



"When Will I Use This?"

Optimizing Relevance in Your Courses¹

UDL 3.0 Consideration 7.2: [Optimize relevance, value, and authenticity](#)

— Make learning meaningful by connecting to learners' interests, goals, and communities.

What is it?

Relevance, value, and authenticity are fundamental drivers of learner motivation. When learners see genuine meaning in what they're learning — connecting to their interests, goals, identities, and communities — engagement deepens and motivation becomes self-sustaining.

Importantly, relevance doesn't require real-world equivalence. Fictional scenarios, simulations, and imaginative problem-solving can be just as engaging when they authentically connect to learners' goals. The key insight is that **not all learners find the same activities equally relevant** — an activity that motivates one learner may not resonate with another.

Drawing on related literature, we can distinguish several pathways through which learners perceive relevance:

- **Career Utility:** Helping learners see how course content applies to their future jobs—answering "When will I use this?"
- **Personal Interest:** Connecting to what learners find genuinely fascinating or enjoyable to learn about.
- **Identity Connection:** Relating content to learners' values, culture, or sense of self—who they are and who they want to become.
- **Social Contribution:** Demonstrating how learners can use this knowledge to serve their communities and help others.

Why do it?

When learners find genuine meaning in their learning — not just external rewards — they invest more effort, persist through challenges, and retain knowledge longer. Related literatures suggest that motivation may be strongest when multiple pathways converge — when content is personally interesting AND career-relevant AND connected to identity. For example, having learners create artifacts for real audiences — not just for grading — has been shown to bring transformative shifts in motivation.

Additionally, while direct instruction about why content matters is helpful, learners who discover relevance through their own reflection develop more durable motivation than those who receive relevance externally. Students learn skills that help them to move from passive learners to active knowledge contributors.

¹ Content developed with AI, based on [the CAST UDL Guidelines™](#), scholarly sources, and web resources. Icons courtesy of [Flaticon.com](#) contributors and others.

How to do it?

Here are some ways to optimize relevance in your courses.

- **Communicate relevance directly:** Explicitly explain why content matters, connecting to career applications, conceptual understanding, and broader social purposes. Don't assume learners see relevance that is obvious to professionals.
- **Support self-discovery:** Create opportunities for learners to discover personal connections through reflection and discussion. Self-generated relevance often proves more durable.
- **Connect to real audiences:** When possible, design assessments that have actual purposes beside grading (e.g., public presentations, reports to community partners, or artifacts designed for real professional contexts).
- **Use simulation strategically:** Fictional scenarios can be highly engaging when they allow learners to practice genuine skills. The key is to connect to learner goals, not to replicate real-world settings exactly.
- **Offer meaningful choices:** When learners have agency in what and how they learn, content becomes inherently more relevant.
- **Value learner experience:** Life and work experiences are foundational learning resources. Create opportunities for learners to connect new learning to their unique backgrounds.

Essential Factors in Building Relevance

While the UDL 3.0 Guidelines emphasize optimizing relevance to honor learner variability, effectively implementing these strategies requires careful attention to several key factors.

- **Address multiple pathways:** Design for career utility, personal interest, identity, and social contribution — not just one pathway.
- **Expand beyond employment:** Authenticity should connect to broader social value and community well-being, not just workplace preparation.
- **Build critical reflection:** Avoid positioning professional practices as inherently superior. Learners should feel empowered to question both workplace and academic approaches.
- **Broaden success definitions:** Include curiosity, persistence, and collaboration — not just grades or prior preparation.

Optimizing relevance, value, and authenticity might require changes to curriculum and instruction. So, consider your workload and start with one strategy from each pathway — career utility, personal interest, identity connection, social contribution — and build your approach over time.

Summary

Optimizing relevance, value, and authenticity creates more inclusive and engaging learning experiences that honor learner variability. By providing multiple pathways to meaning—through career connections, personal interest, identity, and social contribution—we can remove barriers to motivation while supporting all learners' need for purposeful learning. This approach recognizes that learners are more engaged and successful when they see genuine value in their educational experience, ultimately fostering lifelong learning and intrinsic motivation. Finally, remember to start small, making manageable changes in your practice that facilitate learning.

Resources

Anthropic. (2025). Claude Opus 4.5 [Large language model]. <https://claude.ai/>

Albrecht, J. R., & Karabenick, S. A. (2018). Relevance for learning and motivation in education. *The Journal of Experimental Education*, 86(1), 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220973.2017.1380593>

CAST. (2024). Optimize relevance, value, and authenticity. *Universal Design for Learning Guidelines version 3.0*. <https://udlguidelines.cast.org>

Nieminen, J. H., Haataja, E., & Cobb, P. J. (2024). From active learners to knowledge contributors: Authentic assessment as a catalyst for students' epistemic agency. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 30(4), 970–990. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2024.2332252>

Schoutte, E. C., Alexander, P. A., Loyens, S. M. M., Lombardi, D., & Paas, F. (2024). College students' perceptions of relevance, personal interest, and task value. *The Journal of Experimental Education*, 92(1), 76–100. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220973.2022.2133075>

Shillingford, S., & Karlin, N. J. (2013). The role of intrinsic motivation in the academic pursuits of nontraditional students. *New Horizons in Adult Education and Human Resource Development*, 25(3), 91–102. <https://doi.org/10.1002/nha3.20033>