

Fostering Student Engagement with Universal Design for Learning

The Michael V. Drake Institute
for Teaching and Learning

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Please sign in and grab a handout!



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Community Norms



1. Listen to understand, not to respond.
2. Allow individuals the time they need to express their ideas fully.
3. Assume positive intent.
4. Own your impact on others.
5. Criticize ideas, not people.
6. Step up, step back (be aware of who has spoken and who has not.)
7. Utilize the oops and ouch system.



Outcomes

Following this workshop, participants should be able to:

- Understand the first principle of the Universal Design for Learning framework: Engagement.
- Articulate how to motivate students in their specific teaching context.
- Identify techniques to welcome interests and embrace identities, sustain effort and persistence in the learning process, and harness the power of emotions in learning.



Icebreaker



What challenges do we face when trying to get or keep students engaged?

OR VISIT: <https://forms.cloud.microsoft/r/qBfgG423V3>



Universal Design for Learning

What is UDL?



Universal Design Vs. Universal Design for Learning (UDL)

Universal Design: Design physical spaces that are accessible to everyone from the start.

- *Examples?*



Universal Design Vs. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) - Examples

Universal Design: Design physical spaces that are accessible to everyone from the start.

- *Examples: ramps, elevators, curb cuts.*



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Universal Design Vs. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) Cont.

Universal Design for Learning:

Apply the same philosophy to teaching by designing courses that are flexible and accessible for diverse learners from the outset.



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Universal Design for Learning (UDL)

- A framework to guide the design of learning environments that are accessible, inclusive, and challenging for every learner
- UDL consists of three guiding principles to design flexible learning environments and support student agency

Design Multiple Means of
Engagement →



Design Multiple Means of
Representation →



Design Multiple Means of
Action & Expression →



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Defining Ability Status

The Social vs. Medical Model of Disability (University of Oregon)

- ★ The first “views disability as a **consequence of environmental, social and attitudinal barriers** that may prevent people from fully participating in society.”
- ★ The second “views disability as resulting from an individual person’s physical or mental limitations.”



Designing for Access

Access vs. Accommodation (University of Wisconsin-Madison)

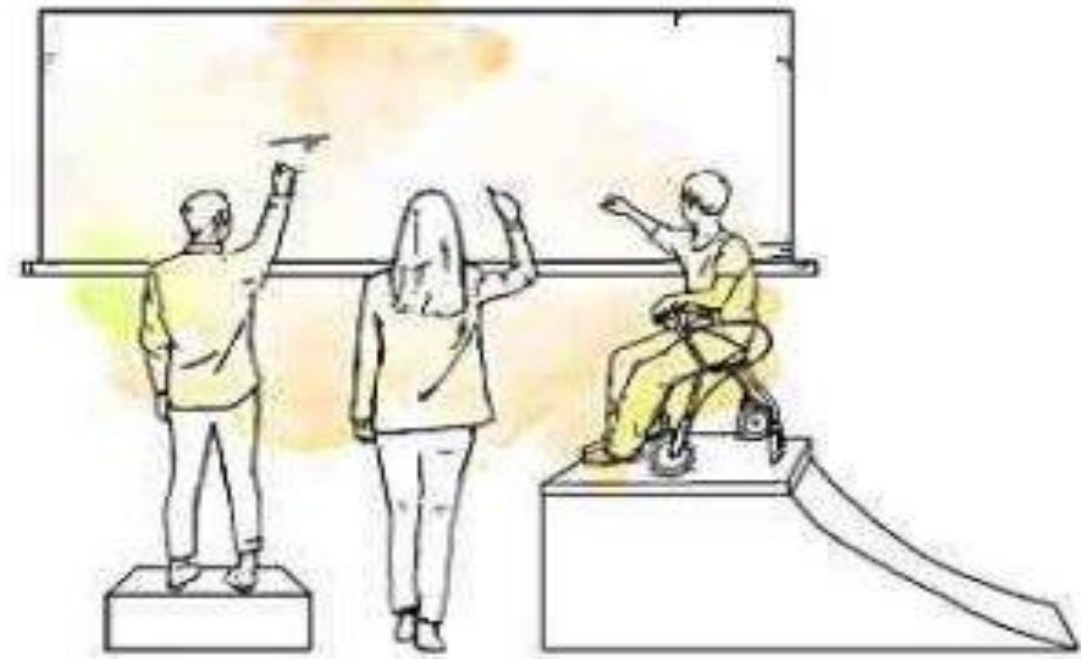
- ✦ The first approach “is proactive and strives to remove barriers during the **design stage** of an event, program, or service.”
- ✦ The second “is reactive and strives to remove barriers caused by inaccessible design.”



