How to Make Personalized Learning a Reality in Your District

Consider implementing a learning management system to use Universal Design for Learning principles to personalize learning for all students. Schools in Indiana and Texas did just that when they chose to revamp everything from curriculum to professional development.
Introduction

One of the great benefits of integrating technology into the classroom is that it facilitates personalized learning in a way that was not previously possible. The learning platform that districts choose should provide a safe environment where students can explore, create, collaborate, communicate, and reflect on their learning goals. Personalized learning is not a playlist of curriculum activities predetermined by the teacher. In personalized learning, students take responsibility and drive their own learning by making choices that allow them to create as well as consume content.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) provides a framework for educators who want to shape individual learning paths to the interests and talents of each student. UDL is a set of principles for curriculum development that guide educators in creating equal opportunities for all students to learn. UDL requires that teachers and students shift roles as they collaborate around student-driven learning paths. When students exercise choice in the learning process, student engagement increases and deeper learning occurs. In this collaborative learning environment the teacher’s role shifts to that of facilitator, guiding students to make learning choices for themselves.

The new Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) for K–12 education specifically endorses UDL and restores responsibility to the states to choose assessments and interventions. ESSA uses the same definition of UDL as that found in the Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008.

“Universal Design for Learning means a scientifically valid framework for guiding educational practice that—(A) provides flexibility in the ways information is presented, in the ways students respond or demonstrate knowledge and skills, and in the ways students are engaged; and (B) reduces barriers in instruction, provides appropriate accommodations, supports, and challenges, and maintains high achievement expectations for all students, including students with disabilities and students who are limited English proficient.”

The major takeaway here is that UDL is not a prescribed curriculum but a way to present content and demonstrate skill mastery that can be embedded in lessons and throughout the school to create a new kind of learning community. UDL requires that educators accept that there is more than one way to learn and demonstrate knowledge. This is a significant departure from traditional one-size-fits-all pedagogy.

When they approach lesson design from a UDL perspective, educators address the range of needs of all students—even those at the high and low ends of the learning spectrum.

UDL provides a framework that ensures all learners have equal access to learning.
Bartholomew Consolidated School Corporation

Bartholomew Consolidated School Corporation (BCSC) is a rural school district with 17 schools and 11,500 students located in Columbus, Indiana, 45 miles south of Indianapolis. District leaders wanted to develop a strategic plan to support all-the-time, anywhere learning and were looking for a systematic way to personalize learning for all students when they came across UDL.

“We looked at everything the district was doing and was required to implement and knew we needed to tie everything together,” says administrator George Van Horn. “Agreeing that UDL was the framework to do this was a crucial step. From there we developed a district-wide plan. We established UDL as the overarching framework so as we add initiatives like project-based learning, the UDL principles guide their inclusion into the work.”

Today, about 98 percent of teachers and students at BCSC are using the itslearning system. Nick Williams, coordinator of instructional technology, says the implementation aligns well with the district’s strategic plan and 10-year commitment to universal design. “As an organization,” says Williams, “itslearning has really grasped and met our needs.”

“A common concern teachers have when changing their teaching strategies and using UDL is the perceived loss of control. “The key part is letting go and knowing that it’s okay and they’re still going to learn,” a BCSC teacher says. “I have found over the past three years that I’ve been here that the more that I let go and give control to my students, the more success that I see in the classroom.”

Individual students have also experienced the impact of the new LMS. When a speech-impaired student in the first grade was unable to communicate with teachers and other students, for example, itslearning proved to be a valuable facilitator. The student recorded videos on itslearning and shared them with her classmates. This process gave her the confidence to begin communicating openly. “Now she’s talking to all of her classmates,” says Williams, “and even doing presentations for fourth graders on how to use the itslearning video tool.”

“UDL made sense for our district because the neuroscience behind UDL aligned with the district beliefs about how each student is different and learns differently,”

Bill Jenson, BCSC Director of Secondary Education
The Promise of Personalized Learning

The terms “personalized learning” and “individualized learning” are often used interchangeably. According to experts, however, they are not the same. Personalization is learner driven, whereas individualized learning and differentiated learning are teacher driven. For both individualization and differentiation, the focus is on the teacher differentiating the instruction to meet the needs of all learners. The learning is not personal, and it does not begin with the learner (Bray and McClaskey, 2015).

