



Shamin Mehrotra has been an integral part of Ummeed Child Development Center’s journey since 2003. As Chief Officer School Ecosystem., Mental Health and Awareness and member of the Ummeed Leadership Team, she brings with her over two decades of experience working with children, families, schools, and systems. As she prepares to lead the organization into its next chapter as CEO, Shamin continues to carry forward its foundational vision of inclusion and hope.

At the heart of her work lies a deep belief in inclusion. Over the years, Shamin has built and led long-term programs that empower schools to welcome children with diverse learning needs. Under her leadership, Ummeed’s School Services team works with educators to create safe and supportive learning environments where every child can thrive both academically and socially.

As a Senior Mental Health Therapist, she also guides Ummeed’s Mental Health Services, ensuring family-centered and strengths-

based care for children with disabilities and their caregivers. Shamin has been instrumental in shaping Ummeed's approach to mental health, grounded in empathy, sensitivity, and clarity—whether through direct therapy, training professionals, or supporting caregivers.

Her leadership also extends to Awareness efforts at Ummeed, where she and her team focus on shifting mindsets around developmental disabilities. From campaigns and conversations to capacity-building initiatives, her work has consistently centered early intervention, inclusion, and self-advocacy, challenging stigma and inviting society to see and support every child's journey.

Shamin's career reflects Ummeed's philosophy of "walking alongside families." She is not only a mentor and therapist but also a changemaker, creating spaces within schools, communities, and systems where children with developmental disabilities are seen, heard, and celebrated. This unique combination of deep institutional knowledge and a forward-looking vision makes her the ideal leader for Ummeed's journey ahead.

She holds a Master's degree in Applied Psychology from the University of Mumbai and a Master's in Psychological Services from the University of Pennsylvania.

UNIVERSAL DESIGN FOR LEARNING: PATHWAY TO INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

Shamin Mehrotra

Abstract

Inclusion in education is not a destination—it is a mindset, a journey, and a collective responsibility. In India, over 50 million children live with disabilities, and many of these disabilities are often invisible and misunderstood. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) offers a transformative framework to create inclusive, empowering learning environments that support every student. By designing for diversity from the outset, UDL fosters independence, confidence, deeper engagement, and lifelong learning. It shifts the focus from teaching to learning, ensuring that all students have equitable opportunities to thrive.

Keywords

Universal Design for Learning (UDL), Inclusive Education, Accessibility, Empowerment, Student Engagement, Lifelong Learning, Diversity, Collaboration, Equity, Good Pedagogy

Introduction

In an era of increasing diversity in classrooms, educators face the challenge of meeting the needs of all learners—regardless of ability, background, or learning style. Traditional teaching

methods often fall short in addressing this variability, leading to disengagement, inequity and exclusion. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) offers a powerful and strategic approach to education—one that anticipates learner diversity and builds flexibility, accessibility, and equity into the very foundation of the learning environment, ensuring every student has the opportunity to thrive.

In India, where being different often leads to marginalization—especially for children with invisible disabilities—the need for inclusive systems is urgent. These children are often misunderstood as lazy or disruptive, and as a result, they don't receive the support they need. Inclusion is not just about physical presence in a classroom; it is about meaningful participation, emotional safety, and equitable access to learning. It is a mindset that values every learner and recognizes that diversity extends beyond disability to include gender, economic status, religion, and more.

Inclusion begins from the heart. It is not a checklist or a destination—it is a journey of collaboration, empathy, and continuous learning. There is no perfect student, teacher, or school. What matters is the commitment to create spaces where every child feels seen, heard, and valued.

What is UDL?

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a proactive educational framework that recognizes learner variability and designs

learning environments to be accessible, engaging, and empowering for all students.

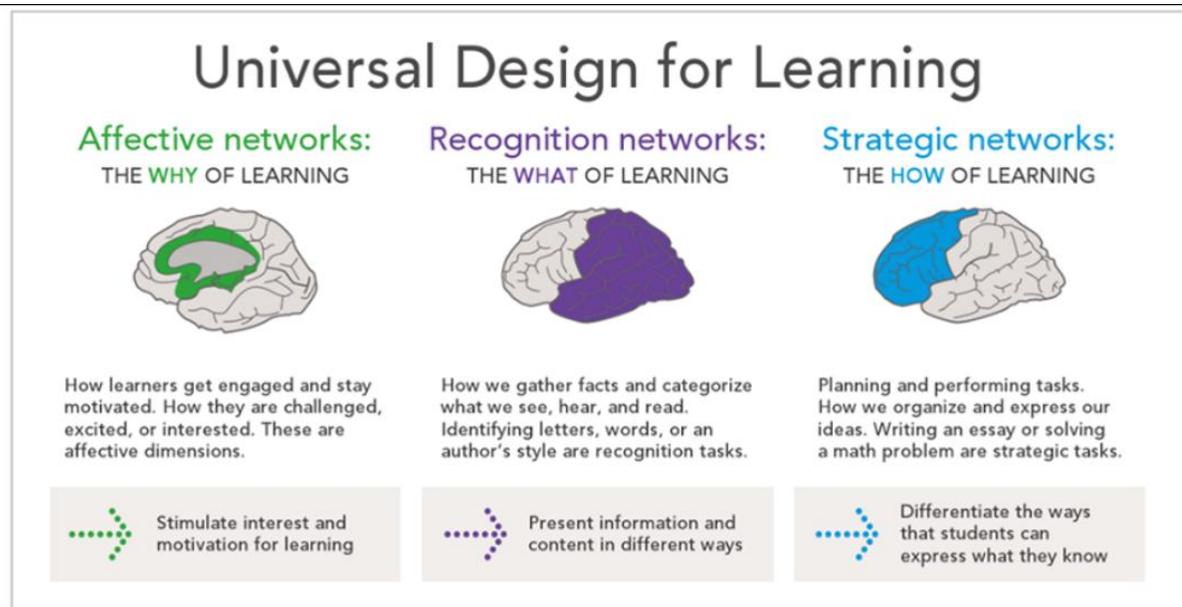


FIG. 4.5. The brain networks ©2013 CAST, INC.