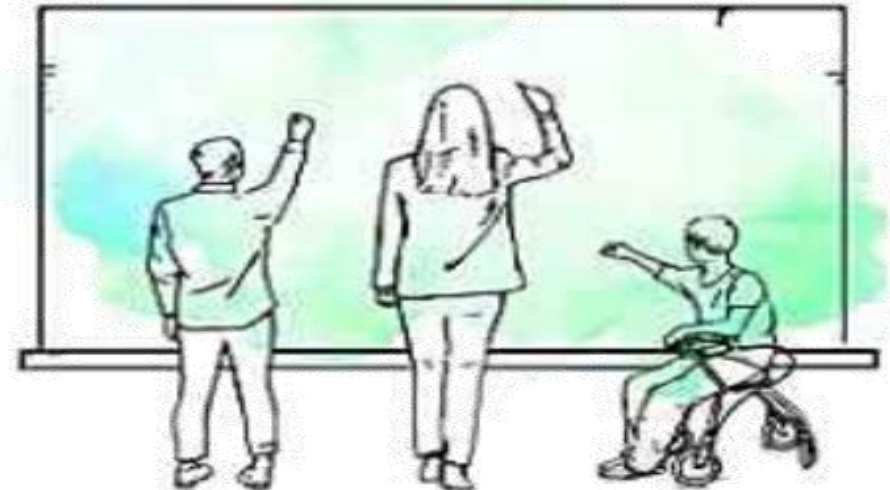
Universal Design

Which one is **Accessibility** &
which one is
Accommodation?

A



B.



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Today's focus: Multiple Means of Engagement

- Principle which centers on offering flexibility with engagement
- The UDL framework emphasizes the idea of learner variability, and the ways that learners' multiple and intersecting identities impact interests, sources of motivation, and preferences
- Students will prefer to engage in different ways – when we design the course or lesson to offer multiple ways to engage, engagement will rise and learning outcomes will be supported



Design Multiple Means of **Engagement** →



Design Options for **Welcoming Interests & Identities** (7)



- Optimize choice and autonomy (7.1) >
- Optimize relevance, value, and authenticity (7.2) >
- Nurture joy and play (7.3) >
- Address biases, threats, and distractions (7.4) >

Design Options for **Sustaining Effort & Persistence** (8)



- Clarify the meaning and purpose of goals (8.1) >
- Optimize challenge and support (8.2) >
- Foster collaboration, interdependence, and collective learning (8.3) >
- Foster belonging and community (8.4) >
- Offer action-oriented feedback (8.5) >

Design Options for **Emotional Capacity** (9)



- Recognize expectations, beliefs, and motivations (9.1) >
- Develop awareness of self and others (9.2) >
- Promote individual and collective reflection (9.3) >
- Cultivate empathy and restorative practices (9.4) >



Sub-Principles

The 'Why' of Learning



Welcoming Interests & Identities



Welcoming Interests & Identities



- Optimizing choice and autonomy
- Optimize relevance, value, and authenticity
- Nurture joy and play
- Address biases, threats, and distractions



Optimize Choice & Autonomy

Give students meaningful choices in how they engage with learning.

Choice can increase **agency, motivation, and connection** when options still align with the learning goal.

Offer choice in:

- **Content** — topics, examples, or contexts
- **Tools** — materials or technology used
- **Process** — how or when students complete tasks
- **Practice** — ways to practice or check understanding
- **Expression** — how students demonstrate learning



Activity: Pick Your Path

You have 5 minutes to explain *why student choice might support engagement*.

Choose how you want to approach it:

- Draw or sketch the idea
- Write a 2–3 sentence explanation
- Create an analogy
- Make a short list of examples
- Talk it through with a partner
- Choose your own approach



Minute Paper: Making Learning Relevant

- **The Course:** Intro to Biology (GE)
- **The Lesson:** Students are learning about cellular respiration, **the process cells use to turn nutrients into usable energy.** During recitation, the TA reviews the stages of cellular respiration using a diagram from the textbook. Students then complete a worksheet labeling the steps and identifying where ATP (the molecule cells use to store and transfer energy) is produced.
- **The Student:** After finishing the worksheet, a student tells you:

“I can memorize all of these steps for the exam, but I don't really understand why any of it matters. I'm not a biology major, and I'm probably never going to use this again.”

How could you modify this lesson to help all your students find relevance, value, or meaning in what they are learning?



Your Challenge

1. You cannot change the learning objective
2. You also cannot remove the required worksheet or exam

Write down:

1. One specific change you would make.
2. Why might that change make the learning more meaningful?
3. How could you avoid assuming that the same thing will feel relevant to every student?