Personalized learning depends on students’ motivation to learn. Author Daniel Pink refers to autonomy, mastery, and purpose as the “motivation trifecta.” This reflects our “deeply human need to direct our own lives, to learn and create new things and do better by ourselves and our world.” We find this idea embedded in the “trifecta” of student learning:

- **Motivation:** Without motivation, there is no push to learn.
- **Engagement:** Without engagement, there is no way to learn.
- **Voice:** Without voice, there is no authenticity in learning.

Researchers report that “Providing opportunities for choice, control, and collaboration are potent strategies for increasing academic achievement. Young people are likely to be more motivated and engaged in an activity when they feel they have a voice in how it is conducted and can affect how it concludes” (Toshalls and Nakkula, 2012).

It is impossible to transform a learning environment overnight. Sustained, significant change takes time. A typical evolution to a personalized learner-driven environment can be seen in the following chart:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STAGE ONE</th>
<th>STAGE TWO</th>
<th>STAGE THREE</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Centered with Learner Voice &amp; Choice</td>
<td>Learner-Centered with Teacher &amp; Learners as co-designers</td>
<td>Learner-Driven with teacher and community as Learning Guides</td>
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Teacher creates projects that encourage learner voice with some choice.

Teacher and Learners co-design projects with learner voice and choice.

Learners design projects that allow learner voice and choose the best way to demonstrate mastery.

Source: personalizelearning.com
To transition successfully to a learner-driven environment, both students and teachers must be willing to change. According to Bray and McClaskey, the goal should be to create a stage-three learning environment that includes the following characteristics, because learners:

- Know how they learn best.
- Self-direct and self-regulate their learning.
- Design their own learning path.
- Have a voice in and choice about their learning.
- Are co-designers of the curriculum and the learning environment.
- Have flexible learning anytime and anywhere.
- Have quality teachers who guide their learning.
- Use a competency-based model to demonstrate mastery.
- Are motivated and engaged in the learning process.

**UDL as the Framework for Creating Learner-Driven Environments**

UDL grew out of the practice of creating physical environments that are usable by as many people as possible. In education UDL goes far beyond focusing on physical access to schools and classrooms. Because the goal for 21st-century learning is the mastery of the learning process, education should help turn novice learners into expert learners. UDL helps educators reach this goal by providing a framework for understanding how to create curricula that meet the needs of all learners from the start. This framework creates flexibility in connecting with learners exactly where they are and helping them to progress in a meaningful way.

By recognizing that people learn in different ways, UDL supports three different brain networks related to learning:

Affective networks: The **WHY** of learning
Recognition networks: The **WHAT** of learning
Strategic networks: The **HOW** of learning

These three networks work together to personalize learning. To activate all three networks, the UDL framework supports a flexible, multi-option approach to curriculum that results in multiple means of:

**Sources:**
- cast.org
UDL helps develop and support expert learners who direct and take responsibility for their own learning. The UDL definition of an expert learner is one who is resourceful and knowledgeable; strategic and goal-directed; and purposeful and motivated, as the chart below illustrates:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Resourceful &amp; knowledgeable</th>
<th>Strategic &amp; goal-directed</th>
<th>Purposeful &amp; motivated</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Bring considerable prior knowledge to new learning</td>
<td>• Formulate plans for learning</td>
<td>• Are eager for new learning and are motivated by the mastery of learning itself</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Activate that prior knowledge to identify, organize, prioritize and assimilate new information</td>
<td>• Devise effective strategies and tactics to optimize learning</td>
<td>• Are goal-directed in their learning</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Recognize the tools and resources that would help them find, structure and remember new information</td>
<td>• Organize resources and tools to facilitate learning</td>
<td>• Know how to set challenging learning goals for themselves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Know how to transform new information into meaningful and useful information</td>
<td>• Monitor their progress</td>
<td>• Know how to sustain the effort and the resilience that reaching those goals will require</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Recognize their own strengths and weaknesses as learners</td>
<td>• Abandon plans and strategies that are ineffective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Monitor and regulate emotional reactions that would be impediments or distractions to their successful learning</td>
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Source: personalizelearning.com

The UDL Model of Access, Engage, Express

UDL allows educators to discover the learner in every child by focusing on how students learn best. While UDL has been used in special education, it can minimize barriers and maximize learning for all learners in a learner-centered environment.

