Inclusive School Practices Toolkit

Accessibility and Universal Design

This tool has been developed as part of the *Inclusive School Communities Project*, funded by the National Disability Insurance Agency. The project is led by JFA Purple Orange.

## Introduction

It is law that people living with disability can access and participate in education on the same basis as people who do not live with disability. Despite advancements made by international and national agreements and laws, people living with disability continue to face barriers in education ranging from access to buildings to access to curriculum. This tool is intended as an introduction to accessibility and Universal Design (UD) for school staff (leaders, educators, teacher aides, office staff, and other site staff). UD is a way of thinking about environments and curricula that schools can apply to maximize access and participation of all students in high quality inclusive educational experiences. This tool discusses the application of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) to curricula and eliminating barriers. Schools are encouraged to use this information to shape the way they think about and design their environments and curricula to meet the needs of all students. Further information and resources on UDL are available through CAST, a non-profit education research and development organization <http://www.cast.org/>

## Ideas

## *Accessibility*

All schools should be accessible to all people including students, families, school staff and visitors. Accessibility is the quality of being easy to reach, enter, obtain, use, understand, or appreciate.[[1]](#footnote-1) For example, when a building is accessible it allows everyone to access and use it regardless of their abilities and needs. Aspects of building accessibility include accessways, toilets, lighting, furniture, ramps, stairways, doorways and doors. An environment should be designed to meet the needs of all people who wish to use it; this is a fundamental condition of good design.[[2]](#footnote-2) School staff (leaders, educators, teacher aides, office staff, and other site staff) are encouraged to use this tool to contemplate the accessibility of their environments and curricula.

## *Universal Design*

UD is the design and composition of an environment so that it can be used to the greatest extent possible by all people regardless of their age, size, ability or disability, without the need for adaptation or specialised design.[[3]](#footnote-3) It is helpful for school staff to understand UD and how this approach can be applied in their context, especially with an increase in international students, students from cultural and linguistically diverse backgrounds, and students living with disability. Young people living with disability have a right to an education in the same way that other students do, and this right is supported if facilities are designed, planned and built to give the best access, participation and learning.[[4]](#footnote-4)

In education, UD applies not only to the school facilities but this also means developing course content, teaching materials and delivery methods to be accessible to and usable by students across the broadest diversity ranges.[[5]](#footnote-5) Student populations encompass a range of abilities, cultural backgrounds, learning styles and education needs; teaching practices need to maximise learning for the widest possible array of characteristics in the student population.[[6]](#footnote-6) According to the Australian Disability Clearinghouse on Education and Training (ADCET), “curricula and course material is considered to be universally designed if:

* Students can interact with and respond to curricula and materials in multiple ways
* Students can find meaning in material (and thus motivate themselves) in different ways
* Web-based course material is accessible to all
* Information is presented in multiple ways.”[[7]](#footnote-7)

Applying UD in schools enables all students to access and participate in education to the greatest extent possible. Accessibility happens when we discover and break down barriers and create opportunities for everyone to participate fully in their school and community.[[8]](#footnote-8)

## Actions

## *The Principles of Universal Design in Education*

UD is underpinned by seven generic principles and these can be adapted to reflect the education setting:

1. Equitable educational experience
2. Flexible material and instruction
3. Predictable structure and instruction
4. Perceptible information
5. Mistakes are tolerated
6. Eliminate unnecessary physical effort
7. Physical accessibility[[9]](#footnote-9)

It is useful for school staff to consider the above principles of UD.

## *Universal Design for Learning*

Educators need to understand and utilise inclusive teaching practices, anticipating student needs and planning effectively in order to respond to the range of different learning requirements in a diverse student population.[[10]](#footnote-10) UDL anticipates a diversity of learning styles and abilities without lowering academic standards and includes designing curricula to be as accessible as possible from the start minimising the need for adjustments in response to the needs of individual students.[[11]](#footnote-11) UDL is informed by the need to provide learners with variability, in schools and higher education.

