

Session 5 Learn: Understanding Learning Barriers



Using technology in the classroom is not the end goal. Like all other educational strategies and tools, the most important thing is to use them how and when they are needed to enhance learning. An important underlying assumption of UDL is that some curriculum materials put roadblocks in front of students just by the nature of how they are designed. Students have different learning pathways which can be supported or hindered by the curriculum materials you use in your classroom. Of course, this brings us back to the fundamental UDL concept of student choice because when students understand what works best for them AND they have the choice to use what works, they will learn more.

In this session, you'll examine some learning barriers for your students. In the next session, we'll talk about some responses or solutions for common learning barriers.

Understanding the Concept of Learning Barriers

In this session, we will focus on identifying learning barriers that your students experience. In the next session, we'll extend this work by focusing on technology tools that match specific learning needs. For now, your job is to think more deeply about how student needs can dictate the success of some learning strategies and tools and the failure of others. Notice again, that while we are talking about needs that students bring to the learning environment, we talk about the curriculum materials and strategies as the cause of failure, and not the student himself.

So, we call these "learning barriers" instead of "student needs." This is important because **your definition of the barrier will drive your solution.**

Example: If you view Bobby's poor writing response in class as due to his lack of motivation to write, then you will focus on strategies that will be motivating to him. Some solutions might be providing Bobby with a choice of topics to write about, providing a choice of tools to write with, or stimulating background knowledge and interest prior to writing. If, however, you have missed the mark, and Bobby's poor writing response is because he physically struggles with handwriting and finds writing laborious, all of those solutions could fail.

If you misdiagnose the problem, your solution is likely to be ineffective. Therefore, you need to be thoughtful about your assessment of the learning barriers that students face. This requires a diagnostic approach to teaching. It is not enough to know that a student is performing below grade-level without understanding why that is the case.

Session 5 DISCUSS: Understanding Learning Barriers

Discussion and Sharing:

Choose a student that you know or have known in the past. What learning barrier did that student encounter? – for what task? – under what conditions? In which kinds of environments did the student show less of an impact from that learning barrier?

Response to Colleagues:

Choose a colleague to respond to. Listen to the description of the student and the learning barriers. Is there another interpretation of the learning barrier that might be worth exploring? Do you have any insights for your colleague, or has your colleague's description provided you with any insights?