

Everybody Learns, Everybody Works: Using Universal Design for Learning in Workforce Development Programs

How Do UDL and Disability Relate to Workforce Development?

Youth with disabilities are highly represented in the workforce development, foster care, juvenile justice, and other social service systems (the next section will explain why), so, whether they are aware of it or not, any professional who works with youth in the workforce development system, works with youth with disabilities on a daily basis. Many of the most common disabilities are non-apparent (such as dyslexia and autism), and are either undiagnosed or undisclosed. As a result, many youth may be unable to fully engage in the learning experiences provided through workforce development programs, and both they and/or the professionals who work with them may be unaware of the reasons why.

UDL makes learning experiences accessible to people with disabilities, as well as anyone else whose learning style does not match that of the hypothetical "average student". By designing workforce development programs along the principles of UDL, youth service professionals can include the largest number of youth in the greatest variety of workforce development opportunities from first contact – even without

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is an educational model for creating general curriculums that are accessible to all learners, regardless of learning style. This information brief is for professionals working directly with youth in workforce development programs. It explains the principles of UDL and how these principles can be used in work experiences and training settings to more effectively and efficiently engage all youth, including youth with disabilities. By incorporating UDL into workforce development programs, youth service professionals can use evidence-based practices to support youth as they prepare to transition from education to the workplace.

expertise in disability or specific knowledge of an individual youth's disability and/or learning style. Furthermore, universal design frequently helps people without disabilities as well (written workshop notes or push-bars on exit doors are some examples), so designing workforce development programs along the principles of UDL could lead to improved outcomes for all participants, with and without disabilities.

Youth with Disabilities in the Workforce Development System

The transition from youth to adulthood is challenging for most young people, however, youth with disabilities are at a particular disadvantage. In general, people with disabilities often face lower educational attainment, socioeconomic status, and overall quality of life than people without disabilities (Kessler Foundation, 2011). Youth with disabilities are twice as likely to drop out of high school (the highest incidence of dropouts among any school-aged population), and half as likely to participate in postsecondary education as compared to their peers without disabilities. In addition, youth with disabilities have difficulties accessing the workforce development system (National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth, n.d.).

As a result, youth with disabilities have insufficient opportunities to obtain competitive employment with the potential for career growth, and experience high unemployment. They are also four times as likely to be adjudicated as peers without disabilities (National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth, n.d.), and are three times as likely to live in poverty as adults.



Given these barriers to education, employment, and well-being, youth with disabilities are highly represented in the workforce development system and need additional support when transitioning from educational settings to workforce development and employment settings. Professionals who work with transition-age youth with disabilities can position them for success by implementing the principles of UDL throughout career exploration opportunities, workforce preparation activities, and workplace experiences.

Background of Universal Design for Learning

UDL is an extension of the universal design concept that originated in the fields of product design and architecture. Universal design creates products and physical environments that are usable by all individuals with the least amount of special adaptation possible (Timmons, J., Wills, J., Kemp, J. Basha, R., & Mooney, M., 2010). An everyday example of universal design is when an automatic door is placed at the main entrance of a building. Since automatic doors can be used by people with and without disabilities, the need for multiple doors is eliminated, and all people can access the building at the same place. Additionally, like many other products of universal design, front entrances with automatic doors do not just benefit people with disabilities, but also parents pushing strollers and workers carrying boxes. In other words, not only does universal design allow people with disabilities to use products and access environments the same as everyone else, but it is also cost-

efficient and convenient for everyone.

UDL takes this concept of universal access and applies it to the realm of education and curriculum design. Since the early 1990s, federal education legislation has placed an increased emphasis on giving students with disabilities access to the general education curriculum, and providing these students with accommodations and modifications if necessary. This has led to educators making adjustments to traditional instructional formats and curriculum materials on a student-by-student basis. UDL eliminates the need for these costly and time-consuming case-by-case alterations by making the general curriculum accessible for as many students with as many different learning styles as possible—right from the start. The principles of UDL take the focus away from individual student's differences and instead draw attention to fixing the traditional curriculum to meet the needs of all students. According to Rose, Meyer, and Hitchcock, "if the curriculum can be flexibly designed, it can meet more learners where they need to be met" (2005).

