UDL as a Tool for Building a Culturally Responsive Classroom

In Kei Miller's book of poetry, *The Cartographer Tries to Map a Way to Zion* (2016), the poet imagines a dialectic between The Cartographer and The Rastaman in which the two speakers discuss different ways of seeing and knowing the world we live in. At one point, The Rastaman responds to The Cartographer's assertion of unbiased, scientific perspective with "draw me a map of what you see\then I will draw a map of what you never see\and guess me whose map will be bigger than whose?\Guess me whose map will tell the larger truth?"

As teachers in a mainstream, western educational context, we often play the role of the cartographer, "drawing maps" and creating guidelines from what we believe is an objective and dispassionate perspective. I would like to suggest that if we are going to design classrooms in which students from a diversity of backgrounds are going to thrive, we need to create an environment that gives them space to add to our maps of knowledge and experience.

One of the great gifts given to me in my teaching career is to have always taught in extremely culturally and racially diverse classrooms. In these classrooms, little snippets of experience and stories from my students that reflect the multiplicity of their lives and their experiences have expanded my world immeasurably, and I am unendingly grateful for this continued redefining and remapping. In her TED talk "The Danger of a Single Story," author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009) talks about prejudice and stereotypes as being a matter of only having one story about a person or a group of people. Vanier is a place where, if we are open to it, we can learn many different stories about many different people and begin, as teachers, to work past our own biases and prejudices. Doing this is not only personally gratifying; it is fundamentally necessary if we are to teach effectively in an environment where so many different races, cultures, languages and identities are represented in our classrooms.

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The central question of this article, then, is how can Universal Design for Learning (UDL) be used as a framework for creating culturally responsive classroom spaces that take advantage of the diversity of experience and expertise that our students, with their multiplicities of race, gender, language, and culture, bring with them into the college environment? I no longer want to focus on teaching them to conform to our expectations; I want to imagine ways that we can educate in an environment that not only makes space for, but actively privileges the knowledge that comes with their individual identities. This is important not just so that we can be personally enriched, but so that our students can use their own lived experiences and identities as a way to succeed at college and beyond.

Very roughly speaking, UDL is a framework, based on an architectural design concept, which envisions designing classrooms and courses that are accessible – but not just physically – to all students, for the benefit of all. It is a shift away from the method of making accommodations for individual students who are seen to fall outside the "norm" due to physical disability or learning difference, and toward the mindset that difference is the norm. This shifts the process of meeting our students' needs from a model that is reactive, reforming it as a proactive process that asks the designer/teacher to "define the universe" that is the classroom, with an expectation of variety. The expectations of UDL are that a classroom is built with difference as the norm and that when the classroom addresses and adapts to differences, it benefits all the students in the class.

This anticipation of difference is, at least theoretically, suited to the needs of a racially, culturally and linguistically diverse classroom. As it is the teacher who defines the universe of the classroom, the place to start using UDL principles to create culturally responsive classrooms is the teachers. The ideal in an institution as diverse as Vanier is that the teaching staff would be a reflection of the student body; however, like many academic institutions in North America, Vanier's teaching staff is much less racially and culturally diverse than its student population. Various studies have concluded that racialized students whose teachers match their racial identities have better outcomes. A new study by Hua-Yu Sebastian Cherng and

Peter F. Halpin (2016), "The Importance of Minority Teachers: Student Perceptions of Minority Versus White Teachers," goes a step further: Cherng and Halpin posit that all students have more positive perceptions[1] of their racialized teachers. It seems that there is a multiplicity of reasons for these more positive outcomes and perceptions. One is the issue of role modeling, wherein students see people they identify with at the front of the classroom and recognize that education and success are possible for them.

There are two other issues at play, however, which are, in fact, more compelling. The first is that teachers with non-white backgrounds have different implicit biases than their white colleagues, and they may be more aware of their biases in the classroom. Consequently, a more diverse faculty establishes a more level playing field for students, which in turn creates an environment where a wider array of students will feel motivated and be rewarded for their efforts. Finally, and maybe most importantly, racialized teachers, in a North American context, are better at creating multiculturally responsive classrooms: "A growing body of comparative

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and quantitative work … finds that Latino and Black teachers are more multiculturally aware than their White peers and that higher levels of multicultural awareness are linked to better classroom environments (in classroom observations)" (Cherng & Davis, 2015). To bring this idea back to my analogy of maps and stories, non-white teachers may have an expanded map or bank of stories to draw on, and therefore become more responsive to a multiplicity of student perspectives. So if Vanier is going to create truly culturally responsive classrooms, it is urgent that diversity in faculty hiring be prioritized. This means going beyond the passive model of waiting for racialized candidates to show up when we are hiring. We need to be actively recruiting candidates and then supporting those candidates, so that we keep them. (There is a large body of work on the issues that racialized employees face when entering white dominated workspaces, and it would behoove us to deal with those issues

before they occur, rather than after). This is especially urgent in disciplines like my own, English, where the racial disparity is particularly obvious.

