

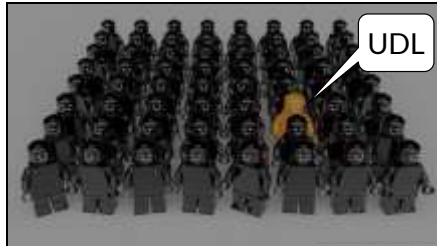
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Secrets of Universal Design for Learning at Scale

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University of Nebraska Kearney
UDL Day
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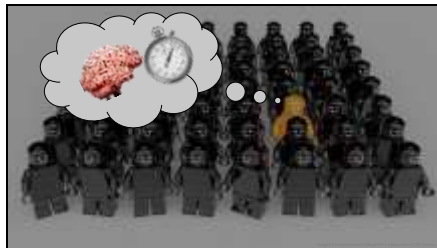
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Welcome to our session. On the screen is a group of 64 Lego mini-figures standing in rows. All of them are identical, except for one that is a different color. Above the different one is a speech bubble that says “UDL.” This is the most common scenario in most North American higher education: even when our institutions adopt goals of inclusive teaching and practices, very few of us actually implement inclusive practices of any kind, let alone a specialized set of principles like UDL.

In this session on “UDL at Scale,” we’ll examine how to move beyond performative inclusion—saying that we value doing the right thing—into active inclusion—creating policies, structures, norms, and practices at the institutional level that create expectations, measurements, rewards, and consequences around inclusive work. We’ll use the UDL framework as a means toward strengthening our systems themselves.

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Now on the screen is the same image of 64 Lego mini-figures, only this time the different figure has a thought balloon over its head that contains images of a brain and a stopwatch. When we encounter this brain and stopwatch, you’ll know that it’s time for a little thinking, interacting, and discussion. Here’s how that can work.

If you’d like to “lurk,” use our thinking time to take some notes about the topic we’re examining: formulate your own thoughts and tie them to previous sessions you’ve attended, resources for further exploration, or actions you want to take to learn, connect, and expand your UDL practices.

Or you can take a more active role: I’ll cue up two minutes of music, shortly. During that thinking time, you have a few options: just think to yourself, take notes individually, or talk quietly with your neighbors.

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For our very first interaction, let’s get into a systems-level frame of mind with this question: what is a policy or goal at your school, college, or university that you have seen, but it doesn’t have an effect directly on your day-to-day work?

On the screen is an image of an administrator sitting at a desk. She’s being inundated by a huge pile of paperwork, and she looks out at us with an exasperated look on her face.

I’ll start the music for two minutes of thinking time, now. Use this time for thinking, note taking, or quiet conversation.

[music playing: “Rolling at Five,” © Kevin MacLeod, used under CC BY license]

Let’s see what themes and common elements we can discern in everyone’s responses.

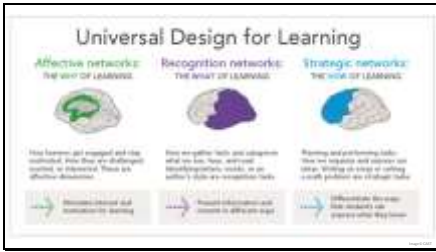
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Now, the aim of this little thinking break is not to show how little we pay attention to the vast reams of policies and documents that are supposed to govern our work at our institutions, but to note that the amount of information that we collectively label as “essential” is far more than any individual can take in, act on, and honor.

When our mental capacity is stretched like this, our brains automatically engage in shortcuts and simplifications. On the screen is a red ball that has crashed a straight path through a maze. Part of the challenge of advocating for universal design for learning is that we’re asking our colleagues to understand and implement principles that can take a myriad of forms. There is no checklist of UDL practices that we can show our presidents, governing boards, and accreditors—yet that’s exactly what they’re expecting of proposed changes to institutional structures and practices.

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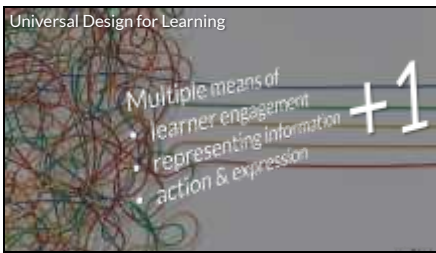


On your screen is the “official definition” of UDL from CAST, showing the three different chemical pathways through the brain that help humans to learn new information: the affective, recognition, and strategic “why, what, how” of learning that involves getting and staying engaged with learning tasks, encountering new information, and practicing with, acting on, and expressing our knowledge.

