There are three principles that are essential to our thinking about Universal design for learning.

The first principle is that of using multiple means of representation. Whatever information is to be taught can be represented in many ways. Often times we see the textbook as the primary means of representing information that students have to learn. But in fact, information can be represented orally, can be represented graphically, or represented in summary. There are multiple ways information can be represented.

The second principle is that we provide multiple means of engagement for students. That means students have to practice what it is they are to learn. But practice should look different for different learners. There are many different ways we can have students engage in that practice--for some it might be writing, for some it might be interaction and for some it might be visual activities.

The third primary principle of universal design for learning is creating multiple means of expression. Students need to demonstrate what they know; however, using a test, which is one the primary means of expression used in schools, might not be the appropriate path for some students. So when we are thinking about how students can express what they have learned, we need to think of the many ways they can do that. They might be able to do that through an oral presentation, a written presentation or they might best represent what they know through a test.
A second question that teachers ask is what does it mean for them when they are planning for students with varied learning needs. The way I respond to that is that it is a very different way of thinking about instruction. In the past teachers have thought about one way to represent information or to teach a particular lesson. Then when a student appears to be unsuccessful in following that path, the teacher typically makes modifications or accommodations for that particular student to help them learn the appropriate content.

When using universal design for learning, teachers, in fact, think differently. They think initially as they plan instruction about how to create multiple paths for kids to access information, create multiple pathways to practice what they have learned and to create multiple pathways to demonstrate what they know. When teachers start thinking about instruction in this way they find they are thinking about all of their students and their varied learning needs from the very beginning.