Challenges and Opportunities in Adhering to UDL Principles to Design Online Courses

Ahmed Lachheb, Victoria Abramkena-Lachheb, & Lesa Huber

In this article, we share the opportunities and the challenges in adhering to the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework to design higher education online courses. We highlight specific instructional design examples to discuss the opportunities and challenges that we have encountered. We conclude by reflecting on UDL as a design tool and ponder the following question: Do design tools guide or serve us? By reflecting on our combined 40 years of design practice experience, we believe we offer valuable design knowledge of the UDL framework to scholars of design, educators, and practitioners.

Introduction

The knowledge of design practitioners has always been valuable, benefiting design theory, education, and practice (Cross, 2001; Nelson & Stolterman, 2014; Stolterman et al., 2009; Schöll, 1983; 1987). Scholars rely on designers’ knowledge to understand design practice in situ, to introduce design tools grounded in practice, to develop signature pedagogies for educating future designers, and to suggest ways that can improve design practice. Designers’ knowledge in the instructional design and technology (IDT) discipline is also valuable, as contemporary IDT scholarship emphasized (Boling et al., 2017; Gray et al., 2015; Lachheb & Boling, 2018; Rowland, 1992; Sentz et al., 2019; Sentz & Stefaniak, 2019; Smith & Boling, 2009; Tracey & Boling, 2014). In that spirit, we—the authors who work as instructional and learning designers—share in this
article the challenges and opportunities in adhering to the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework to design online courses in graduate and undergraduate higher education settings. We do so by relying on our repertoires of design precedents (Boling, 2021) and by reflecting on our combined 40 years of instructional and learning design experience.

What UDL Means to Us?

Broadly speaking, a design prescription is a recommendation for how to design something that is authoritatively put forward by a group, organization, and/or entity in the design profession. From our practitioner perspective, the UDL framework fits this definition of a design prescription. It is packed as a set of design guidelines and grounded in the ‘authority’ of scientific knowledge and principles, which mandates to design instruction in a way that results in: (1) multiple types and means of learning materials; (2) multiple opportunities for student engagement; and (3) multiple options for students to demonstrate mastery of learning. Further, adhering to the UDL framework allows designers to comply with accessibility standards as mandated and authoritatively put forward by Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act and to design successful learning experiences. The UDL framework—including its sets of design guidelines—could also be an instructional design theory that fits the learner-centered paradigm of instructional design theories and models (Reigeluth et al., 2017). In this sense, UDL is a theoretical design tool (Lachheb & Boling, 2018; Yanchar et al., 2010).

Throughout our design education and professional training, we have been introduced to UDL through foundational literature (e.g., CAST: Center for Applied Special Technology, 2018; Moore, 2007; Spector et al., 2014). We recognize that UDL has roots in the idea of barrier-free design that emerged in the 1950s across the world (Moore & Ellsworth, 2014). Such roots evolved later in the 1990s when Ron Mace, a Professor of North Carolina State University, introduced Universal Design to advocate for designing physical buildings and environments to accommodate all users, particularly those with physical limitations and disabilities. The most comprehensive definition of UDL that we recognize is by Moore (2007):

Using a set of principles for design, it [UDL] takes diversity of the learner population into account from the start and builds features into the learning materials, environment, and system that allow a broad set of learners to access the learning (both the content and the instructional strategies) and accomplish learning goals.

(paragraph 4)
The Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST)—where the UDL framework originated—defines UDL as a “design approach to curriculum, that minimizes barriers, and maximizes learning for all learners” (CAST, 2010). When we consider these definitions, we can frame UDL as a design framework that advocates for multiple means of engagement, representation, and action and expression. This framework is based on the notion that there are separate networks in the brain (recognition, strategic, and affective) and ponders how these networks should be thought of when designing instruction. A UDL-guided design expects a great variability among students’ needs, preferences, and capacities. Thus, it refutes the idea of one “typical” student persona.