Nurture Joy & Play

Foster opportunities for curiosity, creativity, and enjoyment in learning.

Create opportunities to:

- **Explore** ideas through experimentation and discovery
- **Be creative** through play, imagination, or storytelling
- **Connect** learning to identity, self, and community
- **Celebrate** progress and accomplishments
- **Experience** learning in ways that feel enjoyable and meaningful

Keep in mind:

Joy and play look different for different learners. Build in flexibility rather than expecting everyone to enjoy the same activities.



Activity: What Makes Learning Fun for You?

Think: Think of a time when you genuinely enjoyed learning something (in or outside of a classroom.)

Pair: What made that experience enjoyable?

Share with the class



Address Biases, Threats & Distractions

Create a learning environment where students can focus on learning rather than navigating unnecessary barriers.

Bias, uncertainty, sensory distractions, and fear of making mistakes can interfere with **engagement and participation**.

Reduce barriers by:

- **Building** an accepting and supportive learning culture
- **Examining** biases that may shape the learning environment
- **Increasing** predictability with clear routines, expectations, and previews
- **Reducing** unnecessary sensory or environmental distractions
- **Normalizing** mistakes, questions, and learning through practice
- **Providing** flexibility in participation and social demands when possible

Keep in mind:

What feels distracting, uncomfortable, or threatening varies across learners.



Design options for....

Sustaining Effort & Persistence



What is “Sustaining Effort and Persistence”?

Core Concept & Definition:

- This principle addresses what keeps students engaged after their initial enthusiasm fades, not only what get them started, but what helps them keep going as a task gets longer, harder, or less interesting.

Why it matters:

- This pattern appears regularly in recitation, lab, grading, and office hours, whenever a student who begins strong starts to disengage, or gives up on a difficult problem before really working on it.

Guidelines of “Sustaining Effort and Persistence”



- Clarify the meaning and purpose of goals
- Optimize challenges and support (scaffolds)
- Foster collaboration, interdependence, and collective learning
- Foster belonging and community
- Offer action-oriented feedback



Activity: Scenario Discussion

In small groups, discuss the scenario on your handout: what is happening here, and what would you actually do?

Discussion Questions:

- What is likely causing the students to lose effort or motivation in this situation?
- What specific things you would say or do, and why? (Please feel free to connect with the guidelines and principles)
- What longer-term change might prevent this from happening again?

After group discussion, we'd love one person from each group to share your thoughts with everyone.



Scenario 1 (Group 1)



- You ask students to complete a research project over several weeks. You explain the final assignment and give them the deadline, but students are expected to manage most of the work on their own. After the first week, you notice that several students have made very little progress.
- When you check in with them, they say, “I know what the final assignment is, but I don't know what I should be doing right now.” As the deadline gets closer, some students become even less engaged with the project.



Scenario 2 (Group 2)

- You give students a challenging problem that requires them to apply concepts from several previous lessons. At first, most students begin working, but after a few minutes, some students stop and wait for you to provide the answer. Others repeatedly ask, “Can you just show us how to do it?”
- You want students to think through the problem themselves, but you also notice that some students do not have enough support to continue working.



Scenario 3 (Group 3)

- You have structured a small-group discussion of a case study; you noticed that your students struggle to stay on task. Students seem unsure what to talk about, fail to take notes, and get quiet quickly. When you invite them to share what they talked about, they have little to say.



Scenario 4 (Group 4)



- You return students' assignments with grades and comments. You spend time explaining what students did well and pointing out areas that need improvement.
- However, when students complete the next assignment, you notice that many of them make the same mistakes again. When you ask a few students about your previous feedback, they say, “I understood what I did wrong, but I didn't know what I should do differently.”



Summary - Instructional Strategies

Clarify the Goal:

- State the purpose of an activity before students begin it.
- Break larger assignments into smaller and manageable steps.

Match Challenge to Support:

- Provide appropriate levels of challenge, scaffolding, guidance, and resources (e.g., hints, guiding questions, worked examples) so students can keep working through difficulty.

Build Collaboration and Belonging:

- Assign clear roles or a specific task for group work.
- Check in individually with students who seem to be struggling or disengaging.

Give Action-Oriented Feedback:

- Point out one thing that worked before addressing what needs to improve.
- Be specific about how to fix a mistake, so students know what to do next.



Design options for...