In this type of learning environment, students practice agency—or their ability to choose. Within the UDL model they can choose how they consume and create content and communicate with their teachers and peers. Student agency changes the dynamic between teacher and student as they collaborate and engage in conversations about the learner’s talents, strengths, challenges, and goals.

What does this look like in practice?

The UDL framework intentionally and systematically includes all learners. While a traditional curriculum might focus on content or performance goals, a UDL curriculum focuses on developing expert learners. Every learner is able to reach these higher expectations.

To ensure that students engage, UDL materials offer alternative paths to success—including choice of content where appropriate, varied levels of support and challenge, and options for recruiting and sustaining interest and motivation. UDL assessments reduce or remove barriers to accurate measurement of a learner’s knowledge, skills, and engagement.
Early in their process, HISD decided to use UDL to build out their 1:1 implementation. District leaders believed that UDL would ensure quality access to learning because the front-end design anticipates the needs of the entire spectrum of learners. The district supports, but does not mandate, using UDL for lesson design. Through their professional development program, HISD encourages teachers to keep UDL principles and ideas at the forefront of their thinking.

“...UDL also supports our transition to student-driven learning as it features a lot of opportunities for students to exercise choice.”

Houston ISD is in year two of their 1:1 implementation. High-school students, as well as middle-school students taking high-school courses, are now 1:1 with Windows-based laptops. The rest of the middle-school students have 1:1 access in labs. Elementary schools use multiple devices but are not 1:1 yet. However, elementary school teachers are using UDL principles in designing lessons.

“When you design a program to meet the needs of the students at the high and low ends of the student population, the needs of the students in the middle are also met. UDL lets us create and support one system for all students,” says Rosenthal.

The UDL framework allows HISD educators to create a consistent transition to digital learning across all settings. The learning management system they chose is not only an instructional platform for students but also supports professional learning for teachers and administrators. District leaders also have plans to invite parents to “the Hub” as they call it, to shift some of the responsibility for learning to students and their families.
Key Questions for LMS vendors

As districts explore universal design as a framework for personalized learning, they will be looking for learning management systems to help them support and integrate UDL into curriculum design and lesson planning. Here are some key questions to ask a potential LMS vendor to ensure that their learning platform supports UDL principles:

1. Does the platform have an integrated lesson planner to support UDL and to help teachers integrate these principles into curriculum?

2. Does the platform have a recommendation engine that teachers can use to provide personalized access to resources if a learner has not shown mastery?
3. Are student rubrics aligned with a learning objective and criteria so that students can show they understand or demonstrate mastery in multiple ways?

4. Can students be given rights to analyze results from tests, assignments, or surveys and report their findings?

5. Can students have ePortfolios where they can self-reflect on their learning progress and demonstrate their best work in a private or public space?

6. Will students have their own Individual Learning Plans in which they can assign themselves tasks and track progress as well as reflect on that progress?

7. Will students be able to submit their work in a variety of ways including, but not limited to, text, video, audio, and other embeddable media?

8. Can educators give feedback to students organized by learning objective and criteria? And can they do this via audio and video?
How to Transition UDL from Theory to Practice

Both HISD and BCSC use the itslearning management system to organize and support UDL in their respective districts. As the first learning management system designed specifically for K–12, itslearning is unique. It was built to be the centerpiece of a district’s learning initiatives, where curriculum resources and management, communication and collaboration, and professional learning as well as student-driven learning all come together in one platform. Houston ISD even calls their LMS “the Hub.”

“We started our journey with universal design for learning almost ten years ago,” says Mike Jamerson, director of technology at BCSC. “We did that because we felt it provided the best possible way for us to reach our students to improve their performance as well as making sure they were engaged in their learning.”

