Explaining UDL in my own words

Hi, colleagues! I'm taking a course in Universal Design for Learning, and I've been asked to explain UDL in my own words. I thought I would also share this with you so you can learn with me. Why? Our students learn in very different ways. "One size fits all" does not work for everyone, so we need to be flexible to maximize success.

So, what is Universal Design for Learning? According to the Cornell University Center for Teaching Innovation, UDL is

> A teaching approach that works to accommodate the needs and abilities of all learners and eliminates unnecessary hurdles in the learning process. This means developing a flexible learning environment in which information is presented in multiple ways, students engage in learning in a variety of ways, and students are provided options when demonstrating their learning.

Flexibility is the key!

UDL is based on three principles of learning: Engagement, Representation, and Action & Expression. I'll briefly describe some key aspects of each principle.

1. Engagement deals with the "why" of learning. Why should students enroll and stay enrolled in our classes? Why should they devote limited time to learning the concepts and skills that we want to teach them?
    a. We need to help students get excited about learning, and the first step is to be explicit about what they are going to learn in the class. We all need to articulate our course goals and learning outcomes in our syllabi for the fall semester to meet accreditation guidelines, so rather than just checking a box, use this opportunity to communicate with students what you want them to get out of the class. Also, it's important to keep referring to these goals throughout the semester, especially around assessments, so they know how papers, exams, or presentations fit into the overall course goals.
    b. So, the key to Engagement is to create a course and classroom environment that makes students want to learn, know what they will learn, and be excited enough to stick with the class if they struggle and work through the hiccups.
2. The second UDL principle is Representation, the "what" of learning. In Political Science, "representation" can mean a lot of things, but for Universal Design, representation deals with how students perceive and comprehend information.
    a. As an example, if I'm asked to sit quietly in a classroom and listen to an audio recording of a speech, my attention will wander if I don't have something to look at while I'm listening. Therefore, if I can follow along with a transcript or there's a visual with captions, I'll be much more likely to maintain focus and absorb the information. This example shows that transcripts and

captions aren't just for the hearing impaired but can be used by different types of learners. A transcript also becomes a searchable document that any student can use to find content without rewatching or listening to the speech.

    b. Another aspect of Representation is to explain any discipline-specific jargon. As experts, we know what we're talking about, but that doesn't mean our students will, and many will be too intimidated to ask. If students can't understand what we're saying, or what they're reading, their learning will suffer.

3. The third and final UDL principle is Action & Expression, the "how" of learning: how students demonstrate what they know. While Action & Expression are not exclusively about assessments, that's where I'm going to focus here.

    a. Before a student writes a paper, they need to organize. Many students have never learned how to do this, but we can teach them to do this by breaking the assignment down into concrete steps. Some students may need direction on where to find necessary material and how to access it. They might also benefit from guidance about how long each step might take.

    b. A second critical piece is understanding how an assignment will be graded, and how the assignment links back to course goals and learning objectives. Make this explicit in the syllabus or assignment instructions.

    c. A final piece that's critical for Action and Expression is flexibility in format. Allowing students to complete assignments in different formats gives students who struggle with an assessment method the opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge on the topic without distractions like stage fright or lack of mastery of English grammar. Unless the learning goal is about the assessment type, such as knowing how to write a policy memo, the method of delivery may not be critical.

Putting this all together, the three principles of Universal Design for Learning (Engagement, Representation, and Action & Expression) are about incorporating flexibility and variation into our courses to spark curiosity and maintain interest, ensure that all students can access the information we teach, and give a variety of opportunities for students to demonstrate what they've learned. Incorporating UDL isn't a quick and easy process, but if we want to grow the major, increase student retention, and improve student outcomes, this is a way to accomplish that. I challenge you to make one small change and see what happens. You can always build from there.