"But I'm white and I already work here!," you say. What do you do when you are, like me, one of the many white teachers at Vanier? How do we move towards creating a more responsive classroom? To begin, it is important for all of us, regardless of background, to consider our own implicit and explicit biases. We need to examine our internal maps of the universe, the stories we tell ourselves about who we are and what we believe about other people. When it comes to implicit bias, we are often talking about internalized messages we aren't even aware we have absorbed about groups of people. In her article "Is This How Discrimination Ends?," Jessica Nordell (2017) examines implicit bias and the effectiveness of anti-implicit bias training. She writes that attitudes about implicit bias are often associated with

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[1] It is important to note that the study goes beyond a simple *like vs dislike* dichotomy and breaks perceptions down into very clear categories, and explores which of those categories are linked to positive academic outcomes for students.

who you are and how that effects the way you perceive the world. In other words, we don't necessarily see a bias if it doesn't have an impact on us. I observe this in myself all the time. I have become, after a lifetime as a cis-gendered woman, fairly good at picking up on gender bias, but my radar for picking up racial or cultural bias only has become active and more accurate as I have put some effort into seeing things from other perspectives. The key to implicit bias is that it's not purposeful; it isn't linked to what you *think* you believe, but rather the unconscious messages we pick up from society. It takes work to start to unpack, and it requires a fair amount of critical self-observation. Nordell (2017) quotes the facilitators of an effective anti-bias workshop she attended with a point that I think bears repeating here: "trying to ignore these differences […] makes discrimination worse. Humans see age and gender and skin color: That's vision. Humans have associations about these categories: That's culture. And humans use these associations to make judgments: That […] is habit". Therefore, our job is to break our unconscious habits. In the same article, Nordell (2017) continues, "Observe your own stereotypes and replace them […]. Look for situational reasons for a person's behavior, rather than stereotypes about that person's group. Seek out people who belong to groups unlike your own." The good news for Vanier teachers is that we already work in an environment perfectly suited to exploding stereotypes. For every negative cultural or racial stereotype out there, we all have had multiple experiences with students who not only defy those stereotypes, but show them for the "single story" that they are. Breaking the habit of our own biases is not merely a matter of being in this environment, it involves opening ourselves to the environment and listening to the stories our students' very presences have to tell. Enter your classrooms expecting that difference is the norm.

The final point here brings me back to story-telling. One of the underlying principles of the UDL classroom is the creation of an environment and an atmosphere where students are empowered to make decisions about their own learning. The idea is to imagine the classroom as a place where there are multiple paths to find one's way to the goal of the course. To do this, we have to become very transparent about our own "story" and allow space for students to tell their "stories" and, ideally, to use those stories as a springboard to success. When it comes to issues of diversity in my English literature classroom, for instance, I have to remind myself to include texts from a diversity of viewpoints. When that isn't possible, I want to think about different ways that my students might view a text. The same work I am doing to dismantle my own implicit bias about people needs to be done for the work I assign. The same is true for assessment. Is it possible to come at writing about literature from different angles and viewpoints? Can I assess the same skills and knowledge (an ability to analyze and structure an argument, an ability to express oneself clearly) with a variety of assignments? Can I build assignments that allow students to bring their own experiences and knowledge into the classroom, to become experts in their own perspectives as a means to becoming experts in literature? Can I be very transparent about my own identity and experiences, so that students have permission to bring their own identities into the classroom? Ultimately, have I created space in the classroom for the kind of exchanges and story-telling (literal and figurative) that allows both student and teacher to map their way towards knowledge? These are questions that are ongoing for me as an educator, and I'm thrilled to be working with the UDL taskforce to explore them in a more complex and comprehensive way than I've been able to in the past.

I'd like to end with a word of thanks to the Kanien'kehá:ka (Mohawk) students I encountered in my first teaching job who, through their presence, opened up a new map of the world to me. I would not be the teacher I am today if I had not been lucky enough to have this group of smart, funny, occasionally-mischievous, endlessly-talented and brave students in my first classrooms. I would also like to honour them and their ancestors by noting that we do this job at an institution that sits on unceded indigenous territory. Present-day Montreal sits on what was a traditional meeting place for different groups of indigenous people. It would do us well as settlers on this land and teachers in this space to embrace that spirit and remember that we are just one of the voices of this place. The more we can work to listen to and amplify the variety of voices we encounter here, the better we will do as human beings and as teachers.

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