UDL provides a blueprint for creating instructional goals, methods, materials, and assessments that work for everyone–not a single, one-size-fits-all solution but rather flexible approaches that can be customized and adjusted for individual needs.[[12]](#footnote-12)

## *How to Apply UDL to Curricula and Eliminating Barriers*

Educators are encouraged to discuss UDL and its application in their classrooms. This may be started through individual reflection or an open discussion at a staff meeting using these example questions:

1. What is my goal? What do I want my students to know, do and care about?
2. What are the barriers? What barriers in the classroom might interfere with my diverse students reaching these goals?[[13]](#footnote-13)

*Figure 1 UDL Guidelines*

A screenshot of a map

Description automatically generated

CAST (2014). Universal design for learning guidelines version 2.1 [graphic organizer]. Wakefield, MA: Author

The three UDL principles can be incorporated into a school’s pedagogical framework. Educators can apply the following UDL principles to create flexible paths to learning so each student can progress (refer to *Figure 1 UDL Guidelines* above):

1. Engagement – the why of learning, which aligns with affective networks
2. Representation – the what of learning, which aligns with recognition networks
3. Action and expression – the how of learning, which aligns with strategic networks[[14]](#footnote-14)

UDL is not a recipe to follow however there are some ingredients that indicate whether the UDL framework has been used to design a learning experience. The following questions, drawn from the UDL Center’s #UDLchat, are useful for building educator’s knowledge and understanding of UDL:

1. How do you know UDL is happening?
2. What are some of the ingredients that absolutely must be present for UDL to happen?
3. How do you, as a designer, know when UDL has happened?
4. How do you, as a learner, know when UDL has happened?[[15]](#footnote-15)

This tool can be used to increase knowledge and understanding of accessibility and UD/UDL. The information and ideas contained here can be used as a prompt for reflection and discussion with school staff, particularly educators, in individual (e.g., staff supervision/professional development meetings) or group settings (e.g., staff meetings). A capable facilitator who understands UDL (the principles, why and how to use it) is vital to engaging educators and other school staff in this discussion and building their willingness and capacity to apply UDL to their teaching.

## More Information

A short video on what is UDL produced by Association for Higher Education Access & Disability <https://youtu.be/AGQ_7K35ysA>

All about UDL <http://www.cast.org/our-work/about-udl.html#.XS6CF_IzaUk>

Examples of applying UD principles in education <https://www.adcet.edu.au/disability-practitioner/course-design-and-implementation/universal-design/>

How the UDL framework guides the design of instructional goals, assessments, methods, and materials that can be customized and adjusted to meet individual needs <https://youtu.be/bDvKnY0g6e4>

Reporting Criteria, established by the UDL-IRN Research Committee Workgroup, which are guidelines for researchers and practitioners who are designing and reporting on UDL implementation <https://udl-irn.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/UDLReportingCriteria_v5.pdf>

UDL Guidelines <http://udlguidelines.cast.org/more/downloads>

## Acknowledgement

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1. National Disability Authority Centre for Excellence in Universal Design (2014). What is universal design. Retrieved from http://universaldesign.ie/What-is-Universal-Design/ [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Government of South Australia Department for Education and Child Development (2016). Effective building practices for children and

   students with disability project report. Retrieved from https://www.education.sa.gov.au/sites/g/files/net691/f/effective-building-practices-for-children-and-students-with-disability-august-2016.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. National Disability Authority Centre for Excellence in Universal Design (2014). What is universal design. Retrieved from http://universaldesign.ie/What-is-Universal-Design/ [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. ADCET (n.d.). Universal design. Retrieved from https://www.adcet.edu.au/disability-practitioner/course-design-and-implementation/universal-design/ [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. TOGETHER WE ROCK (2016). School leadership program tool kit. Retrieved from http://www.togetherwerock.com/sites/default/files/ToolKit\_SamplePages\_web.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. TOGETHER WE ROCK (2016). School leadership program tool kit. Retrieved from http://www.togetherwerock.com/sites/default/files/ToolKit\_SamplePages\_web.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. CAST (n.d.). *About universal design for learning.* Wakefield, MA: Author. Retrieved from http://www.cast.org/our-work/about-udl.html#.XVDPueMzaUk [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. CAST (n.d.). *About universal design for learning.* Wakefield, MA: Author. Retrieved from http://www.cast.org/our-work/about-udl.html#.XVDPueMzaUk [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. CAST (n.d.). *About universal design for learning.* Wakefield, MA: Author. Retrieved from http://www.cast.org/our-work/about-udl.html#.XVDPueMzaUk [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. UDL Center (2019). #UDLchat: The ingredients for making UDL. Retrieved from <https://medium.com/udl-center/udlchat-the-ingredients-for-making-udl-2ed1c0d7590e> [↑](#footnote-ref-15)