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Making Learning an Equal-Access Activity

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When someone gives you directions to the nearest grocery store, do you understand the directions best when they tell you how to get there, draw you a map, or show you how to get there by driving you? Learning styles vary from person to person. Using flexible materials and teaching strategies customized and adapted to the needs of individual students can give all individuals (regardless of their abilities, backgrounds, and motivations) opportunities to learn.

In the 1990s, researchers defined a set of principles for developing curriculum to accommodate differences in the way that individuals learn. This set of principles called “Universal Design for Learning” (UDL) gives all individuals equal access to learning. There are three main principles of UDL:



1. We must provide learners with various ways to gain information and knowledge.

In the example above about getting directions to the grocery store, some people learn best when they hear information, while others learn best when they see new things or do new things. Present concepts and ideas in different ways. Try using role plays, videos, charts, hands-on activities, manipulatives, multimedia presentations, visual aids, music, apps, educational software, etc.



2. We must provide learners with various ways to demonstrate their knowledge.

Not everyone is able to pass a written test with flying colors. Instead of always giving written assessments, allow students to demonstrate their knowledge in different ways. Try using oral exams, presentations, charts, work portfolios, peer reviews, rubrics, etc.



3. We must provide various ways to engage, challenge, and motivate students to learn.

If students are bored or not interested in the information being presented, or if they are not motivated to learn, then they are less likely to learn. Likewise, when students love learning, they are less likely to give up when challenges arise. Try using different rewards. Allow students to make choices about what and how they learn as well as set goals for themselves.

Learning is not a “one-size-fits-all” activity. Even for the “average” student, learning can sometimes be a challenge. By taking into consideration the three principles of UDL when working with students, learning can become less stressful and more enjoyable.

Resources:

National Center on Universal Design for Learning, <http://www.udlcenter.org/>

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