this context, representation refers to what we teach and how we present it to students.

Learners approach and engage with content differently depending on many factors, including disability-related access needs, personal inclinations, and cultural background. We can provide content, learning materials, and frameworks for learning that foster skills development in multiple ways.

Here are a few examples of how we can expand the ways that we represent content in our teaching:

- Information can be presented in both text and a visual or interactive form – for example, through graphs, videos, digital models, guest talks, virtual field trips, or images and descriptions of objects. This offers students more ways to grasp an idea or concept, while also improving the accessibility of the content for those with sensory, cognitive, or learning disabilities.
- When we introduce new concepts, we can foreground possible connections with students’ own lived experience. Many of us enjoy understanding phenomena simply for the sake of learning about the world. So do some of our students, of course – but the majority of learners, who are balancing our courses with dozens of other commitments and deadlines, strongly benefit from a “hook” that makes new content “real” to them. For example, this could involve helping students understand how new drug developments have the potential to help their loved ones living with serious illnesses, or guiding them to make the connection between changing climate patterns and the cost and availability of food at the grocery store or campus cafeteria.

- Using existing knowledge as a scaffold to introduce new content in a connected way can also support students in achieving more complex levels of understanding. This might sound self-evident, but courses often divide up content in ways that can obscure to students the interconnections that we as instructors already recognize. Drawing learners' attention to places where new information connects to previous knowledge, as well as where current content will ground future learning, helps to bring added coherence and commitment to learning in the present moment.

Multiple means of action and expression

This principle speaks to the “how?” of learning: How can learning take place in ways that are more accessible, more meaningful, and produce more-enduring changes in knowledge, skills, and commitment?

Providing options for how learners interact with content, instructors, peers, and the world beyond the classroom offers students an opportunity to “personalize” their learning, as does supporting them in choosing how they can actualize and express their new knowledge.

Some examples of promoting multiple means of action and expression in learning contexts:

- The online learning environment gives us an array of options for using technologies that invite learner engagement. This does not mean investing our limited time and resources in every new educational technology that enters the market, of course. But we can explore a few of those that may offer our students a different way of working with material and ideas. In some cases, these may be features that are already embedded in our online platforms, such as a blog-creation space or digital collaborative whiteboard with both text and drawing options. Social media sites, like Facebook or Instagram, with which our students may already be familiar, are another no-cost option – and these often have accessibility features built into them, too.
- Activities and assignments that offer students the ability to develop multiple sets of skills at once, like slide-based presentations delivered to a few peers in small breakout rooms, or arts-based assignments that incorporate both creative expression and analytical writing components, can allow students to make use of strengths they already possess while also developing new skills. Generally speaking, the more choice, the more accessible the activity – for instance, a creative activity that allows a student the option of expressing their ideas in the form of

music or spoken word may connect with a learner who is blind or partially sighted, and having the option of storytelling may appeal to students whose cultural communities value composing and sharing narratives.

- One of the excellent features of online learning platforms, like Zoom or Microsoft Teams, is the ability of students to participate orally or in writing through the chat feature. Where direct messaging is possible, students who have social anxiety or who feel unconfident about their skills in the language of instruction may be given the opportunity to share their ideas with the instructor, without the fear of judgment from their peers. Reading all of the comments aloud not only helps to integrate oral and written student contributions into a single discussion but also makes it accessible to students who are unable to read or follow the chat themselves, whether due to disability or distracting circumstances (such as attending class meetings while commuting or caring for a young child).

Making these principles more memorable

It may be helpful for some to think about these three principles visually or dynamically. For example, *multiple means of engagement* could be imagined as an assortment of different hands reaching out to invite the student into the content. *Multiple means of representation* could be depicted as a dynamic collage of images, shapes, colours, and/or sounds, which shift into different patterns and forms. And *multiple means of action and expression* could be embodied by a busy art or music studio, with each participant working in a different medium to express a common theme: paint, clay, theatre, vocals, instruments, and so on.

Match the correct UDL principles with their description

The distinctions among the three UDL principles can seem subtle at first. Take a moment to see if you can match these principles to brief descriptions of each by writing the principle for all three descriptions into the correct spots below. If you need to, refer back to the explanations of the UDL principles, presented earlier.