Design Opportunities with UDL

One of the core values that we cherish is that the learning experiences and instructions that we design should be inclusive and responsive to students’ diverse needs. After all, we all remember that one class or learning experience where we felt unnoticed, underappreciated, or neglected. We do not wish for any student to experience the same when they interact with what we design. The UDL framework, in this sense, provides our design work with opportunities to put our core design value into practice, so no student we design for is left behind. Being informed with UDL, we designed—and continue to design—online courses that include multiple types and means of learning materials that can speak to the diversity of students’ preferences, multiple opportunities for students’ engagement, and assessments that include multiple options for students to demonstrate their mastery of learning. Throughout the next sections, we highlight relevant examples to the nine UDL guidelines, as highlighted by CAST (2018). The following table (Table 1) is a graphic organizer of the UDL guidelines and checkpoints, and the corresponding examples and figures referenced in the next sections.

Table 1

Graphic Organizer of the UDL Guidelines and the Corresponding Figures
Multiple Types and Means of Learning Materials

One of the most important points that we discuss in our initial design meetings is the design and development of learning materials. Often, faculty come to us with a predetermined decision about what specific kind of learning material they wish to present to their students (e.g., a paid textbook, a collection of journal articles, and/or only video lectures, etc.). Through negotiation and by presenting to them the idea that learning material variability increases the quality of their course design, we eventually design and develop multiple types and means of learning materials for the online courses we designed. For example, we search for open educational resources (OERs) and advocate for their use instead of (or in addition to) using a textbook (Figure 1). We rely on videos available online and on the institution’s repository of video archives to present rich audiovisual content for students (Figure 2).

Figure 1

Weekly Readings
Authors Note: In addition to the video lecture and the course textbook, weekly readings are drawn from OERs (2-5 bulleted points) (UDL guideline/checkpoint 1.2: offer alternatives for auditory information).

Figure 2

Open Educational Resources Used and Provided

Authors Note: Videos from HBO YouTube channel and a news articles are provided to students as “lecture supplements” (UDL guideline/checkpoint 1.3: offer alternatives for visual information; UDL guideline/checkpoint 2.5: illustrate through multiple media).

Additionally, when we produce a video lecture, we always provide the students with a copy of the slides as a ‘presentation handout,’ giving them the freedom to
watch the lectures, read the slides, or do both (Figure 3a and Figure 3b). Additionally, students are provided with options regarding how they can interact with the learning materials by choosing to focus on the slides or the video feed of their instructor (Figure 4).

Figure 3a

Slides are Attached Under the Video Lecture

Authors Note: *Slides used in the lecture are available for download in a PDF format (UDL guideline/checkpoint 3.3: guide information processing and visualization).*

Figure 3b

Alternative Summary of the Video Lecture is Provided
Authors Note: Slides used in the lecture and an alternative summary of the video lecture are available for download in a PDF format (UDL guideline/checkpoint 3.3: guide information processing and visualization).

Figure 4

Option to Customize the How to View the Video Lecture
Authors note: Students are given the option to customize the way they can view the video lecture (UDL guideline/checkpoint 1.1: offer ways of customizing the display of information).

In addition, given that most courses we design are graduate-level and tailored to specific degree programs, we design activities and materials to activate or supply background knowledge needed for the course (‘Getting Started’ or ‘Pre-Requisite Knowledge’ module, Figure 5a and Figure 5b). In the design of learning materials, we work with faculty to highlight the patterns, critical features, big ideas, and their relationships through creating a detailed course syllabus (Figure 6a), custom course structure and navigation (Figure 6b), and module overviews (Figure 6c).

Figure 5a

Getting Started Module for Students to Complete
Authors Note: The ‘Getting Started’ module is for students to complete before starting the course (UDL guideline/checkpoint 3.1: activate or supply background knowledge).

Figure 5b

‘Civics Refresher’ Module for Students to Complete
Authors Note: The ‘Civics Refresher’ Module is for students to complete before starting the course (UDL guideline/checkpoint 3.1: activate or supply background knowledge).

Figure 6a

Course Syllabus
Authors Notes: The course syllabus shows the course schedule pattern for each week (UDL guideline/checkpoint 3.2: highlight patterns, critical features, big ideas, and relationships).

Figure 6b

Course Homepage

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week/Date</th>
<th>Topics</th>
<th>To Do</th>
<th>Deadline</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Week 1</td>
<td>Course Introduction. Overview of Community Health Assessments and Program Planning</td>
<td>Readings: CDC Community Health Assessments &amp; Health Improvement Plans Self-Introduction Discussion Quiz #1 Mini-Project #1: Choosing Health Topic</td>
<td>8:00 AM ET (1/14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jan. 7-14</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jan. 14-21</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Authors Note: The course homepage shows a custom course structure/ navigation (UDL guideline/checkpoint 3.2: highlight patterns, critical features, big ideas, and relationships).

