



REVIEW

# Designing inclusive assessment through Universal Design for Learning

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*Better Assessment in Higher Education* positions assessment design as a key mechanism for creating inclusive learning environments. Drawing on Universal Design for Learning (UDL), Kevin Merry aims to support educators in developing authentic assessment practices that reduce barriers and enable diverse learners in higher education (HE) to demonstrate their achievements. As founder and chair of the UDL UK and Ireland Education Network, Merry writes from a position of expertise, locating assessment as an integral component of learning design.

From the perspective of an educator with over twenty years' experience in creative arts HE, UDL was not previously central to my own practice. The text therefore provided an opportunity to engage with an approach aligned with inclusive and constructively aligned pedagogies, articulated through distinct terminology. UDL's premise, that barriers to learning are often designed into environments rather than located within learners themselves, reframes assessment in ways that resonate strongly with debates around deficit models and learner variability in contemporary HE (see Enachescu, 2025; Smit, 2012).

The compact 110-page format supports accessibility as a 'skinny' text for speedy engagement. Organised into three sections: Setting the Scene, Assessment Design, and Putting It All Together, the structure promotes incremental reading through short subsections, diagrams, and reflective pause prompts. These features encourage engagement with theoretical concepts in personal teaching contexts, prompting reflection on how assessment practices shape learner agency, motivation, and emotional response. Such considerations are likely to resonate with learning developers whose work frequently involves supporting students' assessment literacy and self-regulated learning.

Part One introduces key UDL concepts, presenting assessment as a process through which learning develops rather than acting solely as an endpoint. Learning through assessment emphasises reflection, feedback, and iteration, reinforcing formative approaches that support ongoing learning. The discussion of learning outcomes (LOs) as part of intentional design is thought-provoking. While constructive alignment (Biggs & Tang, 2007; Biggs et al., 2022) positions outcomes as a starting point for curriculum design, Merry frames them retrospectively, encouraging reflection on how learning activities and assessment shape achievement. This reframing appears particularly relevant within creative disciplines, where students often conceptualise outputs before fully articulating underpinning knowledge and skills (Orr & Shreeve, 2019).

The three UDL dimensions (engagement, representation, and action and expression) offer a useful lens for considering accessibility and authenticity in assessment design. Their relevance is strengthened through attention to emotional dimensions of learning, highlighting how affect shapes motivation and performance. Although widely acknowledged in assessment literature (for example, Boud & Falchikov, 2007; Rowe, 2016), emotional factors are less frequently integrated explicitly into assessment design, making this a valuable contribution.

Part Two focuses on practical aspects of assessment design, including the articulation of LOs and the identification of potential barriers. The concept of the 'assessment construct' aligns intended learning with evidence used to demonstrate achievement. While useful, the relationship between constructs and LOs could be expressed more explicitly for readers familiar with constructive alignment terminology. Additionally, the discussion of 'irrelevant constructs' (p. 48) encourages educators to consider whether tasks unintentionally measure skills unrelated to intended learning. The example of handwriting as a barrier to



demonstrating anatomical knowledge effectively illustrates how seemingly neutral design decisions may disadvantage learners. Consideration of informational and socio-emotional barriers further supports reflective assessment practice. The templates usefully prompt reflection on emotional responses to assessment, though more explicit guidance on application within disciplinary contexts (for example, studio critique, portfolio development, or iterative design work) would strengthen their transferability.

Building on this practical focus, the discussion of authenticity in assessment, described as 'occupational authenticity', reinforces the importance of designing tasks that connect meaningfully to disciplinary practices beyond the immediate learning environment. This emphasis aligns with scholarship that positions authentic assessment as supporting engagement with real-world contexts and preparing learners for participation in professional and societal settings (McArthur, 2023). The section on evaluating assessment design concludes with three guiding questions that prompt reflection on alignment, learner motivation, and potential barriers. These questions provide a useful framework that could be adapted for use with students, encouraging shared responsibility for evaluating learning.

Part Three synthesises earlier sections, offering a four-stage roadmap for assessment design encompassing LOs, learner activity, evaluation activity, and feedback. This cyclical structure reinforces the iterative nature of assessment practice and reflects principles of double-loop learning (Pavlakis, 2020), encouraging educators to reconsider not only their strategies but also the assumptions underpinning them. The inclusion of diagnostic assessment as a mechanism for identifying prior knowledge also highlights the importance of recognising learner diversity at the outset of curriculum design.

Differentiated assessment is presented as complementary to UDL, emphasising the value of both individual and collaborative learning experiences. Within this context, the suggestion that one-to-one support can be particularly effective is persuasive, although its feasibility within large cohorts inevitably raises questions about scalability. For learning developers and other third space practitioners, whose roles often involve individual consultations focused on assessment understanding, feedback interpretation, and learner confidence, this discussion may prove especially relevant. Extending this discussion, the consideration of grouping strategies, including homogeneous and heterogeneous arrangements, offers helpful prompts for thinking through collaborative learning design across disciplinary contexts. References to



established scholarship provide useful conceptual grounding, although some theoretical ideas are necessarily introduced only briefly, reflecting the book's intentionally concise format. Such brevity is also evident in the use of tables and diagrams, which support accessibility by condensing complex ideas. Where concepts are presented primarily in tabulated form, readers unfamiliar with particular frameworks may need to engage further with the cited literature, positioning the text as a starting point for further exploration rather than a comprehensive theoretical account.

Overall, *Better Assessment in Higher Education* provides a concise and accessible introduction to UDL-informed assessment. Its strengths lie in its clarity of structure, practical orientation, and sustained focus on reducing barriers to learning. The integration of reflective prompts and practical tools supports its usefulness for educators seeking to evaluate and develop inclusive assessment practices. While some theoretical references, such as constructive alignment (Biggs, 1996; Biggs et al., 2022), could be elaborated further in relation to the assessment construct, the book succeeds in providing a coherent overview of assessment design that encourages ongoing inquiry and reflective practice. As such, it offers a valuable resource for educators, learning developers, and other third space practitioners seeking to support students' engagement with inclusive and authentic assessment and to design assessment environments that support diverse learners within contemporary HE contexts.

## Disclosure statement

The authors used the following generative AI tools in the preparation of this manuscript: ChatGPT 5.5. The tasks performed by ChatGPT include: editorial feedback, reference checking, and language refinement. The authors have complied with the journal's principles of AI use.

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