Oddly enough, the more detail we go into with this definition, the less useful it becomes for scaling up into a campus-wide effort. The challenge is partly that the UDL framework and its 31 checkpoints are not intended to be summative: the total definition of how to accomplish inclusive designs and interactions. Rather, the UDL framework allows practitioners to craft almost limitless variations within the boundaries of the guiding UDL principles.

When we start thinking about why only about ten percent of our colleagues at colleges and universities across the world have adopted inclusive-design practices of any kind, we discover a mismatch between the goals of UDL and the goals of our institutions.

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Even when we simplify the approach to UDL down from the three principles to the “plus one” approach, like the jumble of multi-colored strings on your screen that turn into neatly ordered rows, what’s missing is a meaningful set of practices that an entire organization can agree to implement. The very flexibility of the UDL guidelines becomes a hindrance to wider adoption, because no two instructors will implement it in the same way.

Our campus leaders look to fund and support efforts that can be duplicated, measured, compared, and assessed for value. So how do we do that when UDL itself is emphatically *not* a set of prescriptive actions?

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On your screen is an image of a soccer player about to kick the ball toward the opposing goalie in the net. UDL has three goals: to create expert learners who are

Purposeful & Motivated,
Resourceful & Knowledgeable, and
Strategic & Goal-Directed.

This aligns with the mission, vision, and values statements at most of our colleges and universities. We want to prepare our graduates to be independent and critical thinkers who have the resources and knowledge to be able to be successful in their professions, families, and communities.

So, how do we get from the principles—“multiple means of engagement, representation, and action & expression”—to the goals of “purposeful, motivated, resourceful, knowledgeable, strategic, and goal-directed” learners?

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Here are the brain and stopwatch images again, this time emanating as thoughts from the statue of Socrates at the Academy in Athens. Let’s pause and brainstorm a bit. What is one way that you predict we’ll move from individual-level UDL to UDL at scale?

I’ll cue up two minutes of music again. During that thinking time, you have a few options: think to yourself, take notes, or talk quietly with your colleagues.

[music playing: “Dirt Rhodes,” © Kevin MacLeod, used under CC BY license]

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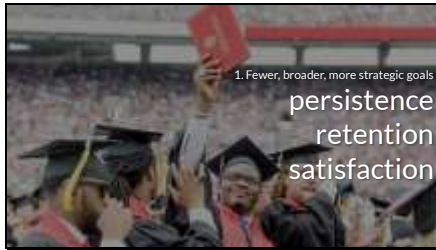


On the screen is an image of a hundred students seated in a theater-style lecture hall. They all have their laptops open. While I would never advocate for large-enrollment courses as an effective way to teach or learn, this is part of the reality on many of our campuses. When we think about UDL at scale, we can talk in two ways: first, about what happens when we make bigger units, like this large-lecture classroom. Second, what happens when we move beyond the units into the level of entire systems: whole departments, schools, colleges, divisions, universities? What changes at larger scales for UDL in both senses of “scaling up”? Five things.

- 1. We adopt fewer, broader, more strategic goals,** and we measure them in terms of overall learner persistence, retention, and satisfaction.
- 2. Individual applications give way to systemic practices.** Instead of effecting changes one at a time and repeating them from person to person, course to course, or service to service, we change the structures themselves, so everyone adheres to simpler, broader inclusive techniques.
- 3. We harness the power of defaults.** It’s amazing how few colleagues cry “you can’t make me do that; I have academic freedom” when everyone follows inclusive practices because systems and services are designed so.
- 4. Our efforts move beyond the classroom and formal teaching-and-learning interactions.** We start to think of the entire ecosystem of the institution and identify where learning is happening during learners’ time away from our formal learning spaces and when they are working alongside support staffers like librarians, tutors, counselors, and so on.
- 5. We weigh academic freedom against access & predictability.** Part of lowering barriers for learners is not making them learn new patterns, systems, and ways of being when they move from one part of our environment to another.

Let’s take a closer examination of each of these five scaling-up ideas and talk about what UDL looks like through these lenses.