Description & Examples	UDL Principles
Allowing students to process and express their learning in ways that are both accessible and personally meaningful to them. Example: Offering learners a choice of a written paper or a video presentation to express their research and conclusions. This is an example of the UDL principle of	
Ways that we can better connect with learners through their experiences,	

interests, and identities. Example: Exploring ways that students' own communities can benefit from the insights of the field or discipline that we teach. This is an example of the UDL principle of	
Designing course materials and activities that help learners develop their skills in accessible ways. Example: Using photos, videos, and interactive models to help students to master a new concept from multiple angles. This is an example of the UDL principle of	

Connecting UDL with Indigenous Perspectives

Earlier in this module, the relationship between UDL and Indigenous ways of teaching and learning was highlighted. At this point, let us pause to learn and think about this relationship in more detail.

Indigenous societies and cultures, even those whose traditional territories overlap, can be very diverse, and it is difficult to make blanket statements about any aspect of them. Instead, let us look at one example of an Indigenous community in Manitoba. Dr. Nigaan Sinclair, a professor in the Department of Indigenous Studies at the University of Manitoba, offers his thoughts on Indigeneity and the university from an Anishinaabe perspective in this TEDx Talk video. While his talk does not address UDL specifically, while you watch, try to identify a few of the ways that we might perceive connections between an Anishinaabeg approach to teaching and learning and the UDL model.

You may choose between watching the full 18-minute video (recommended) or a more focused, 8-minute portion of this talk. In particular, you may wish to give some thought to:

- Given what we learn in this video about Indigenous models of teaching and learning, what do you think an Anishinaabeg perspective would identify as barriers to learning that some students may face within the colonial university model?
- What aspects of the Anishinaabeg approach to teaching and learning do you believe embody values that are also expressed in the UDL model and its three principles: (1) multiple means of engagement, (2) multiple means of representation, and (3) multiple means of action and expression?
- How does Dr. Sinclair's talk itself model teaching practices that foster engagement and accessibility?

You can watch it from the following links:

[What Does an Indigenous University Look Like?](#)

(recommended full video, length: 18 mins)

[What Does an Indigenous University Look Like?](#)

(a more focused portion on sharing knowledge and service; length: 8 mins)

Reflection

Did you notice points of connection between Anishinaabe educational values and practices, and those supported by the UDL model? Take a few moments and jot down some of your thoughts about this.

Dr. Sinclair's talk emphasizes land-based learning. Let's consider the following thinking questions:

- What can we, as educators working with a virtual learning environment, take away from this?
- What features can we replicate in a virtual classroom?
- Are there ways that you can bring the place- and community-oriented approach of Anishinaabe educational philosophy to your online teaching, regardless of your own cultural background and those of your students?

Please jot down whatever thoughts come to mind.

Did you find it challenging to formulate and express your thoughts on possible connections between these two approaches, or ideas about how Anishinaabe approaches could be adapted for your own online teaching needs? Did you find these questions vague or overly broad, especially if these ideas are new to you?

Take a moment and think about what might make this easier for you. For example, what if you had the opportunity to ask Dr. Sinclair clarifying questions about this relationship, or about his own experiences with online education? Or, if, instead of being asked to engage with these ideas through written text, you had the option to convey your response in a visual format, such as on a digital whiteboard or through photos? Or perhaps if you had the opportunity to discuss these connections with a group of colleagues, orally or in a written discussion post or chat exchange?

For some people – often those who have already successfully navigated advanced academic study – working with ideas through solitary written engagement *may* often work

well. But this is not the case for all learners, whose needs and skills may be quite different. We can reflect on the activity you have just done as an example of how the UDL guidelines may prompt us to think about teaching and learning activities in ways that offer diverse possibilities for approaching how we synthesize and integrate knowledge to create deeper levels of understanding. How could you make this reflection activity more accessible to a novice learner by applying any (or all) of the three UDL principles?

While Indigenous people and communities have a wide variety of perspectives on how Indigenous approaches to teaching and learning and UDL may be integrated, consider exploring the content of [this University of Saskatchewan resource on the topic](#). Do any of these ideas dovetail with ones that occurred to you while reflecting just now?

UDL Experiences

In this section are two short videos from individuals reflecting on their experiences with a UDL approach. While watching each video, think about how the perspective aligns with the UDL commitment to promoting holistic access.