This is accomplished by providing learners with multiple means of representation, expression, and engagement; youth are presented information and allowed to demonstrate understanding in a variety of ways. For example, learners are given the chance to choose how they are presented information: reading about a topic from a book, exploring the topic through approved internet sites, or listening to a lecture. Youth also have the option of demonstrating

their understanding in a variety of ways: writing a paper, giving an oral presentation, or creating a poster or model of the information. Additionally, learners are given options for means of engagement with information: educators can provide multiple types of reinforcement, vary difficulties of short-term objectives, or adjust the pace in which youth are required to work.

Presenting and responding to new information in alternative ways is often considered a deviation from the "standard" way of learning, but with UDL these alternatives are built into the curriculum so that they, too, are standard. All learners cover the same topic, all acquire the same knowledge about that topic, and all can choose from a variety of different ways in which to do so. In this way, the curriculum accommodates all learning styles from the beginning, eliminating the need to make adaptations later.

Applying UDL in a Workforce Development Program

According to the NCWD/Youth and Timmons et. al, all youth, including youth with disabilities, need career preparation and work-based learning experiences that focus on their individual interests, skills, and aptitudes (n.d.; 2010). This includes:

- Exposure to career opportunities that ultimately lead to a living wage;
- Training designed to improve and practice job-seeking skills and workplace soft skills;
- Opportunities to engage in a range of work-based exploration activities;



- Opportunities to learn first-hand about specific occupational skills related to a career pathway;
- Learning to communicate disability-related work support and accommodation needs; and
- Learning to find, formally request, and secure appropriate supports and reasonable accommodations in education, training, and employment settings (NCWD/Youth, n.d.).

Workforce development programs, therefore, are essential for youth with disabilities, because they focus on these learning opportunities, helping them to develop the skills necessary to succeed in the workplace, earn a living wage, receive benefits, and contribute effectively to society. However, as many youth have disabilities that are undiagnosed or undisclosed, workforce development professionals are often unable to create programs that meet their learning needs. By applying the principles of UDL, workforce development professionals can design programs that are accessible to as many youth as possible from the start – even before disability-specific information is available.

CAST and Timmons et. al. identify several specific ways to apply these principles to career preparation and workforce development programs (2011; 2010):

Multiple means of representation – the “what” of learning – this gives learners various ways to acquire information and knowledge.

Options can include:

- o Allowing access to multiple versions of directions and resources. This includes multiple languages and multiple formats (i.e., oral, tape recorded, typed, written, and/or with prompts).
- o Accompanying key instructions with pictures or photographs.
- o Making media and internet resources accessible and customizable. Allowing for font type, size, color, highlighting, and contrast to be adjusted for the user; limiting unnecessary distractions.
- o Pre-teaching or providing definitions for unknown or complex vocabulary.
- o Reviewing relevant background knowledge and skills.
- o Allowing opportunities for youth to ask questions, review, and practice.

Multiple means of expression – providing options for the “hows” of learning gives learners with alternatives for demonstrating what they know.

Options can include:

- o Allowing options for physical response. This includes the time and range of motion required for response.
- o Giving youth choices of means to communicate understanding: oral presentation, written response, creative expression (i.e., song, dance, poem, poster, story board, comic strip), and/or electronic media (i.e., PowerPoint, blog post, discussion board, social media website, Inspiration software, interactive games).

- o Utilizing reverse teaching. Have youth teach a mentor or peer, create flashcards, or write sample questions.

Multiple means of engagement – providing options for the “whys” of learning taps into learners’ different kinds of interests and motivations.

Options can include:

- o Teaching youth to set intermediary goals.
- o Teaching youth to self-assess work and behavior.
- o Displaying short-term goals.
- o Altering environments for productivity. Isolating and eliminating distractions. Allowing youth to use noise-cancelling headphones, earplugs, or audio devices (i.e., iPods).
- o Allowing youth to choose their workspace and person/people they work with (i.e., individually, with a mentor, with a peer, in a group, or with a family member).
- o Making performance and behavior expectations explicit.
- o Providing behavior-specific feedback.
- o Allowing youth to choose periodic incentives and/or rewards (CAST, 2011; Timmons, et al., 2010).

The following table further demonstrates how workforce development professionals can apply UDL principles to their programs. It outlines challenges youth may encounter during work experiences or job training, along with ways to help them meet these challenges. These strategies help youth become more actively involved and effective learners and are beneficial for all participants, with and without disabilities.

