10 Strategies for Engaging Learners with Universal Design for Learning and Antiracism

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Introduction

This guide shares ideas for applying both the Universal Design for Learning framework and antiracist teaching methods to courses in higher education. The introduction provides definitions of key concepts related to these frameworks followed by 10 strategies.

The authors of this article offer gratitude especially to educator and author Andratesha Fritzgerald. Fritzgerald's (2020) book, *Antiracism and Universal Design for Learning*, sparked the idea to create this document.

Key Concepts

Universal Design for Learning

Neuroscience and education research suggest that all students can be skilled learners if barriers are removed. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a framework to help instructors address these barriers to learning. The framework is organized around three principles that correspond to three learning networks in the brain with the goal of students becoming expert learners:

Guideline	Goal
Multiple Means of Engagement	Expert learners who are purposeful and motivated.
Multiple Means of Representation	Expert learners who are resourceful and knowledgeable.
Multiple Means of Action and Expression	Expert learners who are strategic and goal-directed.

"UDL is a framework to guide the design of learning environments that are accessible and challenging for all. Ultimately, the goal of UDL is to support learners to become "expert learners" who are, each in their own way, purposeful and motivated, resourceful and knowledgeable, and strategic and goal driven. UDL aims to change the design of the environment rather than to change the learner. When environments are intentionally designed to reduce barriers, all learners can engage in rigorous, meaningful learning." (CAST, 2018)

See also [CAST.org Universal Design for Learning Guidelines](#)

Antiracist teaching

Antiracist teaching begins with the instructor engaging in and committing to ongoing self-inquiry and personal antiracism work. Antiracist teaching:

- Identifies and addresses racism directly through curriculum, course design, and instructional methods,
- Builds students' and instructors' race literacy through collaborative examination of systems of oppression at individual, institutional, and systemic levels,
- Provides opportunities to create real world solutions to address oppressive systems,
- Acknowledges that the classroom and the campus community are part of the real world,
- Guides students in creating plans of action to challenge and dismantle racism, and
- Advocates for antiracist policies and practices at the institutional level (Bell 2020; Darling-Hammond, 2017; Kehoe, 1994; Kendi, 2019; Kishimoto, 2018; Knowles & Hawkman, 2020).

"Anti-racist teaching addresses racism directly and focuses on the cognitive aspects. Anti-racist teaching confronts prejudice through the discussion of past and present

racism, stereotyping and discrimination in society. It teaches the economic, structural and historical roots of inequality (McGregor 1993, 2)." ([Kehoe 1994](#))

See also [CETL (Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning) Anti-Racist Pedagogy Resources](#), [Talking About Race](#), [Antiracist Teaching Methods](#)

White supremacy

White supremacy is often understood in connection to overtly racist hate groups. Using Frances Lee Ansley's definition, white supremacy also "refers to a political, economic, and cultural system in which:

- whites overwhelmingly control power and material resources,
- conscious and unconscious ideas of white superiority and entitlement are widespread, and
- relations of white dominance and non-white subordination are daily reenacted across a broad array of institutions and social settings" (Ansley, 1989, p. 1024).

See also [What is White Supremacy Culture](#) (Okun, 2021).

Social construct

A social construct is an idea that exists because humans agree that it exists and means what humans say it means; this meaning can change over time and is not based in objective reality. Some examples of social constructs that influence the world we live in include time, law, languages, and gender roles. In this document, the social construct under discussion is race (Kang et al., 2017).

Intersectionality

Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) coined the term intersectionality to describe the overlapping identities, such as race, gender, sexual orientation, ability, and class, that shape experiences of privilege and oppression. These intersecting identities do not work in isolation (Center for the Study of Social Policy, 2019). Intersectionality is also a critical analytic lens used to challenge and transform structures of inequality (Dill & Zambrana, 2009).