Perspectives from Educators – Part One

Morganna Maylon (she/her) is a Student Accessibility Services Specialist at Brandon University. Listen to her perspectives on UDL from the following video [time= 5:32 min]. As you explore the content, consider the following questions:

- Think about the needs you have encountered among your own students, whether they have formal accommodations or not.
- What parts of Morganna’s observations about learning barriers or about UDL resonate with your own experiences as an educator – or as a student?
- Is there anything specific mentioned here that you would like to try implementing in your own teaching practice?

Video Transcript of Morganna’s perspective

Hi, my name is Morganna Maylon, and I use she/her pronouns. I'm a white settler woman with long brown hair that extends past my shoulders and green eyes. Today, I'm wearing a beige wool sweater. I'm a Student Accessibility Specialist at Brandon University, where I provide learning strategies and assistive technology support for students with disabilities. I am joining you today from Treaty 2 Lands, the territory of the Dakota Oyate, the Anishinaabeg, and the Red River Metis. Creating accessible

and inclusive learning spaces is part of the important work of decolonizing education and honoring the many ways of learning and knowing. I am grateful for the opportunity to play, work, and learn on these lands. In my work with students, I often see barriers created by how information is presented. Many courses rely on a single mode of representation, which limits access because learners differ in how they perceive and process information. When content is only available in one format, it can become difficult or even impossible to access.

Students may encounter uncaptioned videos, scanned or untagged PDFs, or visuals without descriptions. Those who use screen readers, text-to-speech software, captions, or other assistive technologies may face immediate barriers in these situations. Beyond representation, I also see barriers in how students are expected to demonstrate their knowledge. Assessments that rely on timed writing or single forms of communication may not accurately reflect what a student knows. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) addresses these issues by offering multiple ways to perceive, interact with, and express understanding of course content. The model recognizes that barriers are usually in the environment and not in the student, and it encourages us to design courses that anticipate learner diversity. What I value most about UDL is its proactive approach to inclusion and student success. In my work with students with disabilities, I see how important this really is. The process of getting accommodations can involve many barriers.

Students may need documentation that is costly or difficult to obtain, and they often navigate extra appointments, forms, policies, and communication steps that students without disabilities never have to consider. Even when accommodations are approved, the process itself can add stress and delay access. It is also important to acknowledge that some students who need accommodations cannot access them at all. They may lack documentation, be managing complex life circumstances, or simply get lost in the system. Without built-in support, these students can fall behind, and it's not because they cannot learn but because the learning environment does not meet them where they are at. UDL helps reduce the burden on students by building access into the course from the very beginning. When the environment is designed with flexibility in mind, students can participate without repeatedly needing to advocate for basic access. This is ultimately what I value most about UDL: it shifts responsibility away from individual students to the institution and the learning environment. I see the impact of UDL daily when instructors provide accessible formats such as captioned videos and tagged PDFs. Students who use screen readers or text-to-speech can engage with content much more quickly and effectively. When modules are clear and not blurred, students with

executive functioning challenges are able to stay organized and less overwhelmed. And when assessments allow different ways to demonstrate learning, particularly in untimed environments, students are able to provide work that reflects their actual understanding. These small design choices often result in less stress, higher engagement, and greater learner persistence. While UDL is supportive of students with disabilities, it also benefits many others who may never register for accommodations or identify as a person with a disability.

Students learning in a second language, for example, may benefit from captions and multimodal materials. Those with caregiving responsibilities or full-time jobs benefit from clear organization or flexible participation options. UDL recognizes that all learners have fluctuating needs and live complex and diverse lives. Accessibility should not depend on whether a student has a diagnosis or identifies as a person with a disability. As you consider implementing more UDL principles into your courses, I think it's important to remember that you don't need to redesign everything all at once. Small changes do and can make a big difference. Consistent weekly structure, captioned videos, adding audio materials like podcasts with transcripts, or offering one flexible assignment option can reduce barriers for all students. Think about accommodations you've supported in the past. How many students needed to record lectures or review material more than once? Providing recordings or multiple formats from the start can support everyone. Have you ever heard of students expressing ideas more effectively in conversation than in writing? That might be your sign to build more flexibility into assignments. It can feel overwhelming to begin, but I encourage you to look at your own courses. Many instructors are surprised to find they're already using UDL practices without naming them as such. Building on what you already do is a great way to continue moving forward and create more accessible and inclusive learning environments.

