

The difference between Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and traditional education



By The Understood Team

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is an approach to teaching that aims to give all students equal opportunities to succeed, no matter how they learn. While some teachers in traditional schools may use UDL principles and practices on their own, traditional and UDL approaches to education are very different.

This chart, created with the help of the **CAST**, highlights some of the differences between traditional classrooms and UDL classrooms. CAST, an Understood founding partner, developed the UDL framework.

In the traditional classroom	In the UDL classroom
Teaching focuses on <i>what</i> is taught. The primary focus is on teaching the subject matter students need to learn. Lessons are designed and taught with a “typical” student in mind.	Teaching focuses on both what is taught <i>and</i> how. The primary focus is on finding ways to teach the material to the <u>many types of learners</u> in a classroom. Teachers plan lessons to address a wide range of needs and strengths. There’s no “typical” student.

That often means the teacher will present the material in one way for the entire class. A lesson on the Civil War, for instance, might involve the teacher lecturing the class and writing facts and dates on the board.	The teacher will present the material in a variety of ways. A lesson on the Civil War might include a traditional lecture. But there might also be a video for students to watch or an online class forum for discussion. There might even be a board game that students play to understand the history of the war.
Accommodations are for specific students. Accommodations are only for students with an IEP or a 504 plan, the goal being to help these students learn the same material as their classmates. For instance, a student with accommodations listed in an <u>IEP or 504 plan</u> might get an alternate format for a book, like an audiobook. But alternate formats aren't available to the whole class.	Accommodations are for all students. The <u>accommodations some kids might get</u> in their IEPs and 504 plans are available to all students. The idea behind this is that all kids may benefit from multiple formats. Some say, too, that providing accommodations for all can reduce stigma students may feel about using accommodations. For instance, if a lesson relies on a book, the book will be available to the entire class in multiple forms. That includes <u>text-to-speech</u>, Braille, digital text, and large print.
The teacher decides how the material is taught. The teacher teaches in one way for the whole class, and all students are expected to learn in that way.	The teacher works with the student to decide how the student will learn the material. Teachers and students work together to set individual learning goals. Each student gets to make choices about how to accomplish personal goals. The aim to is to have each student understand how they learn best and become an "expert learner."
The classroom has a fixed setup.	The classroom has a flexible setup.

It looks like a traditional classroom — desks lined up in rows or grouped in pods. The teacher stands in front and teaches to the whole class at once.	The room is laid out with different spaces for different kinds of work — quiet, individual work, small and large group work, and group instruction. Teaching is flexible, depending on the lesson and student needs. The teacher moves around from space to space, helping students as they work.
There's one way for a student to complete an assignment. There's usually only one way for students to show what they know. For instance, a book report might be assigned only as a written essay.	There are multiple ways to complete an assignment. There are many options for students to show what they know, because students have different strengths in how they express themselves. For example, students can choose the format for their book report, such as a video, slideshow presentation, or essay.
Grades are used to measure performance. Students get periodic feedback on how they're doing through tests, quizzes, projects, and assignments. But grades typically aren't used as part of an ongoing discussion about goals and learning.	Grades are used to reinforce goals. Students get continuous feedback on how they're doing. They're encouraged to reflect on their learning and whether they met lesson goals. Grades feed into that discussion.

UDL isn't specifically for kids with learning and thinking differences. But it attempts to build in flexibility that can be adjusted for every student's strengths and needs.

- Learn more about [how UDL can be used in classrooms](#).
- Try these [conversation starters for discussing teaching approaches with teachers](#).
- And see [five examples of what a UDL classroom can look like](#).

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Understood for All, Inc.

96 Morton Street, Floor 5

New York, New York 10014

Media inquiries: media@understood.org (preferred) or [646-757-3100](tel:646-757-3100)