> *"describe[s] the ways in which race, class, gender, and other aspects of our identity 'intersect,' overlap and interact with one another, informing the way in which individuals simultaneously experience oppression and privilege in their daily lives interpersonally and systemically. Intersectionality promotes the idea that aspects of our identity do not work in a silo" (Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP (Center for the Study of Social Policy)), 2019, p. 1).*

> *"provides a critical analytic lens to interrogate racial, ethnic, class, ability, age, sexuality, and gender disparities and to contest existing ways of looking at these structures of inequality, transforming knowledges as well as the social institutions in which they have found themselves." (Dill & Zambrana, 2009)*

Strategies for Engaging Learners with Universal Design for Learning and Antiracism

Strategy #1: Start Small, Keep Building

The basics: Getting started tips for designing with UDL include:

- **Start small:** Engage in [critical reflection](). Choose one strategy, apply it to one learning activity or one assessment. Observe the results and engage in [critical reflection]() to determine next steps.
- **Keep going:** Continue to update, refine, and apply additional strategies to your course design and delivery. Be curious, be compassionate, be critical.
- **Let students lead:** Get regular and ongoing feedback from students about their learning experiences to inform changes and updates. Remember that students accustomed to white supremacy may have a hard time letting go of that internalized dominance and their feedback may be a sign that they need additional interventions, while at the same time they may be creating an unsafe learning environment for students of color.
  - For example, request feedback in anonymous surveys or class session reflections. Consider doing this at semester start and 1 – 2 during the semester.
  - Considerations for feedback questions:
    - AVOID mandating/requiring disclosure: Be mindful of requiring disclosure of any information where students are required to 'out' part of their identity they do not wish to. Examples: socioeconomic status/class, gender, sexual orientation, citizenship status, etc.
    - INSTEAD use invitational language to request sharing and create online surveys that do not force responses. Some ideas for anonymous feedback questions include:
      - Do you feel welcome in this class?
      - Do you think your contributions are valued in class?
      - Do you feel comfortable reaching out to me (the instructor)?
      - Do you see yourself represented in the class materials and content?
      - Have you experienced or witnessed any behavior, including things I might have done, such as microaggressions or other forms of harm?
      - What ideas do you have for creating more welcoming learning community? (ACUE Inclusive Teaching Toolkit)
  - Another way to get student feedback is to request a [Students Consulting on Teaching]() observation through CETL.
- **Be in community:** Connect with colleagues who are engaged in equity, UDL, and antiracist teaching. Support each other in this work, share ideas, and collaborate. This can include reviewing student feedback with a partner who shares your antiracist goals and can help you identify meaningful improvements to make.

Connection to UDL: To understand how this strategy connects with Universal Design for Learning, visit the CAST website section on [getting started with UDL in higher education]().

Connection to antiracism: Engaging with others in a community of practice supports continuous self-inquiry and critical reflection on identity and practice. Both self-inquiry and critical reflection are important components of antiracist teaching methods (Kishimoto, 2018).

Technology: There are many technologies that allow you to gather feedback and build community with colleagues, such as:

- [Qualtrics for surveys]()
- [Microsoft Teams]()

- [Zoom](#)

Strategy #2: Use Identity Safety Cues

The basics: Use identity safety cues that address multiple intersecting identities. Identity safety cues are environmental or social cues that signal to people that their identities are valued and that they will face less discrimination in that setting than they may elsewhere, so they can focus more attention on learning. Identity safety cues can take many forms, such as when you:

- Add a diversity and/or inclusive teaching statement in your syllabi.
- Share your personal pronouns on your syllabi and in the learning management system.
- Use students preferred names and pronouns, learn to pronounce your students names,
- Use rainbow flags in the classroom and learning management system,
- Include multicultural and multigender representation in examples, scholars, sources, perspectives, and discussion prompts to combat negative stereotypes.

Variation: Reconsider your relationship with your field of study as you develop your antiracism skills. If, for example, you want to add a [land acknowledgement](#) on your syllabus or course introduction to indicate to Indigenous students that you respect and welcome them, make sure that your course content is not perpetuating settler-colonialism. In this example, the steps you follow might be:

1. Read the article "[Decolonisation is not a metaphor](#)" (Tuck & Yang, 2012)
2. Review and critically reflect on your course content considering this article.
3. Revise your course content to reflect your new learning.
4. See an [example land acknowledgement on the MinnState Equity 2030 website](#).
5. Write a land acknowledgment based on that example that reflects your relationship with the land we live and work on ([Robinson et al., 2019](#) and [Wood, 2021](#)).
6. Continue learning and revise regularly.

