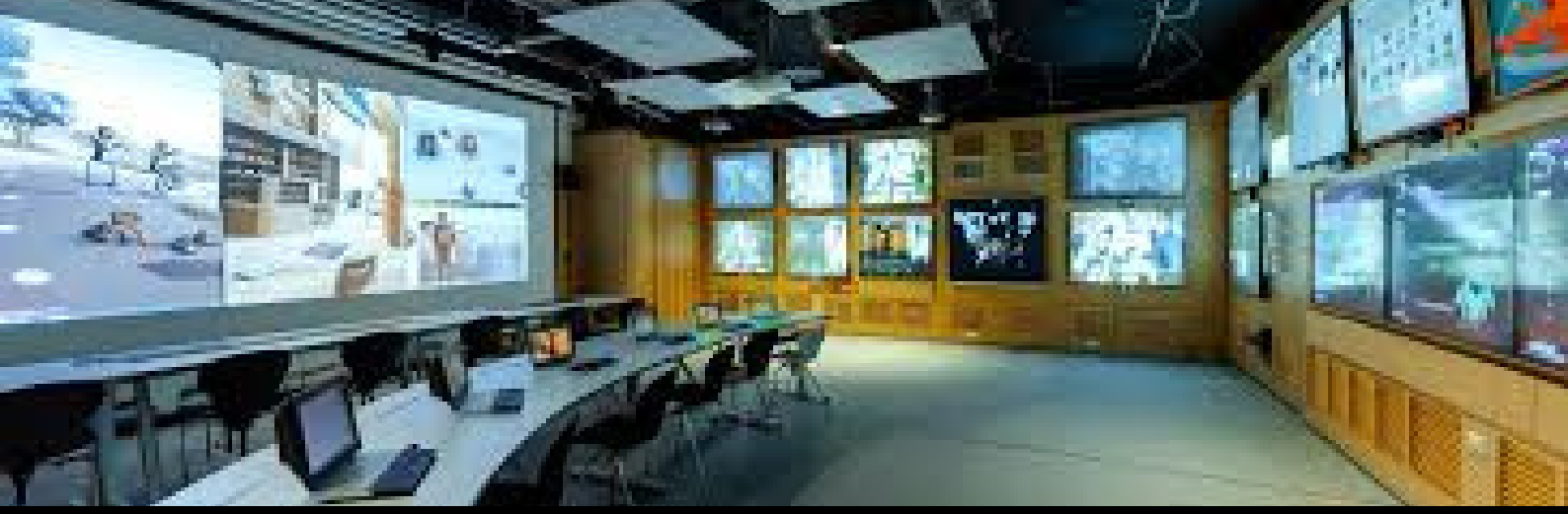


NO.9

THE EDUCATION CONVERSATION

APRIL 2026

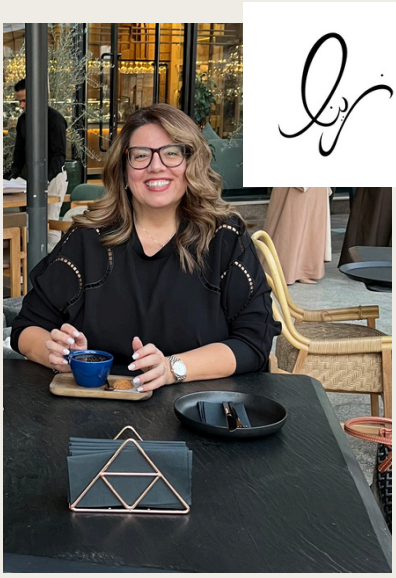
Universal Design for Learning in Real Classrooms

Center equity by designing flexible pathways for access, expression, and engagement.