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On the screen is an example of the first shift that UDL at scale requires. College graduates in their caps and gowns smile while their loved ones look on in the stadium where graduation is being held. One graduate holds his diploma cover aloft. This is the image that your campus president and provost love to share: successful graduates.

When we talk with other campus leaders about the impact of adopting UDL and other inclusive-design approaches, we should definitely not start with the 31 UDL checkpoints. Rather, our conversation focuses on fewer, broader, more strategic goals:

UDL increases learner persistence. More students who are there on Day 1 are still there to complete the final examination or turn in their course project. We know that UDL has a positive effect on persistence because of large-scale research at individual schools (e.g., [Colorado State University](#)), as well as [meta-analysis of the literature](#) across smaller-scale studies.

UDL increases learner retention. More learners take a course with me and then return next term to continue their educations with you. We know that UDL increases student retention—the holy grail of every provost and registrar—because of its [positive effect on what’s often called the “freshman cliff,”](#) where students enter their studies and stop out for various reasons. By lowering barriers and normalizing help-seeking behaviors, UDL at scale affects student retention numbers.

UDL increases learner satisfaction. Study after study shows that learners who feel strong senses of belonging, choice, control, safety, and agency are [more than five times as likely to be satisfied](#) with their experiences in colleges and universities. Not only do satisfied students stick with us in greater numbers, they are more likely to advocate that others study with us, as well. This impact of UDL, especially when it is adopted as part of a larger push for equitable and inclusive education, is the most easily measured at scale with existing student-rating and exit-interview instruments.

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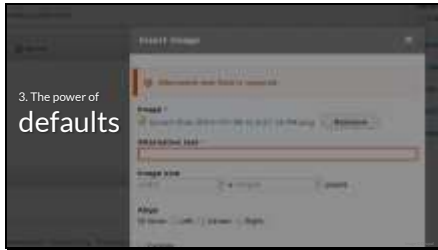


A second change with UDL adoption at larger scales is that individual applications give way to systemic practices. On the screen is a composite image of a hand holding images of mobile phones, laptops, and tablets that are connected by dotted lines to people and systems around the globe.

Imagine that there are twenty steps to perfecting UDL (there aren’t, but think along with me for a moment). Most of our efforts to date have been to train a small, willing group of colleagues to reach Step 20, while the majority of our instructors, staff members, and administrators remain at Step Zero and maybe Step 1.

When we think about UDL at scale, we design our systems and aim our advocacy efforts toward getting everyone in the institution to Step 3. We allocate money, time, talent, and political capital toward these efforts at the level of the entire organization, with the push for change coming from the top down, rather than as a grassroots effort.

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A third at-scale expression of UDL is to harness the power of defaults. On the screen is a dialogue box in a learning management system that warns “alternative text field is required” for an image that is being uploaded.

Reminding people, training people, pleading with them to remember to practice inclusive techniques consistently is doomed to be ever only a partial solution to a challenge that requires near-perfect adoption if it is to be effective. There are already whole shelves worth of legal requirements related to making materials accessible, and yet colleges and universities continue to be sued for their inaccessible materials.

Everyone agrees that taking the time make things accessible is the right thing to do. We can look at the sheer enormity of retro-fitting all of our inaccessible content and suffer from “analysis paralysis,” and we won’t even start.

Rather than trust to everyone doing the right thing, assign resources to create systems that just require good practices, like the required alt-text field on the screen, or a work flow in your media services area that requires the staff to create captions for all video content produced through that office. This part of UDL at scale helps to normalize the work of making engagement, representation, and action choices. It moves accessibility and inclusion from “extra effort” to “everyday tasks.”

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The smiling academic advisor on your screen who is meeting with a graduate student and pointing out career option on her computer screen is an example of the fourth area of UDL at scale: moving beyond the classroom and formal teaching-and-learning interactions.

While UDL had its beginnings in the classroom, it is a framework for lowering barriers across various learning interactions in which our campuses engage. And there are a lot of learning interactions happening in spaces far beyond the classroom, lab, and lecture hall.

Your advisors are teaching students how to navigate the systems of your college or university. Your tutoring staff are teaching study skills. Your mental health counselors are teaching coping strategies. Your librarians are teaching how to assess and work with information. Wherever students interact with support services, think of how they are teaching and learning interactions. If students are learning something—even if it’s not part of the academic curriculum—we can apply the principles of UDL to lower barriers, increase engagement, and support learner voice, choice, and agency.