Figure 6c

Timeline for Module Completion

Authors Note: In an online graduate course module, a suggested timeline for module completion for students is listed (UDL guideline/checkpoint 3.2: highlight patterns, critical features, big ideas, and relationships).
Multiple Means of Action and Expression

Being informed with the UDL framework helped us design multiple means for action, expression, and communication from students. For example, when designing a course site, we ensure that students can easily access the necessary resources and do not have unnecessary items in the navigation menu (Figure 7a). Additionally, we ensure that the course home pages include key information about the course, faculty contact information, and course resources. We do this so that students have different methods for navigation (Figure 7b). Each course we design has a separate module called ‘Getting Started’ that includes sections about accessibility and information on where on-campus students can receive help (Figure 8).

Figure 7a

Course Navigation Menu

Authors Note: A screenshot from an online graduate course that shows a customized navigation menu (UDL guideline/checkpoint 4.1: vary the methods for response and navigation).
Figure 7b
Graduate Course Homepage
Authors Note: Various methods of course navigation in a course homepage (UDL guideline/checkpoint 4.1: vary the methods for response and navigation).

Figure 8

Accessibility and Adaptability Technology Resources
Authors Note: The page includes resources to accessibility and adaptability technology resources (UDL guideline/checkpoint 4.2: optimize access to tools and assistive technologies).

When we design courses, we ensure that faculty have different options to communicate with their students, specifically during emergencies. Thus, as informed by the UDL guidelines on expression and communication, we work with faculty to consider multiple communication means that students can use to communicate with them. For instance, students can email their faculty, send a message through the learning management system, call a faculty office number, or meet via Zoom. These means are usually listed on the course homepage and the syllabus’ first page (Figure 9).

Figure 9

Faculty Contact Information Section
Authors Note: in the course homepage, the faculty contact information is listed (UDL guideline/checkpoint 5.1: use multiple media for communication).

Further, we believe that it is critical that instructional designers and faculty consider and integrate various tools aligned with students’ learning needs and can foster students’ learning. For instance, we work with faculty to adopt multiple technologies (e.g., Quick Check formative assessment tools, assignments tools, and two different discussion tools; one embedded within the learning management system and the other as an external tool). We see firsthand how these tools have fostered learning, community building, and engagement.

In addition, being informed of the UDL framework has helped us design and integrate different types of scaffolds. Such scaffolds have been necessary to guide students through authentic projects, which has required them to apply their knowledge and skills in real-life settings. For instance, in an online course in which students are assigned to conduct their own population needs analysis, they are offered to complete this project in chunks. That is, students’ major project is chunked into several deliverables. The rationale behind this is to engage students in a progression of tasks and provide students with opportunities to track their progress with timely faculty feedback.

Informed with the UDL executive functions guidelines, we provide students with checkpoints and checklists to help them track their learning progress. For instance, each course has an overview page of each module that lists learning objectives, learning materials, and assignments. The rationale for including those overview pages is to help students see the purpose behind each learning activity and assignment and to mentally organize the presented material into a coherent structure (Figure 10a).

Figure 10a

A Screenshot from an Online Undergraduate Course that Shows a Section of a
Week Overview Page Home Page (UDL Guideline/Checkpoint 6.3: Facilitate managing information and resources)

Authors Note: The module includes an overview chart (UDL guideline/checkpoint 6.3: facilitate managing information and resources).

Additionally, being informed by the guidelines of facilitating the management of information and resources, the online courses we design typically include detailed descriptions of all course assignments. We also provide templates that students can use to get started on their thought process and organize their ideas to complete their assignments (Figure 10b). Students can also find a brief description of learning materials, such as readings and to-do lists. At the end of each module, students can find a checklist for each week to help them track their progress (Figure 11).

Figure 10b
Assignment Description

Authors Note: A page dedicated to show the assignment description (UDL guideline/checkpoint 6.3: facilitate managing information and resources).

Figure 11

End-of-Module Checklist
Authors Note: A screenshot from an online undergraduate course that shows an end-of-module checklist (UDL guideline/checkpoint 6.1: guide appropriate goal setting).

