

How Adopting a Universal Design for Learning (UDL) Lense Can Revolutionize Learning and Everyday Living

Last summer, I had the opportunity to spend some time in Valencia, Spain. Valencia is all the things that I adore about Spain – friendly, walkable, full of art and culture, and there was no shortage of amazing and cheap food and wine. But there was something else that really caught my attention: the number of people using motorized wheelchairs in a vast network of safe, and reliable bike lanes. Curb cuts made these bike and wheelchair lanes seamless routes from Point A to Point B. Venturing down to the beach, I watched, an enormous smile spreading across my face, as an elderly woman zipped her wheelchair down the bike lane and rolled directly onto a narrow boardwalk that seemed to go for a half mile across the sand. I was curious about where this led, so I followed the pathway down to a huge, covered platform near the water. Gathered here were people of all ages—people who used wheels of all sorts to get around, whether it was a mobility scooter, a wheelchair, or a walker.

Valencia serves as an extraordinary example of the power of Universal Design Architecture. This concept, coined by architect Ronald Mace, is quite simple at its core: design buildings and products so they are usable by everyone regardless of age, gender, ability, or status. Here at Sterne, we use this same Universal Design framework to create lessons and activities that are inclusive, equitable, and optimized for all types of learners.

To understand Universal Design for Learning, we first have to recognize that UDL requires us to go beyond accommodations for learning. (Some examples of accommodations are audio books or dictation plug-ins, extended time for testing, and Cloze notes, for example.) UDL exists at the edges as a proactive way of thinking and designing lessons and activities; on the other hand, accommodations are inherently reactive, responding to a challenge or need. We can and should use both UDL and accommodations.

I'll highlight two of the most important aspects of UDL: learner variability, and removal of barriers. Most classrooms are not homogeneous, and Sterne exists to

serve all kinds of learners. The very definition of “variability” speaks to change; students will not have the same needs every time they engage with a concept or lesson. Students have unique social-emotional backgrounds, cultural experiences, cognitive abilities, and ways of interacting with content. UDL accounts for all of this. Common barriers to learning are directly related to variability. A lack of background knowledge, executive function challenges, and challenging life experiences all potentially impact learning. Once again, UDL is preemptive.

Choice Boards are a common example of UDL work at Sterne. Choice Boards offer students a variety of ways to show what they know. For example, if the class is learning about short story plot, a Choice Board may include activities such as a recorded dramatic reading of the *denouement*, creation of a detailed plot diagram, a multi-page comic book about the story climax, or a rewrite of the ending of the story or outcome of a character. Even in English class, writing isn’t the only way to show what you know.

I could talk about UDL for days, but I want to leave you with the final thought that *good teaching is good teaching*. We’re often asked about our “secret sauce” here at Sterne, and while we do have an Academic Playbook and we engage in plenty of on-going professional development and training, we understand and acknowledge that there are very few truly revolutionary teaching practices out there. There are only revolutionary teachers who are willing, and able to view the world from a different angle and perspective, get creative and flexible in how they design their lessons and activities, and view our students as the individuals that they are.

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