Connection to UDL: To understand how this strategy connects with Universal Design for Learning, visit the CAST website section on [Checkpoint 7.3 - Minimize threats and distractions](#)

Connection to antiracism: Higher education has a history of exclusion. Racialized students and students with other marginalized identities are harmed when faculty lack cultural competence. Because of this, students with marginalized identities may be more vigilant about their safety in the classroom than other students, and that vigilance may make it more difficult for them to give their full attention to course content. Identity safety cues tell students that they belong (Howansky, Maimon, & Sanchez, 2021).

Technology:

- Add personal pronouns to your syllabus, [D2L Brightspace](#), and [Zoom](#)
- Use [Creative Commons](#) Image Search to add diverse images and examples
- Add a CETL Inclusive Teaching Statement to your syllabus or course introduction
- Be attentive to the disparate social impacts of technology tools when developing assignments, particularly the risks of race- and gender-based bullying when giving social media assignments, facial recognition algorithms that [misrecognize people of color](#), proctoring software that

mischaracterizes the engagement of [neurodiverse students](#), the anxiety that surveillance systems create for many people with marginalized identities, and uneven availability of high speed internet and other tools.
- Review [important considerations for online proctoring](#), including considerations for bias in these softwares.

Strategy #3: Reflect on Values and Goals

The basics: Help students to make connections between course learning goals and their own core values and learning goals to increase the salience and engagement with the course.

- Disclose your own reflection process and share how your values are aligned with the course (modeling the behavior you want to see in students)
- Ask students to identify a few of their core values.
- Engage students in reviewing the course learning goals or in identifying their own learning goals.
- Ask students to share a reflection on how the learning goals support their values.
- Offer students the option to share in a podcast, blog/discussion post, short video, or infographic (Novak, 2022).
- Some example reflection questions might be:
  - What are your core values?
  - What does this core value mean?
  - How did you come to have this core value? (School, family, friends, etc.)
  - How does this core value influence your study habits and/or beliefs about learning?
  - How do you see your core value connecting to the learning goals in this course?

Connection to UDL: To understand how this strategy connects with Universal Design for Learning, visit the CAST website sections on [Checkpoint 8.1 - Heighten salience of goals and objectives](#); [Checkpoint 9.1 - Promote beliefs and expectations that optimize motivation](#)

Connection to antiracism: In their article on addressing stereotype threat, researchers Schmader and Hall (2014) state: "another successful mind-set intervention encourages people to spend time (often only 15 min at a transition point in their lives) reflecting on their core values, particularly those that encourage a sense of social connectedness. In several randomized control trials, this simple intervention has improved grades and test scores and significantly reduced the achievement gap between racial and gender groups."

Technology: Sway, PowerPoint, Media Space, Canva.com

Strategy #4: Support Agency in Discussions

The basics: Provide multiple opportunities to engage in robust discussion on topics of social justice, antiracism, and envisioning an antiracist future. Build scaffolds into the course to reduce barriers and ensure that students have the tools they need to participate effectively in challenging discussion without reproducing inequities through [denial and defensiveness](#), demanding to be [comforted](#), or [oversimplifying](#) complex realities.

Provide guidelines or collaboratively create community agreements for engaging in challenging conversations. Engage the community in managing potential conflicts and barriers to difficult conversations.

Browse these resources from the National Equity Project for more ideas:

- Developing Community Agreements
- Community Agreements: Implementing, Monitoring & Repairing
- Facilitator Tips: Challenging Meetings
- Identifying Equity Challenges or
- Sample Guidelines for Classroom Discussions from Brown University

Support students in engaging in conversation and/or writing effective discussion posts and questions.

