

UDL, Equity, and Antiracism: Part 1

David Toston

Hi, I'm David Toston, senior advisor at the California Collaborative for Educational Excellence. Our primary goal at CCE is to ensure an equitable education for every student. And we recognize that this vision is impossible without relying heavily on the strategies presented through the Universal Design for Learning framework.

We're excited to be partnering with Andratesha Fitzgerald who's a nationally-known expert and author in the area of Universal Design for Learning and anti-racism. Through our conversation, we'll explore strategies that increase the honor and trust between educators and students and leverage the power of personalized learning. And with that, Andratesha, let's get started.

Andratesha
Fitzgerald

Thank you so much, David. I'm so excited to share. And truly, when anti-racism meets Universal Design, there must be action. In the book, "Antiracism and Universal Design for Learning: Building Expressways to Success," I walk through some of the key components of Universal Design for Learning as it relates to equity through the lens of anti-racism.

And so I'm Andratesha Fitzgerald, founder of Building Blocks of Brilliance with over 21 years in public education. And as I share, I'm an author.

One of the highlights I feel of this project, this book, is that Samaria Rice, the mother of Tamir Rice who was a 12-year old boy who was killed by police in Cleveland, Ohio, wrote the foreword to the book. She's a civil rights activist who really believes in the power of personalized learning through Universal Design for Learning. And so today I'm just gonna share a little bit about the movie that we're making, what is Universal Design, and then five questions to anchor your Universal Design for Learning implementation into anti-racism.

And so LeBron James is a basketball star, and he decided that he wanted to make a movie about his life. And so this idea became a concept before it became a script, before it became reality. And so what I learned is that when there are people on the set and there is a sound of what's called a clapperboard, it is the director that yells action. And the reason for this clapperboard is that there are sound engineers and directors and producers that have to merge the sound along with the images. And so what they want at the end is a movie. That word action merges together the intent of all of the people who come together to

make the movie, to create reality. And so in schools, every student, every learner starts the year storyboarding their life movie. And so whether they're in Pre-K or in continuing their education in higher ed, every learner comes to us with a destination that they've chosen, a goal that they want to reach, a movie that they're making, so to speak. And so when we think about the learner's goal, we also have to think about what the goal of Universal Design for Learning is.

Universal Design for Learning is a guide, a script, a storyboard, if you will, that merges together the destination that each learner chooses for themselves, along with these three pieces of the guidelines of Universal Design for Learning. Every effective instructor must give options for engagement, options for representation, and options for action and expression. I'll say a little bit more about this soon.

But from 25 years plus of brain research, researchers have learned the best ways for humans to take in information to actually engage in that learning. And so the image of the Universal Design for Learning guidelines is there, but I wanna draw your attention to the very last row, the bottom where there is a term called expert learners. And the goal of Universal Design for Learning is for each learner to become an expert on themselves. And that means that they'll be purposeful and motivated, resourceful and knowledgeable, strategic and goal-directed. Engagement speaks to how learners are supported as they navigate through new material. Multiple means of representation means we give options for each learner to take information in. And multiple means of action and expression simply means that each learner will have options on how to show us what they know. And so Universal Design for Learning to be implemented fully has three steps. And that's to have a clear and rigorous goal for the designer of the learning experience to identify potential barriers and then to design in order to reduce the barriers at hand.

And so one of the barriers that I wanna talk to you about today as we think about the barriers that we can predict that students will experience for our students of color, there is a predictability that in our systems, that in our content and in curricula, there may be racism. And in order to combat that, we must make the decision followed with consequent actions to be anti-racist, to work to tear racism down wherever it shows up even if that's inside of me. And so prior to the pandemic, there is a tale of two school systems, two schooling experiences for students of color, students of color with disabilities, and then their White counterparts. And so some of that disparity was in suspension in preschool students. And so Black children only represented 18% of preschool enrollment but 48% of children receiving more than one out of school suspension. That disproportionality was seen in the suspension rates that

students of color were suspended at a rate of three times higher than White students. There was disproportionality and suspension for girls of color, but that disparity continued in suspension rates and law enforcement referrals and restraint and seclusion rates, as well as expulsion rates.