**Multiple Opportunities for Student Engagement**

We assert that high student engagement with course materials, activities, faculty, and other students is key for a successful learning experience and, thus, a successful course design. We believe in active learning approaches, which contribute to students taking ownership of their own learning. To this end, as instructional designers, we ensure that the learning materials, activities, and learning interactions are designed for high student engagement. Informed with UDL guidelines of engagement (guidelines 7-9), we design various activities to ensure high student engagement. Graduate courses that we design are often competency-based courses. Such competencies are authentic to the students’ future professional practice (e.g., public health practitioner). To optimize relevance, value, and authenticity of the course, we developed video testimonials from former students (Figure 12a) to address the ‘So what?’ question of learning activities (Figure 12b).

Figure 12a

Video Testimonials from Program Alumni
Author Note: The video testimonials from program alumni highlights the value of the learning experiences the students are about to start (UDL guideline/checkpoint 7.2: optimize relevance, value, and authenticity).

Figure 12b

Rationale for Assignment
Authors Note: The page contains a rationale for the assignment and why it is important (UDL guideline/checkpoint 7.2: optimize relevance, value, and authenticity).

We also rely on group projects and discussions, as well as projects where students work with community groups, to not only foster collaboration and a sense of community but also to increase the authenticity of the learning experiences (Figure 13). Last and not least, to increase self-regulation and to optimize individual choice and autonomy for students, we designed discussion activities in an open-ended way (Figure 14), and we provided multiple formative and informal assessment opportunities for students to check their own understanding of the course materials (Figure 15).

Figure 13A

Screenshot from an Online Graduate Course Group Assignment Where Students Are Asked to Work with an Organization from the Community (UDL Guideline/Checkpoint 8.3: Foster Collaboration and Community)
Authors Note: A group assignment where students are asked to work with an organization from the community (UDL guideline/checkpoint 8.3: foster collaboration and community).

Figure 14

Course Discussion
Authors Note: In an online graduate course discussion, students are free to choose between two formats of introduction posts—a video or a written post (UDL guideline/checkpoint 9.1: promote expectations and beliefs that optimize motivation).

Figure 15
Formative/Ungraded Quiz

Authors Note: A formative/ungraded quiz is included in online graduate class (UDL guideline/checkpoint 9.3: develop self-assessment and reflection).

Challenges of Adhering to the UDL Framework: Obstacles & Opportunities

The opportunities that the UDL framework provides for our design work also come with challenges. Throughout the next sections, we highlight a few challenges that
we encountered, framed as obstacles in adhering to the UDL framework, and we comment on how we addressed each obstacle. These obstacles, despite their immense complexity, challenge our design practice but do not make us less committed to the core values and principles of the UDL framework.

**Interpretation of the UDL Guidelines: Obstacle & Opportunity**

While each UDL guideline’s explanation is provided on the CAST website, these explanations are rather broad, which opens room for ambiguous interpretation—an obstacle that we faced in adhering to the UDL framework. We have witnessed how each designer in our team can interpret these guidelines differently, based on their tacit design knowledge and their core design judgments (Boling et al., 2017). As a result, the variety among the UDL framework’s interpretations led to inconsistent practices and design structures. For example, we had feedback from faculty about how their experiences in designing courses varied as they heard conflicting and inconsistent design ideas and suggestions. It was challenging for us to make sure the framework was applied with the same purpose for which it was designed.

To overcome this obstacle, we dedicated multiple design meetings and conducted double peer-reviews of course design to calibrate our interpretations of UDL guidelines. For that reason, we believe that instructional designers should have a clear understanding of the UDL guidelines, engage in constant reflection on their design practice (Lachheb & Boling, 2021) with UDL guidelines, and operate using the same terms to design appropriate interactions conducive to learning.

**Time Commitment: Obstacle & Opportunity**

The time commitment that we faced in adhering to the UDL framework was another obstacle. Following the UDL framework can help ensure that courses are accessible and responsive to diverse student learning needs. However, it requires significant time to follow UDL guidelines and apply its principles. We all want to employ a thoughtful, slow, and rigorous process for course design. Such a process requires enough time for ideation, iteration, high-quality media production, and formative assessments of our design work. However, with the reality of instructional design work in higher education—specifically, when all modes of instructions need to shift to an emergency mode of remote instruction—we are forced to pick efficiency over effectiveness and appeal (Honebein & Honebein, 2015) and to design a minimally viable product (MVP) in which UDL principles were minimally applied.
To overcome this obstacle, we agreed as a design team on what we call ‘negotiable’ and ‘non-negotiable’ design practices. We agreed that designing accessible and ADA compliant course is a non-negotiable design practice; every course we design must be accessible and ADA compliant. For example, we collaborated with on-campus units that provided us with tools to generate video captions, thus, taking this workload away from faculty and designers. As for the UDL framework, it was negotiable to some extent; time and resource allocations are the main two factors. Additionally, to save time, we include many UDL-informed design ideas in our design templates, as well as design instructional materials that are reusable.