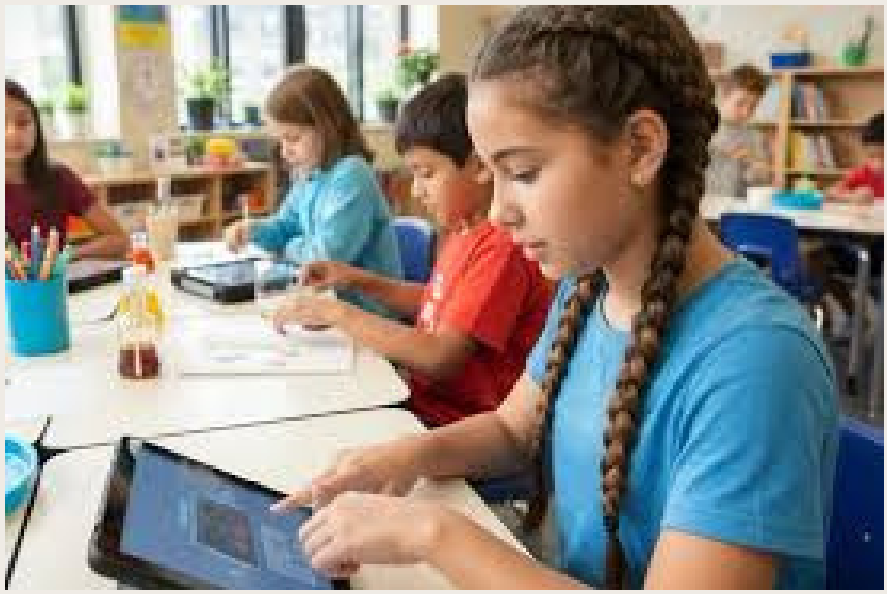
Every teacher knows the moment.
You are in the middle of a lesson, and something shifts.
One student stops writing.
Another looks away.
A few race ahead.
Someone who usually contributes stays silent.
Another student asks, “Can you explain it again?” but you can feel that the issue is not effort.
It is access.
In those moments, it is tempting to think the student is struggling with the learning itself.
But often, the barrier is not the concept.
It is the way the learning was designed.
Universal Design for Learning invites us to pause there — before frustration, before disengagement, before we label the student as weak, distracted, or unprepared.
It asks a more generous and more powerful question:
Where is the barrier and what can I redesign so that more students can reach the learning?
This is why UDL matters.
Not because it gives teachers another framework to manage.
But because it helps us see students differently.
And once we see the barrier, we can begin to design with more care, more precision, and more equity.

With care,
Zeina

Editor’s Note



The Deeper Shift



Most classrooms are designed around a model of sameness.
We plan one explanation.
We assign one task.
We expect one pace.
We assess through one format.
This model assumes that if the instruction is clear enough, students will align.
But classrooms are not uniform spaces. They are cognitively, linguistically, and emotionally diverse environments.

UDL begins with a different assumption:
Variability is the norm, not the exception.
So instead of designing for the "average" student and then retrofitting support, we design from the outset for a range of learners.
This is not about doing more.
It is about designing differently.

Rethinking Barriers

One of the most powerful shifts in UDL is learning to distinguish between:

- **The learning goal (what we want students to understand or be able to do)**
- **The means (how we ask them to get there or show it)**

In many classrooms, these two become entangled.

For example:

If the goal is to understand a scientific concept, but success depends on dense reading, then reading becomes a barrier.

If the goal is to analyze an argument, but assessment depends only on extended writing, then writing becomes a barrier.

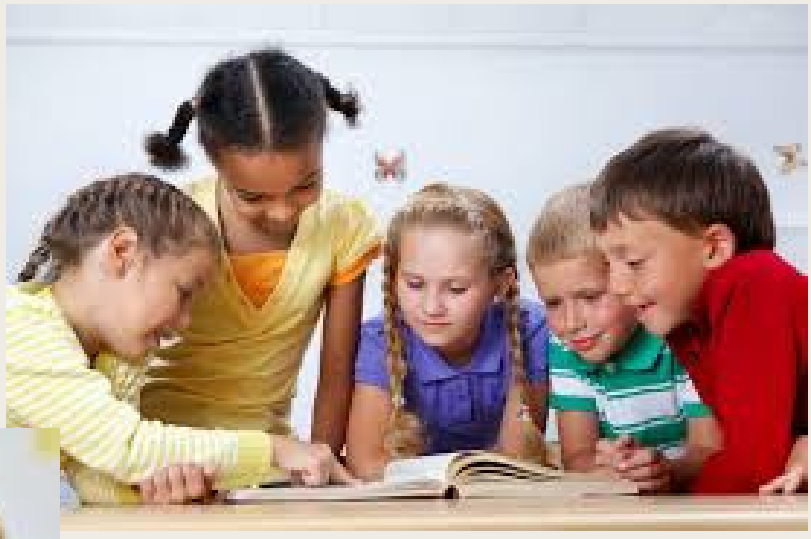
If the goal is to demonstrate understanding, but participation depends on speaking in front of the class, then confidence becomes a barrier.

