UDL, Equity, and Antiracism: Part 2

David Toston	Andratesha, I wish I had met you 20 years ago when I was in the classroom, because I can remember being very much in the place of the willing. What advice would you give for teachers or educators who find themselves being willing and wanting to do this work? How would you coach us to move into the next box of being willing and ready and able?
Andratesha Fritzgerald	First, there is an acknowledgement of what we know and what we don't know. And when we come to this place where we can face ourselves, where we can lean into even uncomfortable conversations about who we're reaching and who we're requiring to reach or jump or stretch to reach us, then we can begin to universally design learning environments and experiences that reach for and bend toward all students.
	And so first I would say recognize the power structure that exists, both past and present, acknowledge the intent and actions of abolishing the limitations of the power structures at hand. And that means that traditionally, the teacher is seen as the source of power and the power holder and the decision maker in the learning space. And when we honor each student, that means we lay down our power in order for each identity, each learner, to make powerful decisions for themselves. There will be times where they make mistakes and they fail and we have to invite them into a space to evaluate their decision making. This moves us from just ready, to ready and willing, meaning that we are willing to make mistakes and we're willing to coach students as they make mistakes. We have to reflect this code of honor by empowering each member of the learning community daily and the supports and the choices that we offer and the opportunity to co-create and be powerful members of the community that co-create the environment together. We have to give space for each learner to evaluate the power of their decisions and give them space to think about the choices that they've made as they choose an outcome, choose a destination, and we give them something like driver's ed to help them learn to drive in a safe, supported way.
David Toston	That concept of honoring students is really so powerful in the book, and I'm trying to formulate a thought around how it begins with us being courageous enough to relinquish the center stage and to invite other actors to help us finish the movie of their lives or the movie or the snippet of the year that they're in our classroom.

Andratesha Fritzgerald	When we think about the honor that each learner deserves, then we begin to create communities that constantly send messages to the learner. And these messages for far too long have been negative for our learners of color. There's been a message that you don't measure up, and then the standardized tests can reinforce this message that you don't belong. The supports are not available so then students are over-identified for special education, and then the fear of over-identification keeps students of color sometimes from getting the services that they need. And so we have to be intentional about crafting these messages over and over again.

And there's a few messages that in my book I share that I really, really want teachers to design from. And those messages are, you are more important than the systems we serve, you are more important than my personal preferences, and so the order of the desk or the activities that we do won't reflect what I want, but more so what you need and what you create, that you are more important than the way the content is packaged. And for far too long, we have been held to page 69 to page 70 then to page 71 instead of breathing into a curriculum that meets students at their areas of interest, that gives them a chance to show what they know before holding accountable to a sequence, we give freedom to hold ourselves accountable to an outcome. I'm willing to learn about you to help you reach your life's goals. That means that we solicit information that we are not the only one seen as the expert in the room, but we value each learner as an expert on themselves.

And last but not least, I will honor you with instruction that holds you accountable and empowers you to take ownership of your own learning. And Zaretta Hammond often talks about the power to take on those. The cognitive heavy lifting has been reserved to the teacher who makes all of the decisions for the students. In a universally designed learning environment, we trust students to make decisions, to have choices, and when the battery of choices that we've laid out for them may not meet their interest or their needs, then we invite them to share with us choices that they create for themselves. This is honor and action, and honor through the lens of UDL is anti-racist. |
| David Toston | So Andratesha, in a classroom that has implemented universal design for learning and is committed to anti-racist practices, what are some approaches that we can take in the classroom to begin to tear down structures of power? |
| Andratesha Fritzgerald | So, when we think about structures of power in the classroom, I want us to think about something that happens in every single classroom, and that's we give directions. And I want you to just reflect for a moment on how many times you've given directions and felt like students aren't hearing me, they're not |

listening, or they aren't following directions. And so when we give directions in order to bring about a certain outcome, so, let's say for instance we really want every student in the class to be focused. And so we may give a direction like, "Clear your desk of everything." That direction can, even though the intent is to bring about focus, can create a barrier to learning for some students. So if I struggle to focus or I draw to make sure that what I hear is what's captured on the paper or I need a fidget for me to focus, that simple direction that seems equivocal to everyone then limits focus for me.

A better solution would be to check in with yourself and think about what would it take for me to focus, and then share what it takes for me to focus with my students to say, "Hey, I need to make sure that I close all 17 tabs on my computer before I proceed with projecting this mini lesson for you." What are some things that you need to do in order to focus? It gives people a time to check in with themselves, to not be held accountable to a standard that is belonging to one person or one group, and it gives each person a chance to think about what the barriers to focus are and what some of the solutions are around the room that other students use before I decide what is best for me. And then we can pause and take a moment to see at the end of that short period of time was my strategy for focus effective, do I need to keep this in my toolbox, or do I need to utilize something different?

For students of color in classrooms where focus may be a barrier, it's been viewed as disrespect. The students may have been asked to leave the room or even suspended or punished for not paying attention even though the class has not been designed to meet their needs for focus. When we identify a barrier to learning, we don't attach it to the student as a negative, we simply design our instruction to bend toward them and meet them where they are.

For so many classrooms, being anti-racist means that the safety that's intended by the UDL guidelines is protected for every learner. And so, there is no power struggle when I am inviting your power to make decisions for yourself. There is no need to dismiss or remove you from the educational setting because I'm inviting you to create this setting, to co-create this setting as a community. And the more empowered you are to make decisions for yourself, the less struggle, the less barrier, the more learning can actually occur.