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Finally, at scale, we have to balance the competing interests of academic freedom against access & predictability for learners. On the screen are two images: one shows a professor sitting on a table at the front of a packed lecture hall, the students leaning forward in interest and engagement. The other image shows two people at a table outside a coffee shop working on a laptop and a mobile phone.

Our instructors have the right to teach their fields in the manner they deem best: that's the essence of academic freedom. As we think about UDL at scale, we should be especially wary of framing UDL as a set of prescriptive actions that force instructors all to do exactly the same thing. Yes, UDL is all about choices, so it's doubly ironic to say "you must" when we're talking about the content, knowledge, and skills in the fields we teach.

At the same time, we should say "you must" when it comes to making our various systems predictable: using the same color scheme, general layouts, button styles, and text names for common controls across our web sites, learning management systems, and other touchpoints. This goes beyond the identity manual and glossary that your marketing team has created, and speaks to having federated style, vocabulary, and operational parameters for all of the base systems that people build on. Your IT colleagues are your allies in this conversation. By the way, we already have predictable systems for our physical environments: they're called classrooms, and they all look and operate roughly the same, except for labs and other special-needs situations. Hmm, why does that sound familiar?

A splendid example is the work that the University of Cincinnati has done to customize all of its student-facing tools to have the same look and feel. They started with [an electronic accessibility policy](#) and worked outward from those guiding principles. Along the way, they discovered that UDL was a framework that fit all of the needs that their policy expressed.

Especially because some colleagues can mistake consistent and predictable access to systems and tools for an encroachment on academic freedom (it's not), it's important for UDL at scale that we get support for those requirements from the administration, faculty senate, academic-staff governance, and any other campus oversight bodies.

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Here are the brain and stopwatch images again. Now the thought bubble is coming from a man in a suit, looking up at us from within a crowd of other administrators in professional clothing.

Let's pause to do some predicting. What is one argument that could persuade your campus leaders to get behind UDL at scale?

I'll play two minutes of music again. During that thinking time, you have your usual options: think to yourself, take notes, or talk with your neighbors quietly.

[music playing: "Deep Haze" © Kevin MacLeod, used under CC BY license]

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When we talk with our campus leaders about adopting UDL at scale, we should rest our arguments on three strategic pillars: access, inclusion, and predictability. Those three words are resting atop three literal Greek columns on the screen. Let's examine why these are the right ways to ask for a UDL approach at scale, using my own university's vision statement and its expression in our [strategic framework documents](#).

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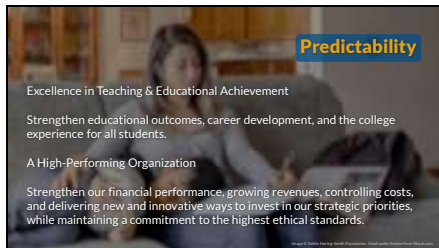
The first strategic priority that UDL at scale addresses is access. On the screen is an image of a graduate student in the library stacks, using his wheelchair to get around. The text on the screen is from the University of Wisconsin-Madison's strategic plan. This is the sort of language that you can find, quote, and align with your UDL message. For instance, we're all about providing and expanding "access to a world-class, affordable educational experience"—it's right there in our vision statement.

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Next in the UW-Madison vision statement is the "Wisconsin Idea" that goes back to the founding of the university: we should be serving the entire state of Wisconsin with our offerings. Inclusion has been part of our university's goals right from the start, so inclusion is a natural argument for adopting UDL ideas at scale. Here again, the language that we use to describe UDL's goals mirrors that already adopted by the institution, and helps us to show alignment to the institution's priorities, like in this image of a group of culturally diverse students smiling for the camera outside our Engineering department's building.

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The woman on the screen is taking advantage of whatever predictability she can: she's on her couch at home, with her book bag, textbook, and notebook open as she studies. Her young child is asleep with his head on her lap, clutching a stuffed animal. This isn't the only sort of learner who benefits from having "learn them once" systems in place: all of us can devote more energy to the challenges of the subjects we're studying rather than to learning new systems and tools at every step.