Emotional Capacity



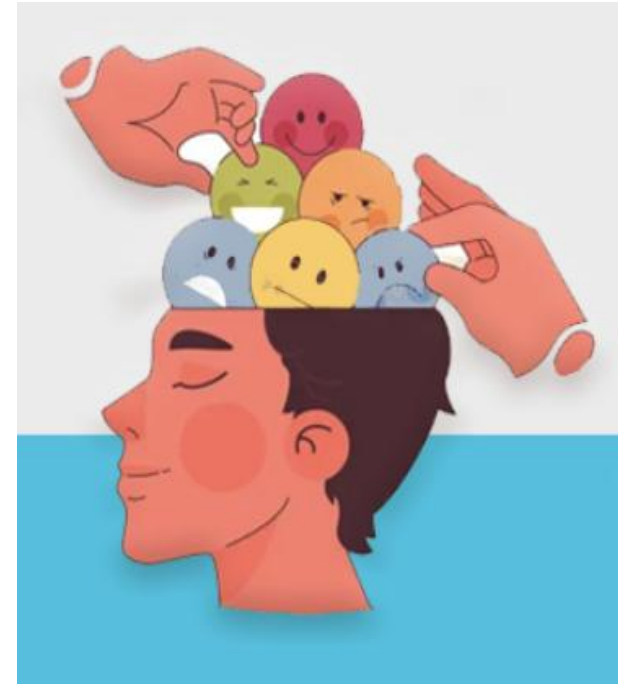
Emotional Capacity

Core Concept & Definition:

- ***Emotional Capacity:*** The ability to **recognize and manage emotions** so that learners can stay engaged, respond to challenges, and continue working toward their learning goals.
- **Example:** A student receives a low grade on a draft and feels discouraged. Emotional capacity helps them view the notes as constructive steps rather than a personal setback.

The Role of the Environment:

- Learning spaces actively make emotional regulation easier or harder.
- Effective learning environments help learners' intrinsic abilities to regulate their own emotions and choose how to move forward in service of their learning.



Guidelines of Emotional Capacity

Recognize expectations, beliefs, and motivations

- Clarify expectations and learning goals
- Connect activities to students' goals and interests
- Invite students to identify what motivates them

Develop awareness of self and others

- Use simple emotion check-ins
- Give students language to express feelings and needs
- Encourage students to consider different perspectives



Guidelines of Emotional Capacity (Cont.)

Promote individual and collective reflection

- Build in short reflection pauses
- Use exit tickets or quick reflection questions
- Give students opportunities to reflect with others

Cultivate empathy and restorative practices

- Model active listening
- Encourage students to explore different perspectives
- Teach strategies for resolving conflict and repairing relationships



Emotion Toolkit: Noticing and Responding

For this activity, we'll build a personal "emotion toolkit" by pairing emotions we notice in the classroom with strategies to respond to them.

- **Step 1:** Fill in the table on the worksheet. Name an emotion you have noticed students experience in the classroom. Then consider how you could help students recognize or express that emotion and strategies you could support them **(5 mins)**.
- **Step 2:** Turn to the person next to you and share **(3 mins)**.
- **Step 3:** Debriefing about what some insights you want to share with us.
 - What emotions commonly appear in our classrooms?
 - How can we help students recognize and express their feelings or needs?
 - What responses help learners move forward?



Emotion Toolkit: Example

05:00

Emotions you have noticed	How could you help students recognize or express the emotion	Responded strategies
Nervous about speaking	Ask students to think about what makes them nervous	• Give students time to prepare before answering. • Let students talk with a partner first. • Allow students to write down their ideas before speaking.

Emotion Toolkit: Sharing

03:00

- Turn to the person next to you and share **(3 mins)**.
- Debriefing about what some insights you want to share with us.
 - What emotions commonly appear in our classrooms?
 - How can we help students recognize and express their feelings or needs?
 - What responses help learners move forward?



Final Reflection



With the time remaining, use the space provided on your handout to consider:

- What are potential challenges to incorporating UDL principles into your teaching context?
- How might you address those challenges?
- What questions do you still have about UDL?



Connecting Engagement to Mid-Semester Feedback

- UDL helps us design with students' motivation and emotions in mind, but student feedback tells us how well that design is actually working.
- **Small Group Instructional Diagnosis (SGID):** a mid-semester feedback tool available to any Ohio State instructor.
- Facilitated by a Drake Institute consultant, who collects anonymous, detailed, and actionable feedback through a short in-class session. The consultant also helps you interpret the results and identify practical next steps for your teaching.



Fall 2026 Toolkit Workshop Schedule

Fall Series – Universal Design for Learning (UDL)

- **October 20** (*Interfaith Room, 3rd Floor, Ohio Union*)
 - Accessibility and Flexibility for Universal Learning
- **November 17** (*Barbie Tootle Room, 3rd Floor, Ohio Union*)
 - Assignment and Assessment Design for Universal Learning

Time: 11:30 am - 1:00 pm (Tue)



Thank You! Questions?



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