Perspectives from Educators – Part Two

Claudius Soodeen (he/him) teaches at the University of Winnipeg and is the Faculty Development Consultant at Red River College Polytech. He also coordinates the Academic Integrity course for graduate students at the University of Manitoba. Let's listen to his perspectives on UDL from the following video [time= 4:44 min]. As you explore the content, consider the following questions:

- What are you already doing in your teaching practice that aligns with a UDL approach?
- What's one aspect of UDL-informed practice, as described here, that you would like to implement in your own teaching practice?

Video Transcript of Claudius Perspective

Hi, my name is Claudius Soodeen, and I'm a university instructor, Faculty Development Specialist, and lifelong learner. Much, but not all, of what I've learned about teaching has been through being a student and being exposed to methods and strategies that either worked or didn't work. The fact that I've been a student while teaching has enabled me to be empathetic and see potential sticking points and opportunities for students. I started teaching in person, but during COVID, I switched to online and took advantage of that medium to adapt techniques and assignments. And I carried on some of those techniques and assignments in the face-to-face classroom. So UDL principles are transportable across teaching environments. In fact, I've incorporated UDL principles even without knowing they had an official name. To me, they're good teaching principles, and just made sense. They help all students. One of the fundamental principles I adhere to is that each student is unique. No two students will necessarily learn in the same way, nor will they have the same needs or respond to the same teaching methods in the same way. Therefore, I try to offer a variety of options in terms of support, in-session teaching, and assessment. I cannot offer infinitely variable options, but I can try to meet students where they are. Furthermore, I don't know which students have which particular needs. So by normalizing these practices, students are put at ease, and I don't have to implement as many alternative practices as I might otherwise have to. Specifically, looking at the UDL checklist provided in this resource for online teaching, I made sure I had the following, and this is not an exhaustive list:

- *Explanatory videos for concepts and assignments, which were closed captioned*
- *Recordings of our live sessions*
- *Flexible office hours via Zoom*
- *Variety of activities in class, and*
- *Content related to real-world skills.*

Some of my assessments had multiple parts to allow students to demonstrate their learning in various ways. I also offered flexible deadlines, but within reason of the course. Now, these practices do not solve all learning issues, but they remove some of the common barriers for all learners, leaving specific issues to address. Some of these issues will need to be referred to specialists. Not all problems need to be solved by instructors. Is it more work? Not always, however,

anything to do with media creation will require time and skill, and there are often tools that can make this task easier. For instance, while I use Camtasia for video editing and manually adding closed captions, other cloud-based content delivery apps can auto-caption videos, for example, Microsoft Stream, Panopto, and YouTube.

So what advice do I have? Start with just a few easy practices, but don't start too small. Flexible deadlines and office hours might be a good starting point, but you could also adapt existing assessments into multi-part assignments with a visual or media-based component to complement a written or oral component. For example, a traditional written assignment can be changed to allow students to demonstrate awareness of core principles on a topic via an infographic. Then, of course, depending on class size, you could have one-to-one meetings with them to discuss gaps and to provide further details that would indicate knowledge. Or, you could have them do a short oral presentation in class, or ask them to create a video presentation as an alternative. Ask students what would help them learn more effectively and make that a general discussion point in the class early in the course. You may get responses about small group discussions, oral presentations, practical application activities, and so on. This will identify some solutions to try that students will more likely respond to positively. Don't get discouraged. Not everything you try will succeed the first time or for all students. If you are able to help one student, consider that a win.

Now that you've watched this video, think about how some of the strategies I used might help your students. But also consider the constraints of your course and your own time. For example, who might benefit from flexible assignment deadlines and why? How flexible can you be without negatively impacting the course, student learning, and your own time? All the best with implementing UDL practices into your courses.

Reflection

In the first of these videos, Morganna discussed the ways that singular methods of presenting information and of assessing learning can impede access for students, especially those who are unable to access formal accommodations.

In the second video, Claudius considered how providing choices to learners helps to reduce barriers, and also offered some concrete suggestions for adapting assessment activities.

Now that we have encountered a couple of perspectives from those who have used a UDL-informed approach to teaching and learning, please briefly identify and reflect on one aspect of your own teaching that you would like to enhance using a UDL lens. This could be a specific activity or assignment, or something broader, like rethinking how course content is structured or presented. While reflecting on this, also consider how this change would address a barrier that at least some students face.