And so we must remember that that clapperboard is a signal for us to take action, what gets recorded, what are our outcomes, and do they match our intent? And so in order to implement Universal Design for Learning which says this is the best way for all students to learn, we have to be attentive that when we say all students, our intent may be to reach Black and Brown learners, but our outcomes are showing that there's a difference. And so Universal Design for Learning plus anti-racism yields the outcomes for all students. We have to be willing. And the definition of willing is to be ready, eager, and prepared to do something. Willing to take, that means that we'll reach and reach for and hold each student. And so we have to be willing to take action. It's not enough to think about UDL. It's not enough to just know that the outcomes have not been successful for students of color, that there has been a difference. It's not enough to just have the information, but are we willing to take action to change?

In my book, "Antiracism and Universal Design for Learning," I talk about the strategies to build express ways to success for students of color. And so we have to be ready and willing to reach. One of the central ideas in the book is this notion of honor. Are we asking students to change who they are at the core in order to reach success, or are we bending the curriculum or teaching our instructional strategies toward them in the name of justice?

Sylvia Duckworth created this graphic. It's called The Wheel of Power and Privilege. And schools were created traditionally and historically to serve those who are White with a post-secondary education, abled body, heterosexual, neurotypical, robust mental health, slim, own property, rich, speak English, cisgendered men who are citizens of the United States. And so when we think about those identities, those who are in power, those who enjoy the privilege of being seen as normal, those who show up most in curricula, in pictures, and resources, we have to think about what changes are we willing and ready to take in order to reach for those who have been historically and traditionally marginalized? And when we make those changes, when we employ these strategies, when we honor every learner, then each student gets to make decisions for themselves. Each learner gets to see themselves as the picture of success. Each identity is honored as we reach and bend the curriculum toward

each identity instead of asking students to change who they are to reach toward us.

And so I'm gonna just share briefly five questions that anchor Universal Design for Learning and anti-racism. J. Luke Wood created this Taxonomy of Educators' Perspectives. And so as you think about your willingness and readiness to implement the strategies that I'll share with you in just a moment, this is a chance for you to do a heart check and an action check to see what you are willing to do, what you are ready to do, what feels resistant, and maybe something that you refuse. This is a heart check for you just as we go through and as you prepare to learn more about anchoring Universal Design for Learning and anti-racism.

And so the first question for you to think about for yourself is, how do I acknowledge inequities within my discipline and decenter Whiteness in my course content?

So maybe this is where you reflect on the diversity of author representation or theoretical frameworks in your course or content and anticipate how to frame topics that students of different races and backgrounds may experience differently. Are you willing to do this? Are you ready and willing? Is there a resistance or a refusal? How do I communicate anti-racist principles in my course policies and learning goals? And so have you invited feedback from your students or colleagues to see where there may be implicit bias or assumptions? Have you added an anti-racist statement to your goals that is authentic to you? Are you willing to say out loud that I'm anti-racist, that I'm moving toward justice with the decisions that I make with and for students?

The next question is, how do I teach with humility, acknowledging my own biases and challenging my students to encounter their own? Do you give students a chance to think through their own biases to reflect? Is there space for reflection and emotion? And if you're comfortable doing so, have you shared your own journey with students? I used to think or do this, and now I do that.

How do I elevate student voice so that a full range of ideas and approaches and perspectives are valued and recognized? Have you considered providing opportunities for students to collaborate in multiple ways, written through text, different platforms? Have you tried incorporating frequent questions to decenter your own power and honor each learner's voice and space to make decisions?

Have you ever tracked your speaking patterns, who are you speaking to, whose voices are heard most to make sure that every voice is not only invited, encouraged, but heard when shared?

And how do I create assessments that enable students to demonstrate different knowledge and different ways of knowing? Is there a way for me to lean in to make sure I'm giving multiple ways for students to demonstrate their acquired knowledge, not just one way to show what you know but multiple ways? What am I ready and willing to learn before I teach?

And so the goal of UDL is not just to create expert learners in the students but as a community of learners to become expert learners. And so am I willing to acknowledge my own biases, my own privilege? Am I willing to revise courses and curricula? Am I willing to amplify minoritized voices? Am I willing to incorporate high-impact learning activities? Am I willing to develop community partnerships?

This is anti-racism and action merged with Universal Design for Learning. If we don't invite anti-racism to UDL, then it is possible for us to recreate the same old movie over and over again, holding up tenets of White supremacy, holding up tenets of racism without evaluating how we make the change. Are you ready, and are you willing?

Then a new story is on the horizon, but it doesn't become a movie recorded with intent and impact merged together beautifully until we take action, thank you.