

Online Course Design Best Practices

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Universal Design for Learning (UDL)

“UDL is based on principles that empower everyone to have agency over their own learning. It allows educators and learners to set clear goals, anticipate environmental barriers, create meaningful options, and fully embrace human variability.”

— CAST

How do I implement UDL in my course?

- Provide options for students in the way they interact with the content and demonstrate their learning
 - This may also include options based on their professional goals – give students the freedom to complete assignments that align with their career goals
- Keep in mind the wide variety of students who may take your class, along with their needs and goals
 - Career (past experience, present position, and future goals)
 - Background (demographics, time since last enrolled in a college course, experience with online learning, etc.)
 - Family commitments
 - Time zone/geographic location
 - Schedule
- Keep accessibility in mind
 - Work with librarians to find accessible versions of resources you’re already using (e.g. PDFs)
 - Always ensure images have appropriate alt text that give students what they need to understand the image in the context of the course topics
 - Run built-in accessibility checkers when working in Word, PPT, etc.
 - Use Ally accessibility checker in Canvas Course
 - Place all videos in a Kaltura channel and embed into the course from there. You can add machine captions through Kaltura and edit them for accuracy
- Consider the workload of the students in your course and cut back to only readings/assignments that are necessary for meeting objectives.
 - If you have additional readings/resources that some students may enjoy for a deeper dive, feel free to add them and label them as “supplemental”
- Utilize the [TILT model](#) when creating assignments to ensure students have all the information they need to be successful.
 - Explain why students are doing the work (purpose)
 - Provide clear and thorough instructions (task)
 - Give students a rubric, making it clear how they will be evaluated (this also makes your grading easier) (criteria for success) 



Authentic Assessment

“An authentic assignment is one that requires application of what students have learned to a new situation, and that demands judgment to determine what information and skills are relevant and how they should be used. Authentic assignments often focus on messy, complex real-world situations and their accompanying constraints; they can involve a real-world audience of stakeholders or “clients” as well.”

- [Authentic Assessment](#) IU Bloomington, Center for Innovative Teaching and Learning (linked to more information)
- Ask yourself “What will students need to be able to do, in application, in their future/ career?”
 - Example: Assignments focused on interacting with a client. How would you explain this (e.g. coding language) to a client?
- Break a large assignment into parts
 - Allows for instructor feedback as students progress to ensure they’re moving in the right direction
 - Makes it easier for the instructor to grade in the end as students have been providing pieces of larger product along the way
- Bonus* Because authentic assessments focus more on application through solving complex tasks and/or creating something new, students have a more difficult time finding ways to cheat.



Engagement & Building Community

"Feeling connected to faculty and peers is critical to academic performance and a general sense of well-being."

— [Creating Community in a Course, Teaching.IU](#) (linked to more information)

Instructor presence

- Ensure your students get to know you and your background with the topics in the course. Allow students to get to know you the way they would in a face-to-face course using some of the following methods:
 - Course welcome video
 - Weekly "check-in" videos; can be less formal
 - Maintain active participation in discussion boards
 - Provide robust personalized feedback on assignments
 - Be clear about your expectations for course engagement
 - Post Canvas announcements every week with reminders and incentives for students to remain active in your class
 - Be prompt and thorough in your responses to students
- Specify your preferred method of contact (email, Canvas messages, etc.)
- Provide the opportunity for students to meet with you as needed (e.g. office hours)

Community among learners

- Provide a space where they can learn from one another and set the tone for how to engage
 - Discussion forum where students can post "wrong answers only" from their work that week and can help each other find solutions
 - Sharing progress on projects where students provide each other with feedback based on an instructor-provided rubric
 - Invite students to provide resources to enhance the course
- Place students into learning groups based on similarities in things like their professional goals
 - This could also allow for a UDL approach allowing them to work on different projects/assignments that align with their aspirations
 - Encourage them to think of this as professional networking, rather than just group work
- Ask students to post a video introducing themselves at the beginning of the semester (give them the option to post a written introduction if they're uncomfortable being in front of the camera)



Increasing engagement with content

- Make video content more engaging by utilizing tools like PlayPosit to inject questions or reflection points
 - Allow students to practice applying what they learned by using low-stakes assessments like Quick Checks
 - Ask students to identify ways that the content will be applicable to their future, relates to current events, ties in with previously discussed topics, etc.
 - Keep lessons (especially video lectures) as short as possible (ideally 5-7 minutes) to ensure students can stay engaged
 - Break a longer video up into segments if necessary
 - Bring in other experts – create videos with colleagues in other areas or who are “in the field”
 - Send a list of questions (if possible, allow students to contribute to the list of questions) to a colleague who is willing to record a video for your course and ask them to record themselves answering the questions in a Zoom room. Send the recording to you once it’s complete
 - Schedule an online meeting with a colleague and record your conversation to post the course (more like an interview)
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Streamlined Course Organization

Providing students with a consistently well-organized course allows them to spend fewer resources finding what they need and more time engaging with the material.

- Utilize modules
 - Create an overview page that gives students a “roadmap” for the week ahead
 - List of goals (outcomes) for the week
 - Provide links to learning materials and embed videos
 - List items students need to complete for the week
 - If you have a lot of content for students, consider using a content page where you can link to readings and embed videos
 - Provide a way for students to engage
 - Use Playposit to keep students involved when watching videos
 - Add a Quick Check to the page to provide a low-stakes assessment of learning so far
 - Assignments/Discussions
 - Put this right in the module so students don’t have to go look for them somewhere other than in modules view.
- Put syllabus on syllabus page and provide a downloadable version
 - Consider using the syllabus page to house the information that students need most frequently and provide the more complete syllabus as a download. This keeps the syllabus page from being overwhelming
- Use a design map when creating your course
 - A backwards design model can help you focus on the objectives for the course and how to ensure students meet them
 - Start by identifying objectives for the course
 - Break those objectives into smaller objectives for each module
 - Determine how to assess those module-level objectives and design those assessments
 - Find a way to allow students to practice using the material before encountering the higher-stakes module assessment(s) (e.g. Quick Checks, discussion board, PlayPosit, etc.)
 - Provide the material necessary for students to complete the assignment successfully
 - Consider removing or labeling as “supplemental” any materials beyond what is necessary for success on assessments



Aesthetic Unity

Students value an aesthetically pleasing course but more importantly, consistency makes it easier to focus on the content and not get lost searching for what they need.

“Consistent course organization from course to course, effective use of “to-do” lists, and consistent textbook platforms can all reduce the logistical burden students experience during remote learning.”

— [Baseline Course Design During COVID](#), Teaching Online at IU (linked for more information)

- Best practices:
 - Consistent design and layout from module to module
 - Predictable placement of instructions
 - Visible course navigation (i.e. progress bars)
 - Alignment between syllabus, course overview pages, and content pages
- [CidiLabs](#) – a tool built-in to Canvas that does a lot of heavy lifting for you. (click the link to find more resources)
 - Access by using Alt+Shift+D to pull the sidebar up
 - Allows for consistency
 - Builds in a lot of accessibility work for you (e.g. headers)
 - Home page, Syllabus page, Overview (pre-built)
 - Content blocks, Quick Checks, Video, Image, Icons, Tabs, Expanders (build during presentation)