UDL in Action

In this section, we examine two case studies in postsecondary contexts, explore the barriers to effective learning, and demystify the way forward with UDL.

Thinking about Barriers: Scenario One

We have just encountered perspectives from those who have experience with UDL. Now, let us think about how we might respond to the sorts of online teaching and learning challenges we may encounter in the virtual classroom. Here is a scenario that you might encounter in your teaching practice.

You are developing a new online course prior to the start of the term, and you have started to receive students' accommodation letters from your campus's Accessibility Centre. Think about the type of requests you typically receive: for extended time on exams and assignments, for an alternative to in-class presentations, or the like. What is one thing you might do differently in this course to reduce the need for students to rely on these accommodations? In what ways would this also better meet the needs of those of your learners who do not have special accommodations, but may still struggle due to other barriers, such as a different first language than the language of instruction or complicated work commitments?

Some possibilities to consider:

- One of the ways you might approach your new course to reduce barriers could include using assessment methods where time parameters are more flexible, such as non-timed exams, or substituting essays or projects for timed testing.
- You might consider giving your students more than one assignment type from which to choose – for example, some students really enjoy delivering oral presentations, but for others, a written paper may be more psychologically manageable.

- The UDL approach strongly supports project-based learning in general, as the greater variety of potential topics and approaches, more complex thinking and organization, and the ability to foster the kinds of skills and self-regulation students will need in the workplace all help to support deeper, more passionate, more accessible learning and enhanced student agency.
- If there are specific skills that your course needs to cultivate – for example, writing a research-based paper – think about how you might proactively reduce unnecessary struggle (and students’ anxious late-night emails to you) by providing more detailed guidelines and links to citation resources right in the assignment instructions. Remember, flexible assignments do not necessarily mean unstructured ones! Especially for students who may lack a strong foundation in some key academic skills, providing explicit guidelines and “thinking prompts” rather than assuming tacit knowledge can make the difference between the ability to produce work they are proud of and turning in assignments about which they feel uncertain, embarrassed, and disconnected – and it can also result in fewer papers that are “suspect” for AI-generated or essay-mill-authored content.

Think about the three [UDL principles](#) and try to identify just one concrete, manageable change you can make that will reduce barriers for these students.

Thinking about Barriers: Scenario Two

Let’s try another scenario – one that many of us, unfortunately, know all too well!

You’re an instructor whose online students seem disengaged from both you and your course’s content. Attendance at synchronous sessions is irregular at best, and you find that students who are present do not actively participate. When students submit work, many seem to have only a superficial understanding of the content and concepts.

Taking inspiration from the three [UDL principles](#), what could you adjust in the middle of the term, when you cannot retool your course expectations in a major way, to increase student engagement?

Write down a few thoughts in the box provided. Or, if you are working with colleagues on this module, take the opportunity to discuss this scenario with them.

What did you come up with?

While ideally, UDL can help us to eliminate barriers before they are encountered, it can also be a responsive strategy for enhancing the learning environment at any point in the term.

- One of these could involve asking students to engage in collaborative discussion in smaller online breakout rooms, to help those who need to “talk through” their ideas to do so in a lower-stress, peer-centred environment, before sharing their ideas more confidently in the larger class environment.
- Sometimes, class disengagement is prompted by an instructor’s overreliance on lecturing. This format of instruction can be especially challenging for neurodivergent students who may struggle with sustained passive attention. But all of us have had the experience of struggling to concentrate on even an interesting lecture when we are tired or distracted by ill health, worries, or other circumstances. When students are struggling to balance heavy course loads, unpredictable health, unavoidable employment responsibilities, and sometimes caregiving commitments as well, the ideal of the well-rested, focused, and alert student who has completed the readings for class may simply not be realistic. One option here is to break up lecture content with short streaming videos, offering questions for reflection while watching them, and following up with class discussion immediately afterwards. Crafting such video-based discussion questions to tie into the assigned reading material, but without requiring direct knowledge of it for participation can prompt some of those students who feel unprepared to contribute.
- “Gamification” is a word that makes some faculty roll their eyes, but the basic idea – that making learning fun through enticing learners to use their minds and skills in new ways or collaborating or competing with peers enhances engagement and retention – can take many forms. These can range from simple games, such as team-based trivia-style competitions based on lesson content, that do not require any specific technology, to ones that make use of free apps, like Kahoot, to prompt learners to engage through their own familiar devices.
- For some students, one of the most important factors in learning engagement is affective or emotional considerations, including feeling acknowledged and valued by their instructor. The middle of the term is not too late to ask students to fill out a brief questionnaire or discussion post “introducing” themselves and offering their thoughts on what they believe they need in order to do their best work in the remainder of the course.