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Table 1.1: Work-Related Processing Challenges and UDL Strategies to Address them

Processing Challenges in Work Experiences or Training Settings	Long Term Instructional Goals	How Workforce Development Professionals Can Facilitate Learning		
		UDL Principle		
		Multiple Means of Representation	Multiple Means of Expression	Multiple Means of Engagement
Job tasks and training materials that require substantial abstract reasoning	- Learn to seek more examples, explanations, and interpretations through questioning and research	- Provide multiple examples and interpretations	- Have youth teach a peer or mentor the material	- Provide youth with visual cues for moving from one step to the next
Complex job tasks or training materials that are not clearly organized	- Learn to chunk tasks - Learn to graphically represent complex information - Ask clarifying questions	- Present tasks and information in multiple ways (i.e., written, typed, in audio format, on the internet, etc.)	- Allow youth to organize information in a way that makes most sense to them	- Break down information or tasks into smaller chunks
Job tasks or training materials that require basic academic skills or cognitive strategies beyond those of the individual	- Receive intensive instruction in learning strategies	- Provide cues and prompts about how to approach completing tasks (i.e., number list of tasks, a schedule with tasks, etc)	- Allow additional time for youth to respond (i.e. asking questions before break, lunch, or at the end of the day to allow processing time)	- Teach youth to develop short-term goals to help them in their process of completing a larger, more complex task
Job tasks and training materials that may not have a connection with an individual's previous experiences, do not connect with current life activities, or are not initially interesting	- Search for personal connections to make content relevant - Learn self-management strategies for maintaining attention in a variety of situations	- Provide information and assignments in ways that build on an individual's strengths and interests (i.e., explain how task connects to future career interests)	- Allow participant to choose his/her desired method of demonstrating and expressing knowledge (i.e., create PowerPoint of information, use chart to track progress)	- Provide incentives and opportunities for reinforcement - Have youth identify connections to their past experiences
Job tasks and training materials that may seek responses and look for outcomes that are unfamiliar to youth and young adults	- Learn to check and redo work - Ask clarifying questions or for help when needed - Learn to identify performance expectations	- Utilize activities that are similar in format to past activities - Provide opportunities for youth to ask clarifying questions	- Provide incomplete thought webs or outlines so youth can fill in missing information (i.e., use a sample web for a well-known topic with a partial new topic web)	- Make learning and performance expectations explicit - Teach youth to self-evaluate work (i.e., create weekly or daily self-rating sheets for youth to complete)

(Adapted from CAST, 2011 and Timmons, et. al, 2010)



Conclusion

Universal Design for Learning is a set of principles for designing educational materials and instruction methods that offer learners flexible means of representation, expression, and engagement. In doing so, a UDL approach accommodates all learning styles with the least amount of individual alterations possible. Given that youth with disabilities often have diverse learning needs that are not met by traditional instruction methods, and that there are many youth with disabilities (some undiagnosed or undisclosed) being served by the workforce development system, the principles of UDL are particularly relevant to workforce development professionals. By providing options for the “whats”, “hows”, and “whys” of learning in work experiences and training settings, workforce development professionals can help *all* youth access the opportunities and learn the skills necessary for transitioning into and succeeding in the workplace.

Resources

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The National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth (NCWD/Youth) is composed of partners with expertise in disability, education, employment, and workforce development issues. NCWD/Youth is housed at the Institute for Educational Leadership in Washington, DC. The Collaborative is charged with assisting state and local workforce development systems to integrate youth with disabilities into their service strategies. This Information Brief was written by Patricia D. Gill and Christine Douthwaite. To obtain this publication in an alternate format please contact the Collaborative at 877-871-0744 toll free or email contact@ncwd-youth.info. This Information Brief is part of a series of publications and newsletters prepared by the NCWD/Youth. All publications will be posted on the NCWD/Youth website at www.ncwd-youth.info. Please visit our site to sign up to be notified of future publications. This document was developed by the National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth, funded by a grant/contract/cooperative agreement from the U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Disability Employment Policy (Number #OD-16519-07-75-4-11). The opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the position or policy of the U.S. Department of Labor. Nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply the endorsement by the U.S. Department of Labor. Individuals may produce any part of this document. Please credit the source and support of federal funds.

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