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From Barriers to Belonging: Universal Design for Learning in Accessible Classrooms

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Abstract

Inclusive design begins with a promise: what is necessary for some should be available to all. In classrooms, this means that spaces and instruction must be intentionally designed to remove barriers to access for students with disabilities as a matter of human rights, while simultaneously offering every learner opportunities to thrive. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) extends the principles of Universal Design in architecture into teaching, ensuring firm goals for learning are met with flexible means for engagement, representation, and action and expression. This article explores how designing classrooms through the lens of accessibility fosters independence, confidence, and belonging, creating environments where all students can learn and grow together.

Keywords

Universal Design, Universal Design for Learning, Accessibility, Disability, Inclusive Classrooms, Belonging

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Introduction

For decades, the disability rights movement has made clear that access is not a privilege but a human right. The 1975 *Declaration on the Rights of Disabled Persons* and subsequent international instruments affirm that persons with disabilities are entitled to the same fundamental human rights and freedoms as others (United Nations, 1975). The proof of this principle surrounds us in everyday life. Ramps, closed captions, audio descriptions, and curb cuts remind us daily that when design starts with people with disabilities in mind, everyone benefits. Parents with strollers, travelers with rolling suitcases, and older adults with changing mobility all rely on curb cuts. Captions support not only Deaf and hard of hearing communities but also multilingual learners, multitaskers, and anyone watching video in a noisy environment. These examples demonstrate that inclusive design does not create "special" features for a few; it creates smarter, more sustainable systems for all. In education, the same truth applies: when classrooms are designed for students with disabilities, they become more engaging and more effective for every learner.

Designing classrooms for belonging and achievement begins with identifying and eliminating barriers that make learning inaccessible. This requires us to critically examine one-size-fits-all approaches, the "tried and true" practices of traditional education, and recognize how those practices can exclude students. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) ensures

that instructional goals remain rigorous and clear, while proactively removing the barriers that prevent students from engaging and showing what they know.

For example, relying only on printed text to introduce new concepts can exclude students who are blind, who process visual information differently, who are still building fluency with decoding, or who are multilingual learners developing proficiency in English. By providing digital texts that can be enlarged, read aloud, or translated, we ensure all students can access the content. Similarly, if instruction is delivered primarily through lecture, the absence of visual supports can create a barrier. Adding visuals and captions not only includes students who are Deaf or hard of hearing but also supports learners who process auditory information differently or who benefit from multimodal instruction.

When educators embrace the concept of "firm goals and flexible means," students with disabilities are fully included, and at the same time, all learners gain stronger comprehension, greater independence, and a deeper sense of agency.

Universal Design for Learning in Practice

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) was first conceptualized in the 1990s by researchers at CAST (Meyer, Rose, & Gordon, 2014). Inspired by the concept of Universal Design in architecture, which emerged to ensure physical spaces were accessible to people with disabilities from the start, UDL

extends that same philosophy into education. The framework is grounded in neuroscience and emphasizes that learner variability is the norm rather than the exception. UDL provides a way to make learning goals clear and rigorous while offering multiple pathways for students to access information, engage with content, and demonstrate their understanding. When instruction is designed with this variability in mind, students with disabilities are not asked to fit into a rigid classroom model. Instead, classrooms are proactively designed to be flexible enough to meet their needs, which in turn benefits all learners.

As an English/language arts teacher, I had to unlearn many "tried and true" practices to create a classroom where all learners could thrive. Handing out novels and expecting every student to handwrite a five-paragraph essay may meet the needs of some students, but it limits others. Just as stairs create barriers for some individuals, rigid instructional practices create roadblocks that prevent access to meaningful learning.

There is no standard that requires students to comprehend a hard copy of a novel or produce their thinking in a handwritten essay. Instead, the firm goals are more flexible. For example, consider the standard: *"Analyze how particular elements of a story or drama interact (e.g., how setting shapes the characters or plot)."* Early in my career, I would give every student a paperback copy of *Lord of the Flies* and require them to write an essay in the same format to share what they learned about how the elements in the story interact. Yet the standard never required those conditions.

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Over time, as I learned more about UDL, my design practices started to shift. Students could still choose the traditional novel, but they also had access to digital texts they could enlarge, listen to, or translate. Some preferred reading aloud together in small groups, while others read independently with annotation tools. To share their analysis, students had options: some wrote essays, others created multimedia projects like videos or infographics, and some recorded short podcast episodes.

In this way, all students worked toward the same rigorous goal. What changed was that every learner had an on-ramp, the opportunity to explore strategies that worked best for them, and the agency to make responsible choices about how to show their learning while I provided feedback, targeted instruction, and facilitated learning. This not only honored student variability but also built confidence, independence, and deeper engagement. And to be honest, it was much more engaging for me!

Designing Flexible Learning Spaces

Physical classrooms must mirror this philosophy. When spaces are designed with disability access at the center, they open possibilities for everyone. Many new school buildings are now being designed with Universal Design for Learning in mind. I recently had the amazing opportunity to present with a group of architects from a firm called Studio G about how the design of a classroom can support flexible instructional practices for teachers.

In these conversations, we explored how classrooms are increasingly being built with distinct zones that anticipate learner variability (Novak, 2024). There may be calming and quiet areas for students who need reduced stimulation, collaboration zones with flexible furniture that can be rearranged quickly, and teacher corners for targeted support. These physical elements create an environment where flexibility is embedded into the structure of the room itself.

Now imagine the lesson I described earlier about students closely reading an excerpt from a grade-level text and demonstrating understanding through a formative assessment. In a traditionally designed classroom, options might be limited and some students would encounter barriers that prevent full access. In a universally designed classroom, however, a student who is blind can access the text digitally with a screen reader, while a student with ADHD can move to a quiet zone that minimizes distractions. A student who learns best through discussion can join peers in the collaboration area, while the teacher provides scaffolds in a small group without removing students from the larger community.

In this kind of space, the goal remains the same for every learner: to access, comprehend, and demonstrate understanding of a grade-level text. The means are intentionally varied, ensuring that students with disabilities are included without stigma while at the same time giving all students choices that build agency, confidence, and independence. Classrooms

designed with flexibility at the core signal to students that they belong and that there are multiple ways to learn and succeed.

Conclusion

Belonging cannot be an afterthought. When classrooms are designed through the lens of accessibility for people with disabilities, they become environments where all learners can succeed. Universal Design and Universal Design for Learning together offer powerful frameworks for creating more accessible, more innovative, and more inclusive spaces. What is essential for some becomes empowering for everyone, reminding us that accessibility is not an accommodation but a foundation for equity, innovation, and belonging.

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