Moving Forward with UDL

Drawing on a UDL approach for planning and teaching a course does not need to be an overwhelming, all-or-nothing effort. In most cases, faculty interested in UDL adapt their courses over many iterations to enhance their design and reduce access barriers.

Choosing even one potential barrier that you can reduce or remove for students can make a big difference in the ability of students to not only survive your course, but to thrive in

their learning!

What is known as the "[Plus-One approach](#)" ([video; 2:19 mins](#)) or adding an additional modality for conveying content or assessing learning -- is an easy way to expand the accessibility of your courses in manageable “bites” over time. You can find a list of examples of these techniques from real educators in the [UDL Plus-One Pledges made](#) section.

Also, consider being open and transparent with your students when implementing UDL-inspired measures, whether you build them into your course design from the outset or pivot mid-semester to enhance your course’s accessibility. Most students want to understand why a course is set up the way it is, and some of them may even be “watching and learning” with the goal of becoming educators themselves. It can be especially helpful for students with formal accommodations to be aware of the ways you have built accessibility into your course. For example, if time allotments for activities or assignments are generous and flexible by design, this may help a learner to decide whether to make use of their accommodations, such as exam rescheduling or booking a test in the campus testing centre, or if your embedded access considerations may already meet their needs.

Applying UDL to Your Course

In this module, we explore how UDL could be used for enhancing our courses, apply a UDL course inventory designed for postsecondary educators, and reflect on how we can enhance courses with UDL.

Using UDL to “inventory” your course

As we have gone over some key aspects of a UDL approach in this module, you have been prompted to think about changes that you might make in your own teaching practice to increase accessibility for both disabled and nondisabled learners. At this point, you will have an opportunity to think about your own courses in a focused, practical, and more detailed way. You will probably find this activity most useful if you approach it with a specific course you teach in mind; you may even want to have a copy of the syllabus on hand to remind you of the course specifics, and on which you can make notes about anything you would like to adjust or change.

Melissa Landers-Potts, a Professor at the University of Georgia, has developed an excellent UDL Course Inventory designed for postsecondary educators to critically reflect on their courses and to decide what areas they would like to focus on enhancing.

The Inventory is divided into three sections, each corresponding to one of the three UDL principles: providing multiple means of engagement, of representation, and of action and expression. As you go through it, try to be as honest as possible with yourself about areas that you feel you are already doing well, ones where you see possibilities for enhancing your teaching, and ones that you simply do not feel you will be able to manage at this time (but may wish to revisit at a future time).

A UDL Course Inventory

UDL provides a framework for optimizing teaching and learning effectiveness based on research-based evidence about how people learn. Thinking about the strategies and methods associated with UDL can be overwhelming at first. This checklist breaks it down into manageable chunks, giving you concrete and specific things to consider about a specific course you teach, in line with the three principles of UDL.

Principle I: Provide Multiple Means of Engagement

Learners differ in the ways they can be engaged and motivated to learn. The strategies associated with this principle help you expand your means of engaging students in your course.

Strategy	I do this regularly	I'd like to try/do more of this	Not right now
I utilize multi-modal teaching techniques that extend beyond lecture (e.g., large/small group discussion, think-pair-share, role-playing, case studies, games, exercises, guest speakers, panels, movies, videos, podcasts, webinars, project- or problem-based learning, etc.).			
I structure class sessions in a way that facilitates and compels <u>all</u> students to engage in communication and participation during the class period.			
I clarify the real-world significance of course content.			

I share my enthusiasm for the course materials with students and justify my excitement .			
I challenge students with assignments that are meaningful to them and speak to the interests of the variety of students in the classroom.			
I use strategies to create a sense of community among students.			
I give prompt and instructive feedback on assignments.			
I supplement lecture and reading assignments with visual aids (e.g., photographs, videos, diagrams, interactive simulations).			