UDL helps us separate these.

So we can ask:

Is this difficulty essential to the learning or accidental?

When the barrier is accidental, we redesign.



What UDL Looks Like in Practice

In real classrooms, UDL does not appear as a checklist.
It shows up in small, intentional design moves.

1. Multiple Means of Access

Students do not all take in information in the same way or at the same pace.
Designing for access might include:

- pairing a dense text with a visual or summary
- ·pre-teaching key vocabulary before the lesson begins
- offering worked examples alongside explanations
- using diagrams, models, or short videos to complement instruction
- providing guided notes or sentence starters

This is not about simplifying content.
It is about making the pathway into the content more visible and more reachable.

2. Multiple Means of Expression

Students do not all demonstrate understanding in the same way.

Expanding expression might include:

- allowing written, oral, or visual responses
- offering structured templates for those who need support
- using quick checks (exit tickets, concept maps, short recordings)
- designing performance-based tasks alongside traditional assessments

The key is clarity:
What exactly are we assessing?
Once that is clear, we can allow flexibility in how students show it.

3. Multiple Means of Engagement

Engagement is often misunderstood as motivation. But in UDL, engagement is about how students connect with the learning experience.

This might include:

- offering choice within a task (topic, format, or process)
- connecting content to real-world contexts
- structuring collaboration intentionally (not just grouping students)
- building in moments of reflection
- making success criteria visible before students begin

Engagement increases when students understand the purpose, see relevance, and feel capable of progressing.

A Classroom Example

(For A Deeper Look)

Consider a lesson where the goal is to analyze a text.

1. In a traditional design:

Students read silently → answer comprehension questions → submit written responses.

2. In a UDL-informed design, the teacher begins by clarifying the goal:

Students will identify the author's argument, evaluate evidence, and explain their position.

From there, flexibility is built in:

Access:

annotated version of the text
audio version for listening while reading
vocabulary support and guiding questions

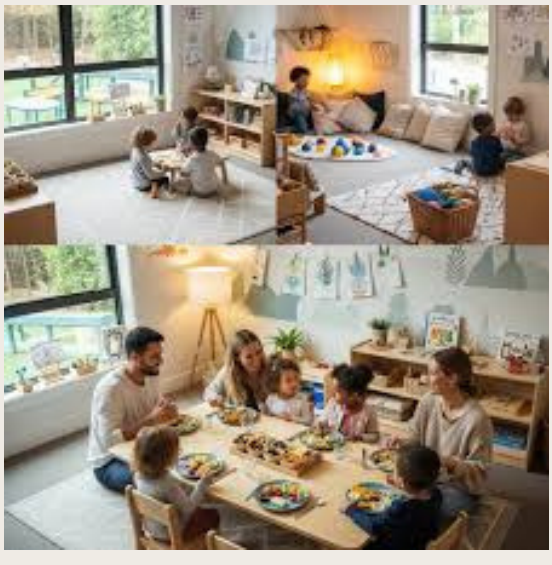
Processing:

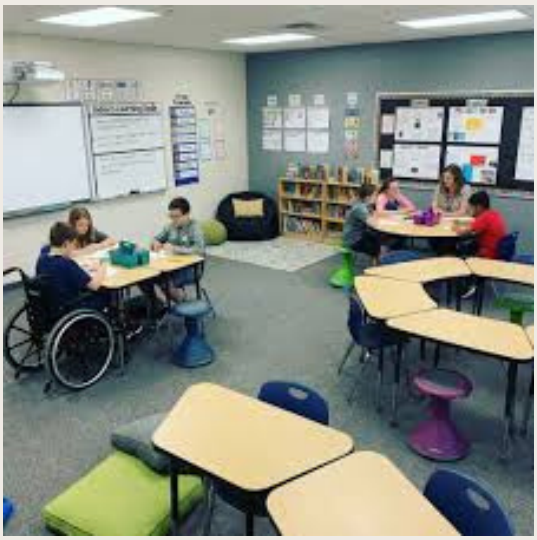
think-pair-share before independent work
graphic organizers to structure thinking
guided annotation prompts