**Resistance to Follow the Guidelines and Design Failures: Obstacle & Opportunity**

While working with different faculty on course design, we noticed certain resistance to following UDL guidelines—a third obstacle we faced in adhering to the UDL framework. The main reason for this resistance is that each faculty approached their course design project with their own teaching philosophy and ideas on teaching. After all, most of the faculty we have worked with are excellent teachers with impressive experience. For example, one faculty pushed back against the idea of multiple means for action and expression when we suggested giving students multiple options to submit their assignment of an ‘elevator pitch.’ They cited a legitimate concern—it will result in an unlevel playing field for students, and thus, it could be an inequitable and a non-inclusive practice. Another faculty was willing to implement the ideas we suggested that are informed with UDL. Still, they insisted on having an efficient process of grading students’ artifacts and not worrying about technical issues they may encounter with the students’ multiple formats of deliverables.

Additionally, in a few design projects, we have experienced design failure partially due to our advocacy for UDL. For example, one design project had to be completed in a short period, and we lacked the needed resources to empower the course design with UDL guidelines. The design project eventually got scrapped. This project could have been successful if we did not face obstacles in collaborating with the faculty, who, in their defense, could not afford to dedicate the time to the course design project that we wanted. Adhering to UDL in this project caused design constraints, thus introducing modes of design failure. In general, most faculty we work with find the UDL framework enriching and good, but it could make the course design experience more intensive and time-consuming. As we understand, time is a luxury for some of our faculty who do not get fairly compensated for their design efforts and the multiple tasks they have to complete;
thus, they deserve our utmost empathy and compassion.

To overcome this obstacle, we had to rely on our repertoires of design precedents (Boling, 2021). We showcase to faculty good examples from their peers to increase their motivation and interest in adopting UDL-informed practices. We also cite personal experiences with teaching and learning to bring more credibility to our UDL-informed design suggestions. We treat each faculty and their course design project as a unique situation in which we address their concerns through empathy and respect.

**Conclusion**

The challenges we faced adhering to the UDL framework do not make us less committed to designing equitable and inclusive learning experiences. After all, design work is by nature always constrained, challenging, and requires—sometimes difficult—tradeoffs. As we commented throughout the paper, we appreciate the core values of UDL, and we continue to embrace them. We think that we are able to strike a happy balance between the opportunities we have and the challenges we encounter in adhering to UDL; thus, we do not have to sacrifice efficiency over effectiveness and appeal (Honebein & Honebein, 2015).

We firmly believe in the following idea: design tools, such as UDL, serve us and do not guide us. UDL, like any other theoretical design prescriptions, must be put in the service of designers’ judgments to design rich, inclusive, and responsive learning experiences. We believe that designers should adopt a designerly approach to design tools’ selection and use (Lachheb & Boling, 2018; Stolterman et al., 2009). This approach means that design tools are serving what the designer needs and not scaffold or direct their design in a predetermined way. This approach also mandates designers to grow a good ability to evoke strong instrumental judgments that help them select what design tools to use, how, when, and why (Lachheb & Boling, 2018; Lachheb & Boling, 2021).

Eventually, designers in our discipline can face the challenges—such as we listed earlier with UDL—by coming up with design tools for themselves, informed by their tacit knowledge and the reality of their design practice. Relying solely on scholarly tools as offered in traditional IDT literature will not get instructional designers far enough in facing their intricate design problems and wicked practice. With a designerly approach to design tools, we can “[...] contribute to advancement in the field robustly and affect positively the types of instructional design problems we can take on and the ability of our designers to flex with the nature of those problems” (Lachheb & Boling, 2018, p. 49).
References


**CC BY:** This work is released under a CC BY license, which means that you are free to do with it as you please as long as you properly attribute it.