- Share class agendas, learning goals/essential questions, study guides, review sheets to focus learners on key topics.
- Provide multiple opportunities for low or no-stakes practice with feedback that supports effective discussion.
- Provide models and examples of expected behavior or learning products.
- Engage students in self-assessment or peer review of discussion posts or contributions to improve metacognition. After a first draft, ask students to consult a handout like this one: Revised Blooms Handout (iastate.edu) and edit to incorporate new ideas or language.
- Provide a comprehensive list of emotions from which students would select their emotional reactions rather than rely on open-ended questions, such as an emotion wheel

For more ideas, see the Anti-racist Discussion Pedagogy.

Connection to UDL: To understand how this strategy connects with Universal Design for Learning, visit the CAST website sections on Checkpoint 8.3 Foster collaboration and community, Checkpoint 9.3 Develop self-assessment and reflection

Connection to antiracism: Part of white supremacy culture (Okun, 2021) is the phenomenon of maintaining white power through white right to comfort and fear of conflict. Antiracist education disrupts this right to comfort by engaging in difficult conversations to prevent whiteness from claiming innocence, looking away from injustice, and not taking responsibility. Students need to be taught how to engage in authentic class discussions and self-reflective critical thinking about race and other emotionally challenging topics. (Boatright-Horowitz, Marraccini, & Harps-Logan, 2012; Evans-Winters & Hines, 2019)

Technology: Shared Word Online document

Strategy #5: Incorporate Diverse Representation

The basics: Infuse diverse representation of scholars, perspectives, images, examples, etc. throughout your course curriculum. Depict Black, Brown, and Indigenous people through an asset- and strengths-based lens. Answer these questions to help you reflect and change:

- Who is depicted through images in your course? Select most of the pictures and images in your curriculum of Black, Brown, and Indigenous people. Assure you are using contemporary, contextual images that counteract stereotypes.
- What authors, scholars, or experts are represented in your content? Whose perspectives? Who is missing? Review your curriculum. Does it counteract white supremacy culture? Is there a multitude of people of color? How are they depicted? Be aware of stereotypes and tokenism.

Connection to UDL: To understand how this strategy connects with Universal Design for Learning, visit the CAST website sections on Checkpoint 3.1 - Activate or supply background knowledge; Checkpoint 7.3 - Minimize threats and distractions

Connection to antiracism: Antiracist teaching methods systematically challenge and address institutional and systemic racism (Kishimoto, 2018; Knowles & Hawkman, 2020)

Technology: Work with a Librarian to Create a Shared Image and Source Repository for your Content Area, Creative Commons Images; Creative Commons Image Search; Royalty Free Image Services

Strategy #6: Empower Students with a Class Digest

The basics: Engage students in creating a collective class digest of vocabulary or key topics. Or provide your own digest of vocabulary or key topics that students can collaboratively annotate and/or comment with questions or additions. Provide structure to support student agency and creativity and provide feedback to correct or clarify as needed. Options include:

- Cooperative online note taking to support multiple forms of class participation
- Cooperative word maps, concept maps, flow charts or other graphic organizers to support vocabulary development and a deeper understanding of sequences and relationships (examples for various subject areas)
- The Frayer model, or four-square mind map, in another type of graphic organizer, to support conceptual thinking

Variation: Build a foundation for critical reflection by engaging learners with Strategy #3: Discussions to Support Agency. Then use the class digest to engage students in critical reflection to:

- **Contextualize your discipline:** Incorporate the historical, political, and economic context of your discipline into the course to set the stage for discussions of race, racism, power, and privilege (Baker-Bell, 2020; Bell, 2020; Kishimoto, 2018).
- **Analyze race:** Guide students in deconstructing myths and analyzing race as a systemic and social construct to identify impacts and root causes (Bell, 2020; Kishimoto, 2018) and
- **Explore intersectionality:** Analyze the diversity of individual experiences within and between racial groups without 'flattening out the differences' (Davis & Livingstone, 2016; Kishimoto, 2018, p. 545)

Connection to UDL: To understand how this strategy connects with Universal Design for Learning, visit the CAST website sections on Checkpoint 2.1 - Clarify vocabulary and symbols; Checkpoint 7.1 - Optimize individual choice and autonomy

Connection to antiracism: Antiracist teaching methods incorporate analysis of race, power sharing, and mutually supportive learning environments. This includes decentralizing authority and empowering students (Kishimoto, 2018).