Strategy	I do this regularly	I'd like to try/do more of this	Not right now
I make myself available to students during office hours in flexible formats (e.g., face-to-face, email, online chat, telephone), and they know how to contact me .			
I encourage students to develop peer learning communities , study groups, and resource exchange using technology			
I make sure that my course includes multiple perspectives .			
I provide ample quiet time for students to individually reflect before group activities if necessary.			

I engage students as fellow learners and intentionally demonstrate that I value their ideas.			
I am transparent in why I am having students engage in learning activities and justify assignments in terms of student learning outcomes.			
I am explicit and detailed in communicating my expectations of students in all aspects of course performance and how they will be assessed.			
I use rubrics and other assessment tools for assignments that students see before completing them.			
I use rubrics as a teaching opportunity and spend time explaining assessment criteria and the rationale for using them to students.			

Principle II: Provide Multiple Means for Representation

Learners differ in the ways they perceive and comprehend information that is presented to them. The strategies associated with this principle help you expand the ways in which students receive the information associated with your course content and learning outcomes.

Strategy	I do this regularly	I'd like to try/do more of this	Not right now
My course syllabus clearly describes the content and my expectations of the students.			
I present information in multiple formats (e.g., lecture, text, graphics, audio, video, activities).			
I begin each class session with an outline of what will be covered .			

I summarize key points throughout the class session and tie these points to the larger course objectives.			
I employ technologies (e.g., Perusal , Top Hat , etc.) that enhance learning.			
Students can access and download course materials in multiple formats .			
I maximize eLC tools effectively to enhance learning (e.g., discussions, quizzes, links, conditional release of information/assignments).			
I utilize the work of scholars that represent multiple perspectives in my course to present a broad representation of the discipline.			

Principle III: Provide Multiple Means of Action & Expression

Learners differ in the ways in which they can navigate a learning environment and express what they know. The strategies associated with this principle help you expand the options for student action and expression in your course.

Strategy	I do this regularly	I'd like to try/do more of this	Not right now
I encourage students to demonstrate knowledge and skills in ways other than traditional tests, exams, or formal writing (e.g., projects, portfolios, journals, visual or artistic representations).			
My assessments measure students' achievement of the learning objectives , as they are stated on the syllabus.			
I provide students with opportunities to develop confidence in the content we are covering (e.g., through allowing them time to work through problems, reflect on them, or collaborate with peers)			

before they are asked to share their responses publicly.			
I offer students the option/choice throughout the semester, for assignments to demonstrate their learning (e.g., choice on papers, presentations (live or recorded), PowerPoints, team assignments, poster sessions, role playing, websites, games, exercises, case studies, online discussions, individual and group projects, etc.).			
I provide opportunities for students to learn from each other.			
I use strategies to facilitate group participation and communication outside the classroom (e.g., discussion forums).			
I offer my students the ability to submit assignments in a variety of ways (e.g., electronically or in hard copy).			

Attribution: UDL course inventory is adapted from Melissa Landers-Potts's [UDL Course Inventory](#) under [CC BY-NC-SA 4.0](#) license.

Reflection

Once you have gone through the UDL Course Inventory, please make some notes for yourself about the areas in which you chose “I’d like to try/do more of this.” What is a concrete action you can take to adjust your particular course accordingly? You can use the textbox below if you wish, or make notes separately or on a copy of your syllabus itself.

Finally, what is one area for which you chose “Not right now,” but that you would like to keep in the back of your mind as something you would like to revisit in the future?

Now you are in a great position to start making real changes toward developing your courses to be more accessible and engaging, while fostering increased student agency over learning! Congratulations! Towards the end of this module, you will find some further resources on UDL, which you can explore to continue to build your knowledge and skills on this approach.

Course Closing

Wrapping up our exploration of UDL

In this module, we have:

- Learned about the origins of UDL.
- Recognized what we, as educators, have to gain from incorporating UDL into our course design.
- Reflected on the importance of learner agency.
- Investigated the three core principles of UDL and some of their potential applications.
- Learned about Indigenous perspectives on teaching and learning, and considered their connections to UDL.
- Learned from the perspectives of individuals who have used UDL and experienced its benefits.
- Explored barriers that students may encounter and possible solutions.
- Considered how the UDL model can inspire and guide us to enhance our own courses.

