UNIVERSAL DESIGN FOR LEARNING

The Barrier Is in the Design

A Sample: Group Learning Without Clear Roles

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About This Resource

This resource helps educators and learning leaders keep asking one question: what are the barriers to learning, and how can we reduce them? It is meant to guide design decisions about how learning experiences and environments are structured, sequenced and supported.

> **Source:** CAST (2024a). CAST Universal Design for Learning Guidelines version 3.0. Retrieved from https://udlguidelines.cast.org. The principle, guideline and consideration names on this page are CAST's own words. The UDL Guidelines are © CAST.

"One of the tenets of UDL is that barriers live in designs, not in students" (The IRIS Center, n.d.). Barrier clues invite us to get curious, look a little closer, and ask what more could be made possible through design. The possibilities for reducing barriers are practical suggestions for changing the conditions of learning so that more learners can access, engage and express themselves. They are not prescriptions.

What Counts as a Barrier

Barriers

- Never in the learner.
- Always in the design.
- We can reduce them.

Important factors

- Valued parts of identity and context, such as disability, language and culture.
- We do not design them away.
- We design for them.

From the POUR Barrier Sort activity (English) in the Aiming for ALL Collection (Stark, 2026a).

> This page shares one example as a sample. The full resource has 20 barrier examples in four groups of five. Each group has a table that maps the UDL Guidelines and Considerations. It also has slides and a facilitation guide. It is available to schools and learning organisations that work with me. To ask about it, email me.

Barrier Example A

The Barrier Is in the Design: Barrier Example A

1 Barrier Example	2 Barrier Clue Examples (Context Matters)	3 Possibilities for Reducing Barriers through Design
Group learning experiences designed without clearly defined roles, processes, or timeframes.	You may observe learners who... • ...appear confused and disengaged during group learning, suggesting the design may not yet include structural roles to guide participation. • ...withdraw entirely or take over the group without seeming to notice, when the design offers no universal supports for the range of ways learners engage socially. • ...hand all decisions to their peers and appear passive, which may suggest that they find this kind of unstructured social situation challenging to navigate and the design offers no safe way in. • ...miss verbally assigned roles and appear disengaged, possibly reflecting that they rely on visual references to track spoken instructions and the design includes no written or visual record.	• Co-construct clear roles, processes, and timeframes with learners, treating variability in how learners engage socially as something to design for, not manage in the moment. • Find ways to design the collaborative structure so that expectations are predictable, roles are transparent, and the consequences of mistakes feel low-stakes for every learner. • Where possible, create a visible shared reference for roles and timeframes, such as a printed card, a projected slide, or a physical chart that every learner can see and return to. • Invite learners to revisit and revise the structure as the learning unfolds, giving every learner an opportunity to shape how collaboration works in practice. • When assigning roles in the moment, write them down and say them aloud simultaneously, so every learner receives the information in more than one modality.

4 Companion Table: UDL Guidelines and Considerations

Reaching ALL Learners

These UDL Guidelines and Considerations inform the possibilities for Barrier Example A. Each consideration links to its page on the CAST UDL Guidelines website. This example draws on no Representation guideline.

Barrier Example	Engagement	Representation	Action & Expression
Group learning experiences designed without clearly defined roles, processes, or timeframes.	**Design Options for Welcoming Interests & Identities (7)** • Address biases, threats, and distractions (7.4) **Design Options for Sustaining Effort & Persistence (8)** • Foster belonging and community (8.4) **Design Options for Emotional Capacity (9)** • Recognize expectations, beliefs, and motivations (9.1)	No Representation guideline for this example.	**Design Options for Expression & Communication (5)** • Use multiple media for communication (5.1)

References

CAST (2024a). CAST Universal Design for Learning Guidelines version 3.0. Retrieved from https://udlguidelines.cast.org

The IRIS Center. (n.d.). *Page 2: Addressing barriers*. In *Universal Design for Learning: Designing learning experiences that engage and challenge all students*. Peabody College, Vanderbilt University. https://iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu/module/udl/cresource/q1/p02/

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