



Universal Design for Learning in Social Studies

What Is the Issue?

Students sometimes struggle to access social studies content in meaningful ways, which can result in poor performance and/or disengagement. [Universal Design for Learning](#) (UDL) is a framework that helps educators support all students by integrating choice and flexibility into instruction. Though UDL is often utilized to support learners with diverse abilities, it is designed for all students by offering them customized learning experiences driven by their own preferences. UDL facilitates a mind shift in educators that refocuses their efforts to provide multiple means of engagement, representation, and action and expression at the forefront of instruction.

Universal Design for Learning is a framework to guide the design of learning environments that are accessible and challenging for all.

Why Does It Matter to You?

Educators: UDL helps overcome traditional barriers to learning by attending to learner variability, which is the recognition that each student has a unique set of strengths and challenges that are interconnected and vary according to context. UDL provides a framework for educators to design their lessons, units, and assessments in a proactive manner that accounts for learner variability prior to the beginning of instruction.

School Leaders: UDL aims to improve educational outcomes of all learners, including diverse populations, gifted and talented, and historically marginalized groups such as at-risk learners, multilingual learners, and learners with disabilities. UDL fosters executive functioning skills in students that lead to learners who are motivated, resourceful, and goal-oriented.

Things to Consider

- [Universal Design for Learning](#) encompasses the entire learning process by addressing the “why” (engagement), the “what” (representation), and the “how” (action and expression) of learning.
- “UDL can be applied to the four lesson components—goals, assessments, methods, and materials—in relation to the skills and concepts denoted in an academic standard.” (Rao & Meo, 2016)

- The [UDL Guidelines](#) are a tool used in the implementation of Universal Design for Learning to provide concrete suggestions. UDL guidelines 7.1 and 5.1 address some common barriers to social studies success, such as boredom and retention of information.
 - 7.1 Optimize individual choice and autonomy. In the social studies classroom, this can be achieved by pursuing student-guided questions and topics as well as connecting learning to students' communities and identities.
 - 5.1 Use multiple media for communication. In the social studies classroom, this can be achieved by incorporating audio/visual materials like primary source interviews, interactive maps, timelines, etc.

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

- UDL improves access to high-quality education by ensuring all students have an opportunity to learn and succeed. When educators provide multiple means of engagement, representation, and action/expression, they eliminate barriers that limit student achievement.
 - Optimizing multiple means of engagement allows diverse populations to see themselves reflected in curriculum and fosters student-led inquiry and choice, which leads to authentic representation and participation.
 - Providing multiple means of representation creates an inclusive space where students utilize culturally sustaining multimodal resources to construct knowledge that is inclusive of their lived experiences and cultural knowledge.
 - Allowing multiple means of action and expression acknowledges that knowledge and skills are acquired through varied cultural and linguistic schemas, giving students the flexibility to utilize their strengths to demonstrate what they know and can do.

Recommended Actions You Can Take

- [Engagement of Students](#)
 - Utilize culturally relevant primary sources.
 - Connect learning to current events.
 - Provide choice boards with options for interacting with historical content that leverage a student's cultural experiences and perspectives.
 - Allow opportunities for students to work individually and with peers.
- [Representation](#)
 - Provide multimodal presentation of content, including images, audio, and videos.
 - Modify primary sources to simplify, focus, and increase readability.
 - Clarify vocabulary and symbols.
 - Leverage student-generated representations through blended learning opportunities that

use students' cultural knowledge and prior experiences to understand content.

- [Action & Expression](#)
 - Provide a rubric of expectations.
 - Create multiple tools for construction and composition.
 - Monitor student progress and encourage self-reflection.
 - Design flexible assessments that allow application of skills through cultural lenses and modalities aligned with student strengths.

Reflection Questions

- Engagement
 - What resources and strategies can be used to provide students with multiple opportunities to engage with content?
- Representation
 - What resources, materials or tools can be used to provide multiple means to represent and express information and concepts?
- Action & Expression
 - How can I have my students demonstrate achievement in a variety of ways?

Additional Resources

- [New Jersey Department of Education Universal Design for Learning in Action - Classroom Walkthrough](#)
- [Universal Design for Learning Guidelines version 2.2 \(graphic organizer\)](#)
- [Step-by-Step planner: UDL lesson design](#)
- [Universal Design for Learning for Social Studies](#)

Attribution

Novak, K. (2022). *UDL now! A teacher's guide to applying universal design for learning*. CAST Professional Publishing. Wakefield, MA.

Rao, K., & Meo, G. (2016). Using universal design for learning to design standards-based lessons. *SAGE Open*, 6(4), 215824401668068. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244016680688>