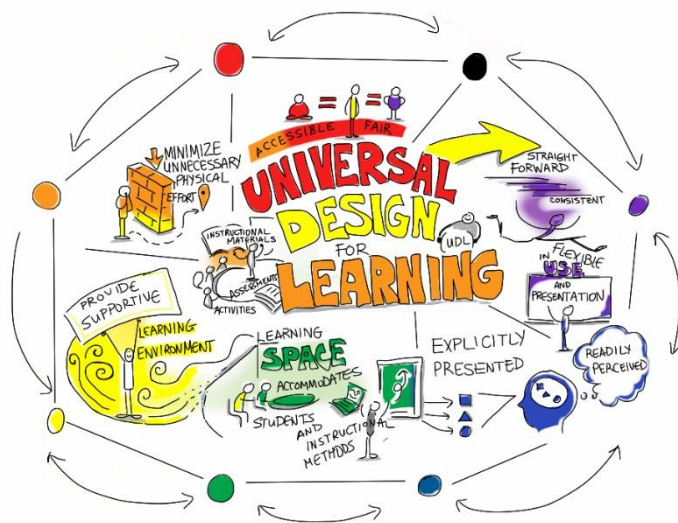


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UDL long image description

The image is a colorful illustration emphasizing the concept of "Universal Design for Learning." At the center, the words "Universal Design for Learning" are prominently displayed with "Universal" in bold red, "Design" in yellow, and "For Learning" in orange. Surrounding this central text are various interconnected elements illustrating different concepts. To the top left, a wall is depicted with an arrow pointing towards "Minimize unnecessary physical effort." To the right, a yellow arrow indicates "Straightforward," accompanied by "Consistent." Below, a box labeled "In Flexible Use and Presentation" is shown with a figure pointing to it. On the left, a swirling design surrounds "Provide Supportive Learning Environment." Towards the bottom center, a group of students is depicted beneath the words "Learning Space Accommodates Students and Instructional Methods." Each feature is connected with arrows, representing an interconnected approach to educational design. The overall layout is surrounded by various colored dots and arrows.

It is important to always remind ourselves that reducing barriers and improving the accessibility of our own teaching is an ongoing journey, not a destination. The UDL model is continually undergoing elaboration and refinement, and our own experiences with teaching and learning can help to inform these processes as well. When we experiment with our courses and discuss our results with our teaching colleagues, we are also contributing to the evolution of the UDL approach.

Thank you for being a part of this journey, and for continuing to help reduce barriers to effective learning for students!

Learn More

The UDL Model

- [CAST and UDL Guidelines](#)

CAST's website has extensive resources for learning more about the UDL approach, including written content on specific aspects of UDL and its application, and video resources, including many webinar recordings that explore UDL.

- [UDL Course Inventory](#)

Center for Teaching and Learning, University of Georgia, developed this inventory under the CC 4.0 license. [Accessed 25/10/2025]

- [UDL Hub](#)
UBC website with information on UDL, as well as experiences from UBC community members and further resources for learning. [Accessed 03/01/2026]
- [Universal Design for Learning: One Small Step](#)
University of Saskatchewan open-access resource for faculty on applying UDL, developed by the Gwenna Moss Centre for Teaching and Learning (GMCTL) [Accessed 03/01/2026]
- [Case Studies in UDL](#)
Open-access book from Trent University Teaching Commons, on putting UDL into practice. [Accessed 03/01/2026]
- [Universal Design for Learning \(UDL\) for Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, and Accessibility \(IDEA\)](#)
Open-access guide to applying UDL to postsecondary education, developed by multiple Ontario universities and authored by Darla Benton Kearney [Accessed 02/01/2026]
- [Culturally Responsive Teaching and UDL](#)
Short article from *Faculty Focus*, including further resources, on bringing together UDL and a culturally responsive approach. [Accessed 03/01/2026]
- [To Cultural Inclusivity and Beyond with Universal Design for Learning \(UDL\)](#)
Blog post, video, and resources on UDL and cultural inclusivity. [Accessed 02/01/2026]

Other Accessibility Resources

- [Accessibility resources by MB Hub](#)

Manitoba Flexible Learning Hub curated course design resources on accessibility in teaching and learning.

- [Ontario's Universities: Accessible Campus](#)

Tools and other resources for enhancing course accessibility.

Indigenous Approaches to Accessibility, Teaching, and Learning

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