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### Book Review: Anti-racism and universal design for learning: Building expressways to success.

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**Book Review: Anti-racism and universal design for learning: Building expressways to success.**

**Author Biography**

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Culturally responsive teaching and pedagogy include more than teaching strategies; the concepts also include a mindset shift for educators. It requires focusing on seeing all students as potential learners shifting from a sympathetic view of students to one of empathy.

The excitement for this book started out as a semester project; a book club between a professor and four graduate students. As teacher educators, we understand the value of continuous learning. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is part of the lesson plan format used by the preservice teachers in the program. A section of the plan requires them to complete a chart that includes engagement, representation, and action & expression in their lessons to plan instruction. UDL is a consistent part of conversations with preservice teachers when offering feedback and during observations.

The project was designed to improve instruction for how we use UDL and the plan included reading a chapter a week, keeping notes on a collaborative digital whiteboard: jamboard, and meeting bi-monthly (hybrid) to discuss the chapters. But once the book club began and we started reading the recently released book *Antiracism and Universal Design for Learning: Building Expressways to Success* (Fritzgerald, 2020), the conversation about how to use UDL became more empowering for the members of the group and motivated each member to make real-world connections about their own teaching experiences. There were lots of conversations about what could and should have been done differently in former classrooms. We begin to experience the mind shift.

But first, a little background about UDL, Universal Design for Learning focuses on three guiding principles for educators. Based on Vygotsky's prerequisites for learning (1966), UDL posits that teachers should design instruction that incorporates the affective network (engagement in learning), the recognition network, (understanding the information), and the strategic network (applying strategies to process their learning). All brains share networks for learning, all individuals process the information they learn differently, which is where UDL comes in. It is a way of planning instruction with the student at the forefront of instruction. Teachers plan strategies and instructional methods to meet the needs of the broadest range of learners. With UDL, teachers adapt, not students.

It is essential for preservice teachers and inpractice teachers to understand and really know their students in order to teach them purposefully and meet all of their needs. Students do not necessarily want to learn or are even motivated to learn if they do not have a positive relationship with the teacher. That relationship-building requires the teacher to understand more than just the data provided by an assessment. Therefore it is essential that the instructional plans that the preservice teachers write must include UDL principles. After choosing the content

for instruction, the preservice teachers are then prompted to determine how this lesson is accessible to all learners. They must think about how they will engage the students in the lesson, how they will represent the content, and how they expect students to demonstrate their understanding of the skills and concepts. Making this focus a priority for planning instruction will benefit them and their students in their future classrooms.

UDL has been around since 1984, but Fritzgerald (2020) takes UDL to another level. In her book, she uses the analogy of expressways to view and explain the UDL principles and shows educators how to build and create expressways with on-ramps for students to engage in learning. To travel on this expressway, black and brown students need a vehicle built for personal learning to activate their prior knowledge and become expert learners. Often, students of color that are at high risk, are left stranded as spectators due to the systems set in place that do not recognize and welcome their differences. The book is a short read and easily accessible to all educators. In the foreword, Rice shares, “Fritzgerald offers very practical suggestions for making inclusion, antiracism, and the acceptance of differences the first and most important step in lesson planning.”

This powerful book demonstrates how to take a teaching method or idea and cultivate it into a culturally responsive tool; this process begins in chapter one with her challenging educators to think about the obstacles that have been created by learning institutions. She includes real-world examples of black and brown students who have been marginalized by the school systems. “Just good enough is not good enough until it is good for all students.” (p. 3). She continues by sharing the importance of honoring students. How do educators show students that they honor them? When we honor students we show them: “I see you, I am learning from you. I acknowledge you. You are welcome here. You belong. Your success is my mission.” (p. 6-7). Another important area is learning how to share the power of learning with students. This will provide students with the power over how they learn is one way to help to break the cycle of institutionalized education. Once the code of power is gone, students can become true learners and leaders in the classroom. All of those powerful ideas are included in just the first chapter titled *Antiracism and UDL Begin with Honor*.

She includes safety checks for helping students enter the UDL expressway while offering suggestions for educators to understand how they can build the UDL expressway. There is in-depth information about restorative justice, culturally responsive teaching, and trauma-informed practices to help guide teachers in giving students access to enter the expressway in ways that show they are listened to, honored and valued.

In chapter 5, *Engagement as License to Learn*, she explains the importance of helping students learn to “drive themselves, to monitor themselves, to use feedback to improve themselves and then to make choices to ensure they are moving in the desired direction at all times.” (p. 65). Providing students with pathways to self-regulate their own learning gives them the ‘license to learn’ and for engagement to be effective in UDL in schools. Students cannot learn in an environment where they don’t feel safe and they cannot thrive if they cannot learn, this is especially true for Black and Brown students for whom the structure of schooling can be

oppressive and not responsive to their needs. Providing effective pathways for students to share control with the teacher allows students to become more independent and more likely to succeed in the school environment and eventually the world.

In chapter 9, *Constructing a Universally Designed, Antiracist Classroom*, she explains that “construction zones are not beautiful, but the outcome often is.” (p. 131). Our current climate promotes defense mechanisms by everyone when they hear words like culturally responsive teaching because of the misinformation from both news and social media. Words like racism and antiracist are often barriers in conversations about how to implement culturally responsive teaching practices. But in this book, Fitzgerald gives authentic examples and presents clear ideas for how to build an expressway that might be able to fix the pavement on the learning highway created by fear of the unknown. To serve learners in the classroom, it is vital to explore all sides of history, no matter how troubling, to truly learn the different perspectives and arguments. To learn more about our black and brown communities, there must be a sense of understanding their experiences and history. “There is always the dust of old mindsets, and the jackhammer of common challenges that threaten every schools’ attempt at reform.” (p. 131). Change is never easy, pretty, but if it does not hurt just a little is it really true change?

In the final chapter, it is clear that there will be roadblocks and some will want to help navigate the obstacles whereas others will challenge and ridicule the roadblocks. It is important to note that UDL was created to help improve accessibility for learning by all students. In this book, Fitzgerald takes it further by offering insights into how to provide clear entrance and exit ramps for black and brown students to get a license to drive their own learning. These ramps can be utilized to create a more efficient highway of learning for all students.

She offers all educators the opportunity to revisit why they are teaching and provides opportunities to think about **what** they are doing that demonstrates their ability to engage students, honor students, and share the power of learning to create learners with self-regulation skills and who become motivated learners. She offers teachers the opportunity to find ways to help students become co-constructors of their learning by providing ideas for creating an on-ramp for teachers to be part of building the expressway for students who are often regulated to the category of unteachable.

This book provides teachers with a roadmap to consider avenues for recognizing their own experiences in order to develop instruction and opportunities for students to become drivers on the expressway of learning and life. Taking a look at a system that was designed to elevate some and degrade others is never easy – especially when that system is our schools, but this book is a good place to start dismantling the broken parts of that system. As one of our book club group members shared, “Inaction is agreement, are we giving students the right information to help them get on the on-ramp?” With the implementation of UDL in the classroom, learners of all backgrounds will know they bring something valuable to the learning environment, they have the opportunity to share what they know, and that their destination and journey on the expressway is equally important.