Expression:

written paragraph
concept map
short recorded explanation
small-group discussion with feedback

What changes is not the rigor.
What changes is the number of students who can reach that rigor.





Common Misconceptions

UDL is often misunderstood in ways that prevent implementation.

"It means creating different lessons for every student."
No. It means designing one lesson with built-in flexibility.

"It lowers standards."
No. It separates standards from the methods used to reach them.

"It takes too much time."
At the beginning, it requires intentional planning. Over time, it reduces the need for constant re-teaching and individual accommodations.

"It is only for students with specific needs."
UDL benefits all learners because variability exists in every classroom.

The Leadership Connection

UDL becomes sustainable only when it is supported at the leadership level.

If leaders want teachers to design flexibly, then systems must reflect that same flexibility.

This includes:

- professional learning that is practical and classroom-based
- time for teachers to redesign tasks collaboratively
- access to examples within subject areas
- recognition that implementation is iterative, not immediate

Leaders also need to model the same principles:

- offering multiple ways for teachers to engage in professional learning
- creating space for reflection and feedback
- avoiding one-size-fits-all mandates

UDL is not an initiative to be implemented.

It is a culture to be developed.

START SMALL (BUT INTENTIONAL)

A powerful entry point is to take one lesson and ask three focused questions:

Access
How will students receive and make sense of the content?

Expression
How will students show what they understand?

Engagement
Why will this matter to them, and how will they stay connected?

Then add one flexible option in each area.
Not ten.
Just one.

A second entry point into the content.

A second way to respond.

A second way to connect.

Over time, these small shifts compound.

Reflection Prompts

As you look at your teaching or your institution this week:

- Where do students consistently struggle and why?
- Are those challenges tied to the learning goal, or to the way it is delivered?
- What assumptions are built into your current design?
- What would change if flexibility was planned from the start?
- What is one redesign you can test immediately?

Final Thoughts

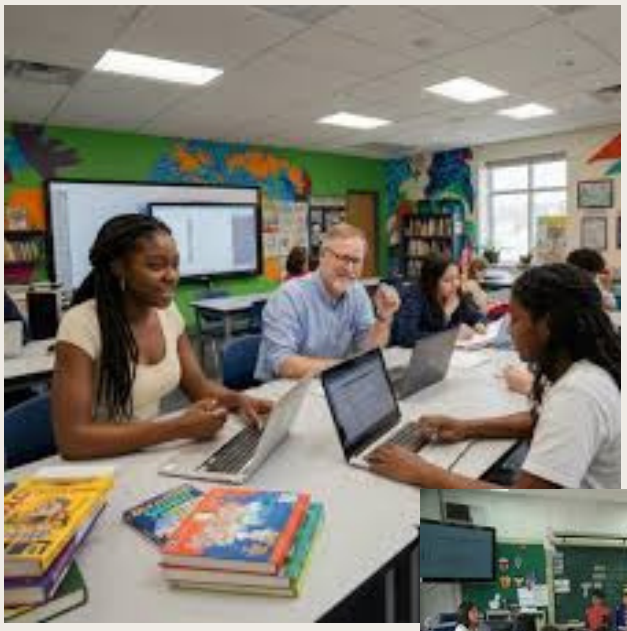
Universal Design for Learning is not about making learning easier.

It is about making learning more possible.
When we design with variability in mind, we shift the message we send to students.

From:
You need to adapt to this system.

To:
This system can be designed to support your learning.

And that shift, small in design, significant in impact, is where equity begins to take shape in real classrooms.



Coming in Issue #10:

Reflecting on Growth: Student Progress and Educator Empowerment

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