Universal Design for Learning and Digital Equity

With a focus on digital equity that moves beyond providing access to devices and reliable connectivity, Universal Design for Learning offers guidelines to support learners through personalization that honors each learner's needs and strengths.

The Digital Divide: Digital Equity and Inclusion

In their **Driving K-12 Innovation** report, The Consortium for School Networking (CoSN) describes digital equity as the interconnectedness of digital foundations, learning conditions, and meaningful learning opportunities. While digital equity has historically been seen as providing equitable access to technologies such as powerful devices and high-speed internet both inside and outside of school, the definition is broadening to ensure students:

- Have the knowledge and skills to use technology for learning;
- Have opportunities to interact with robust and accessible content and programs;
- Have their identities represented with and by the technologies themselves; and,
- Experience meaningful opportunities that empower themselves as learners.[1]

It's important to remember that even if students have access to both devices and reliable connectivity, inequities will persist if they don't have the skills and opportunities to use the technologies effectively as learners and creators.

Insights and Lessons Learned

As the pandemic closed school buildings nationwide, many districts and schools focused on getting wifi-enabled devices into students' hands. Almost immediately, the realization occurred that devices are useless without connectivity. Students, families, and educators without reliable internet access found it increasingly difficult to access resources and materials for learning and to engage in meaningful learning experiences. As noted in EdTech magazine, "A laptop doesn't do anything without connectivity; without access to the internet, a student's productivity, innovation and creativity are stifled."[2]

1. Read more in **Driving K-12 Innovation** from CoSN.
2. Read more in **Without Digital Equity, Students Lose the Opportunity to Learn** from EdTech Magazine

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As districts and schools worked to creatively solve problems and innovate in order to provide connectivity for students, families, and educators, digital equity became top of mind. Even with hotspots and powerful devices, students still struggled to connect with content, educators, and each other. Technology was largely seen as simply a tool or a vehicle to deliver content, while a focus on digital equity challenges people to rethink this vehicle as a way to nurture students' identities, voices, autonomy, and creativity.

These insights into how technologies are viewed and used with intentionality are leading districts and schools to provide students with personalized learning experiences; those with all aspects of learning being driven by each student's needs.

> Learner variability is "a recognition that all students differ, and that these differences matter for learning. If you start with the assumption that there is variability among each learner, different decisions are made on how to create optimal environments and opportunities to support their learning."[3]

> "Not only do students need equitable access, but they also require equitable opportunity to develop as expert learners."[4]

Opportunities to Grow

- Instead of returning to the pre-pandemic learning model, leverage the creativity, innovation, and problem-solving that educators are using to capitalize on the skills students have acquired, including those beyond content knowledge.

- Educators can use guidelines, like **Universal Design for Learning** (UDL), to design learning experiences where students direct their learning in ways that honor the **variability of learners'** needs and strengths including pace, pathways, strategies and how they demonstrate knowledge/skills.

- With digital equity adding emphasis on supporting all learners to use tools to develop important skills, UDL can help students **develop as expert learners**.

- Districts and schools can utilize funding sources to engage in long-term strategic planning. ESSER funding can help support and create sustainable programs for the next 3-5 years and beyond.

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3. **Read more in** Learner Variability Is the Rule, Not the Exception **from Digital Promise**
4. **Read more in** Universal Design for Learning as a Framework for Digital Equity **from Getting Smart**

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What is Universal Design for Learning?

Framework

[Universal design for learning](#) (UDL) is a framework of guidelines for designing learning experiences so students have options for how they learn, what materials they use, and how they demonstrate their learning. UDL focuses on providing multiple means of:

- Engagement (Why)
- Representation (What)
- Action and expression (How)

The UDL guidelines address the why, what, and how of learning and strive to support expert learners who are purposeful and motivated, resourceful and knowledgeable, and strategic and goal directed. UDL views learner variability as the rule, not the exception; an opportunity to explore differences within students.

> "When implemented with a lens of equity, the framework has the potential to eliminate opportunity gaps that exclude many learners, especially those who have been historically marginalized. If we want all students to have equal opportunities to learn, we have to be incredibly purposeful, proactive, and flexible. UDL creates a learning environment that is the least restrictive and most culturally responsive, trauma-informed environment for all students."[5]

The Why, What, and How of UDL

The why (affective networks)

Learners differ in the ways in which they can be engaged or motivated to learn as different tools, topics, and strategies engage and inspire students in different ways.

Action: Provide options for students to build interest and commitment in learning.

Focus on:

- Building interest by sparking excitement and curiosity for learning;
- Sustaining effort by tackling challenges with focus and determination; and,
- Using self-regulation to harness the power of emotions and motivation in learning.

The what (recognition networks)

Learners differ in how they perceive and comprehend information that is presented to them as they have different background information, funds of knowledge, and access to the same language.

Action: Since learning (and its transfer) occurs when multiple representations are used, allow students to make connections within, as well as between, concepts.

Focus on:

- Providing multiple modes of perception with flexible content that doesn't depend on a single sense;

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5. Read more in [If Equity is a Priority, UDL is a Must](#) from Cult of Pedagogy

- Communicating through languages and symbols that create a shared understanding; and,

- Constructing meaning and generating new understandings through comprehension.

The how (strategic networks)

Learners differ in the ways that they navigate learning environments and express what they know and traditionally they have been asked to share their understanding in singular pathways.

Action: Provide students with opportunities to explore how they act and express their learning with strategy, practice, and organization.

Focus on:

- Interacting in physical ways with accessible materials and tools;

- Expressing and communicating ideas using tools that help attain learning goals; and,

- Developing executive functioning by acting on plans to make the most out of learning.

How UDL Supports Digital Equity

UDL sends the message to students that they are more important than systems, they are more important than educators' personal preferences, and their identity and goals are valued in a way that drives instructional decisions. UDL also helps to ensure digital equity for all students, including those with disabilities, through design that provides materials and platforms that are accessible and work with the software and hardware, such as assistive technologies, available to students.[6]

View Additional Resources

Check out the rest of the Digital Equity tools and resources on the
K-12 Blueprint.

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6. **Read more in** Digital Accessibility: How Schools and Teachers Can Support Students with Disabilities in Remote Learning from AIR

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