Predictability can be a tricky part of large-scale UDL to tie in to existing organizational vision and strategy, so look for the language about strengthening financial performance and educational outcomes. That's code for "be more efficient," which means having standardized structures, tools, and practices rather than each silo on campus doing its own thing. If your campus is mostly silo and hardly any "all together," this makes the argument for UDL predictability especially enticing to leadership—and especially fretful for the folks in the departments and units. By focusing our arguments on outcomes for learners, we are better positioned to get buy-in from all of the stakeholders in the conversation: instructors, staff members, and leadership.

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Okay, we've talked about the conceptual framing for UDL at scale and examined how to get buy-in from your campus leaders. Now, how do we actually get UDL to take hold across an entire department, school, or campus? Well, like the concertgoers in the image on the screen who are all holding up their cell-phone flashlights to signal solidarity with the band and with each other, there are five specific techniques that we can implement.

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UDL-at-scale technique 1 is to include UDL-specific principles and goals in the institution's vision and strategic plan. The overhead image of people around a table looking at graphs and charts is a simpler version of this technique. We saw earlier that the mission, vision, and strategic plan for the University of Wisconsin-Madison already contained language that was like the UDL principles and checkpoints. Now, take the next steps and go through the formal process of including UDL itself as a goal for the college or university. This technique takes time, so it's key to start it first.

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UDL-at-scale technique 2: Commit to core UDL applications to be implemented institution-wide, along with milestones for measuring success. At Kennesaw State University, Jordan Cameron came up with [The Basic Four](#):

- **Image alt-text:** the photo of Meryl Streep on your screen has descriptive text beneath it.
- **Basic document formatting:** using semantic structure, list styles, tables, contrast, and descriptive links as in the graphic of a file being composed on a laptop.
- **Video captions & transcripts:** ensure that they are synchronized, equivalent, & accessible, as shown with the captions for a scene with a woman and man reading books.
- **Choosing accessible third-party resources:** perform accessibility testing of existing and new systems with learners from across the ability spectrum (and include mobile-device testing). Don't buy products that don't have VPATs (Voluntary Product Accessibility Templates), and test to see if the claims in the VPAT actually reflect the operation of the tool or product.

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UDL-at-scale technique 3: Get campus leadership to direct funding, time, and people toward the development, assessment, growth, and maintenance of the core UDL implementations in technique 2. Make sure that the responsibility for success is distributed (not just on instructors' shoulders) and funded. The on-screen image of an administrator in a suit offering cash and a clock represents the two biggest predictors of UDL project success.

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UDL-at-scale technique 4 is to provide options within and beyond campus-wide levels of implementation. This is a mind-set shift that seems subtle but which has profound effects on the adoption rate for UDL. Rather than penalizing people who don't adopt inclusive techniques, shift the narrative and the funding toward support. Saying "this is our collective goal and we will support you to reach it" is far more effective than "you must do this by December 31, or else there will be consequences." Like the diverse group of administrators, staff, and instructors giving the thumbs-up gesture on the screen, move from "must-do" to "we will support you to do."

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UDL-at-scale technique 5 is to create faculty-development programming, staff-development programming, IT-level changes, media services work flows, and the like that explicitly adopt the UDL principles. If inclusive efforts fall only on the shoulders of instructors, that's not a systemic change, but a new burden. Engage all of the service areas of the college or university to understand and implement inclusive practices within the scope of their work, such as the media-services area automatically chunking long video content into small sequential segments that have captions added. Because this type of work requires a learning period before it becomes routine, plan for the added time needed for training, practice, and internalization.

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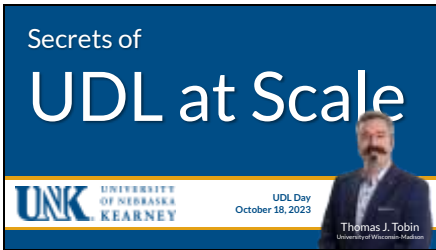


All right! That was a walk through a lot of details about adopting universal design for learning at scale. I'm grateful to everyone who shared your ideas, questions, and brainstorming with us, so far.

A last question for everyone. On the screen is a hand beneath a lit light bulb, symbolizing one piece of new knowledge. Take a moment to think of the one biggest take-away from our time together. What's one thing that you want to remember, try, do, or practice, based on our session today?

We'll do this as a lightning-round exercise, so we won't put music on. Just shout out your big take-away, and we'll acknowledge as many of them as we can.

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