



Promoting Communication Through Universal Design for Learning and Text Analysis

After reviewing this brief, you should be able to,

- Define Universal Design for Learning (UDL)
- Compare UDL to Universal Design (UD)
- Explain how and why to do text analysis

Occupational therapy practitioners, also called OTs or OTPs, often work with people who face communication challenges, such as in the case of autism spectrum disorders, or ASD. Using universal design for learning, or UDL principles and text-analysis tools can help autistic people navigate situations where effective communication is essential. Let's look at what UDL and text analysis are...

It's possible you have heard of the concept of universal design, or UD. UD ensures inclusive access to physical environments and technological products. Instead of this kind of access, UDL focuses on access to educational materials created for people with a wide range of abilities, literacy levels, preferred languages, and cultural practices.

Understanding how the three pillars of UDL work provides a clear framework for designing community autism-friendly participation. The UDL pillars are providing multiple means of engagement, representation, and action and expression. The *engagement* pillar can be thought of autistic people becoming self-aware and identifying how they want to be a part of community life. The *representation* pillar involves cultivating a variety of pathways to meet their communication, social needs, and sensory needs. The *action and expression* pillar can be considered a way of helping autistic people to develop ways they can express feelings, needs, and desires as one part of emerging self-advocacy.

From a legal standpoint, UDL is an important aspect of the United States Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008. The UDL framework provides guidance for implementing inclusive education strategies. To do this, UDL promotes presenting information in a variety of ways, helping autistic people show their knowledge and skills in multiple ways, and reducing instructional barriers for students with disabilities or with limited English proficiency by using educational accommodations while maintaining high achievement standards. In other words, simplifying communication does not mean dumbing things down.

When UDL-designed supports are implemented in the community, people encounter more inclusive opportunities. Consider the technique of *signposting*, the practice of encouraging uniformity across environments using symbol sets as a vital component of a visual support model. In mainstream settings this can help people who typically need additional support become more able to independently engage in all activities. As a side benefit, when these tools promote understanding, they can lead to greater independence.

So, let's talk about text analysis. At first glance, understanding reading levels may sound like a topic for educators and parents rather than community members. Instead, having a basic understanding of reading levels and how to adjust them can become an essential skill for community educators. Adjusting reading materials to low and high reading levels helps promote what academic educators know as a least restrictive environment. Several web-based, free programs exist to measure text and reading comprehension levels. Providing written materials that are consistent across community settings goes a long way to making learning easier and more predictable. Determining text complexity requires uploading a couple of sentences of text to a program's analysis tool and retrieving a complexity level such as easy reader and complex.

In addition to written communications being divided into complex and easy reader levels, community partners can choose to use either single word supports, storyboard or comic book style information, icon-based, and photographic communication. In general, the more literal the images are, the easier they are for a variety of readers to understand.

Community members can explore their own resources and needs to develop the signage they need to make their venues as autism-friendly as possible. When they collaborate with local occupational therapists, special educators, and autistic people, they can create a signs and information postings that are targeted and effective and avoid spending time on signage that either misses the mark because there is a mismatch between the reading level of the sign and the communication skills of the visitor, or they lack the visual appeal to grab and focus attention.

Asking autistic people and their families for their opinions and insights can go a long way to designing effective signage, but so it's taking the time to watch and learn from how they spend their time in the community settings. Practice can make perfect and repetition is the key to learning!