“With itslearning, we saw a platform where we could truly implement the three principles of UDL: multiple means of representation, multiple means of engagement and multiple means of action and expression,” says Jamerson.

Rosenthal, from HISD, reports: “We’re using the itslearning platform for curriculum, collaboration, instruction, personalization, and communication. By the end of the school year, the Hub will roll out to all 282 of our schools.”

www.houstonisd.org/powerup

“itslearning allows students to take control of their learning and be engaged while doing so. Our UDL concepts come to life, students are more engaged, and they’re learning through methods that interest them.”

Margaret Denton, BCSC Teacher
The itslearning platform supports UDL outcomes so that learners can:

- Sharpen their executive function skills, such as goal-setting and strategy development
- Improve comprehension and information processing
- Stay engaged in lessons and overcome distractions
- Communicate effectively using multiple tools, including high-, low-, and no-technology options
- Develop self-regulation and self-assessment skills
- Increase autonomy
- Show what they know through flexible, individualized assessment options.

Once a district adopts universal design principles, itslearning personalizes learning for all students by supporting each learner on an individual learning path. Students and teachers transition to a student-driven model of learning where students take on more responsibility for their learning and have choices about how they learn and demonstrate their knowledge. The combination of student agency, self-reflection, collaboration, and personalized feedback from teacher-coaches results in deeper learning experiences and better student outcomes.
### How itslearning Supports UDL in 1:1 Implementation

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>UDL Principle/Guideline</th>
<th>Goal</th>
<th>Action</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Principle 1: Provide multiple means of representation</strong></td>
<td>Minimize differences. Maximize flexibility. Establish identical expectations for students with individual support.</td>
<td>Incorporate representation from all users (especially those on the extremes of user differences) in every stage of the design by using the platform to print larger, use text to speech options, and offer choice of resource type for lessons.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Offer alternatives to visual and auditory information.</td>
<td>Provide consistent structure to effectively support all users.</td>
<td>Record demonstrations for students to view/ hear later. Use embedded graphics and animations with subtitles.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Illustrate through multiple media.</td>
<td>Create a universal literacy environment that provides learners with embedded features that support individual learning needs.</td>
<td>Use rich text editor to bring in pictures, slides, and video/audio. Provide a variety of resources through the lesson planner that students can select from—including games or self-assessments, video, and text.</td>
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<td><strong>Principle 2: Provide multiple means of action and expression</strong></td>
<td>Transition to student-directed learning.</td>
<td>Show students how to use discussion boards to communicate with others in the class and how to record audio or video.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Create options for expression and communication.</td>
<td>Use multiple means of communication.</td>
<td>Students can use integrated rich text editor to submit work in text, video, or audio.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Support student-directed planning and strategy development.</td>
<td>Guide appropriate goal setting.</td>
<td>Allow students to manage their own Individual Learning Plans (ILPs).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use multiple tools for construction and composition.</td>
<td>Facilitate management of information and resources.</td>
<td>Show students how to plan by using the calendar to organize their own events and to use a task list to ensure items are completed on time.</td>
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**Principle 3: Provide multiple means of engagement**

Optimize individual choice or autonomy.

**Goal**

Allow students to choose projects to work on from a list of approved ideas. Let them choose how to demonstrate mastery using the assignment tool.

**Action**

Develop and support students taking more responsibility for their learning path.

Increase mastery-oriented feedback.

Use the assignment tool rubrics to give students concrete, actionable feedback for each learning goal’s criteria.

Provide options for self-regulation.

Develop self-assessment and reflection.

Encourage students to use blogs and ePortfolios to self-reflect and share with others to elicit feedback. Allow students to create assessments and peer assessments for themselves using the permissions setting for assignments and tests.

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**References:**


“UDL and Expert Learners,” National Center on Universal Design for Learning website. www.udlcenter.org/aboutudl/expertlearners


About itslearning

Designed specifically for K–12 teachers and how they want to teach, itslearning is a cloud-based learning platform that connects teachers, students, parents, and school leaders—both in and outside the classroom. The platform gives teachers countless ways to create engaging lessons and resources, makes sharing materials easy, and automates routine tasks so teachers have more time to focus on their students.

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