It is built on three core principles, each rooted in how the brain processes learning:

1. Multiple Means of Representation

What we teach and how we present it

This principle focuses on how information is delivered to students. Since learners perceive and comprehend information in different ways, UDL encourages presenting content through multiple formats—text, visuals, audio, tactile materials, and real-life objects.

Practical Tips for Educators:

- **Use diagrams, videos, and infographics alongside written text.**
- **Provide captions and transcripts for audio-visual materials.**
- **Allow students to adjust font size, background colour, or layout for readability.**
- **Use real-world examples that reflect diverse cultures and contexts.**

Think of this like preparing a meal for guests with varied tastes and dietary needs. You wouldn't serve only one dish—you'd offer a spread that includes vegetarian, non-vegetarian, spicy, and mild options. Similarly, representation in UDL ensures every learner finds something they can digest.

2. Multiple Means of Action and Expression

How students show what they know

This principle emphasizes flexibility in how learners demonstrate their understanding. Not all students express themselves best through writing—some may prefer speaking, drawing, building, or using technology.

Practical Tips for Educators:

- **Allow students to choose between writing an essay, creating a video, or presenting a poster.**

- **Use assistive technologies like speech-to-text or typing tools.**
- **Offer flexible seating arrangements to support different working styles.**
- **Encourage peer collaboration and alternative formats for assignments.**

Imagine asking every guest at your party to sing a song to show they had a good time. Many of them may not be comfortable singing- some might sing, others may want to dance, some may want to write a thank-you note. The goal is to let them express joy in their own way—just like students should be able to express learning in ways that suit them.

3. Multiple Means of Engagement

Why students learn and stay motivated

This principle addresses how to spark interest and sustain motivation. Engagement is deeply personal—it depends on relevance, emotional connection, and autonomy. UDL encourages designing learning experiences that are meaningful and culturally responsive.

Practical Tips for Educators:

- **Offer choices in topics, tools, and partners for projects.**
- **Connect lessons to students’ real-life interests and goals.**
- **Use storytelling, humour, and play to make learning enjoyable.**

- **Create opportunities for self-reflection and goal setting.**

Inclusion isn't just being invited to the party—it's being asked to dance. Engagement is the music that makes students want to participate. If the music doesn't resonate, they won't dance. UDL ensures the rhythm of learning is one they can connect with.

Because of the natural diversity, classroom instruction that assumes all students learn in the same way simply is not effective. There is no such thing as a "one-size-fits-all" lesson. At the same time, it is not practical for educators to create an individualized lesson for every student, every day. This is where Universal Design for Learning (UDL) becomes essential. UDL is not a reactive accommodation—it is a proactive design philosophy. Rather than lowering academic standards or catering to every individual preference, UDL focuses on anticipating learner diversity and embedding flexibility and accessibility into instruction from the start. By providing multiple means of engagement, representation, and expression, educators can design learning experiences that are inclusive, challenging, and effective for all students.

It is important to call out that UDL differs from another commonly used term, differentiation. While differentiation responds to known individual needs, UDL designs for anticipated diversity. Differentiation is reactive; UDL is proactive. UDL doesn't require knowing every student's background in advance—it creates a flexible structure that supports all learners.

For example, let's use the ramp vs. stairs situation: If a student in a wheelchair can't access a classroom because there are only stairs, the problem lies in the design—not the student. UDL removes these barriers by building ramps for all learners. Having a ramp doesn't just help the person in a wheelchair—it helps everyone. Similarly, designing for accessibility benefits all students, not just those with identified needs.

Empowering Students Through Thoughtful Design

Thoughtful design under UDL does more than make learning accessible—it empowers students to take charge of their education.

- **Fostering Independence:** UDL nurtures autonomy by offering choices in how students learn and express themselves. Students become active participants in their learning journey.
- **Building Confidence:** Personalized pathways allow students to experience success, reinforcing a positive self-image and belief in their abilities.
- **Enhancing Engagement:** In a UDL classroom, the focus shifts from trying to “fix” students to rethinking the design of curricular goals, assessments, methods, and materials. UDL connects learning to students' interests, cultures, and personal goals, making content more relevant—and relevance increases both motivation and persistence.

- **Supporting Lifelong Learning:** UDL equips students with strategies to learn independently and adaptively. They become resilient, curious, and capable of navigating future challenges.

When learning is designed with universal access in mind, the benefits ripple outward: students with disabilities gain meaningful entry into the learning process, while their peers without disabilities often experience accelerated growth. Teachers find deeper engagement and flexibility in their practice, and classrooms evolve into inclusive communities where every learner feels a sense of belonging. Research affirms that when we design for the margins, we uplift the center—clearing the path for one ultimately clears it for all.

Conclusion

Universal Design for Learning is more than a framework—it is a philosophy of inclusion, empowerment, and possibility. It challenges educators to design with intention, anticipate diversity, and create environments where every student can thrive. UDL is not about perfection—it’s about progress. It’s not about teaching all students the same way—it’s about ensuring all students can learn in their own way. When we design for inclusion, we design for dignity, equity, and lifelong success.

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