Technology:

- OneNote Class Notebook,
- Shared Word Online document,
- Create a synchronous, informal class digest using backchannel discussion tools like Poll Everywhere or Zoom Chat (What is backchannel discussion?)

Strategy #7: Make it Accessible

The basics: Engage learners with accessible curriculum, course design, and instructional methods.

- Make text-based content available in screen reader-friendly formats
- Provide alternative text for visual content such as images, tables, etc.
- Provide accurate captions for video lectures; and generate transcripts for audio lectures
- Share technology that supports accessibility with students. See the technology options to help you with these basics.

Variation: Browse the resource below for ideas on using accessible language/rhetoric, adopting accessible class policies, and more:

- Duke Accessible Syllabus Project resources
- Creating an Accessible Classroom from Brock University
- Tulane Accessible Syllabus resources
- Creating Accessible Lectures by the Council of Ontario's Universities
- Browse the resources in the University of Washington DO-IT site

Connection to UDL: To understand how this strategy connects with Universal Design for Learning, visit the CAST website section on Checkpoint 1.1 - Offer ways of customizing the display of information

Connection to antiracism: Educational institutions continue to see "heightened and sharpened disparities in learning and digital access for disabled students of all ages, with the burden falling most heavily on disabled students further marginalized by racism, classism, and other forms of oppression." (Hankerson & Brown, 2020, p. 869). Antiracist teaching methods challenge assumptions about privilege and actively rejects all manifestations of white supremacy culture, including ableism (Kishimoto, 2018). Providing an accessible learning environment helps educators avoid the perpetuation of status quo power dynamics within the classroom (Kishimoto, 2018). Incorporating accessibility as an expected practice is one way to model how individuals might address systems of oppression through real world action (Kishimoto, 2018; Knowles & Hawkman, 2020).

Technology:

- Find the Caption Guide for Media Space video/audio on our website.
- Create an audio transcript using Microsoft Word Online.
- Use mobile responsive and accessible web pages in D2L Brightspace.
- Share the Microsoft Immersive Reader in Word, One Note, Teams, and Outlook with students.

- Offer students the option to use [Read & Write](#).
- [Create accessible math expression using EquatIO](#) - available to faculty and students.
- Be attentive to the disparate social impacts of technology tools when developing assignments, particularly the risks of race- and gender-based bullying when giving social media assignments, facial recognition algorithms that [misrecognize people of color](#), proctoring software that mischaracterizes the engagement of [neurodiverse students](#), the anxiety that surveillance systems create for many people with marginalized identities, and uneven availability of high speed internet and other tools.
- Review [important considerations for online proctoring](#), including considerations for bias in these softwares.

Strategy #8: Support Information Processing

The basics: In asynchronous modules and/or synchronous classes use an instructional model that supports information processing (Hammond, 2015).

- **Attention:** Gain students' attention through video, music, puzzle/problem, question, or a short talking activity.
- **Chunk:** Chunk information into 2-6 digestible pieces.
- **Process:** Support students as they actively process new information, provide 12-20 minutes of input followed by 5-10 minutes of thinking time, and
- **Review:** Review that material through application by solving real-life social justice problems (Hammond, 2015).

Help students build cognitive routines to process and review learning – As they process new content, review, or study material, teach students to ask and answer these four questions:

- "How is this new material connected to what I already know?
- What are the natural relationships and patterns in the material?
- How does it fit together? What larger system is it part of?
- Whose point of view does it represent?" (Hammond, 2015, p. 131)

Connection to UDL: To understand how this strategy connects with Universal Design for Learning, visit the CAST website sections on [Checkpoint 6.2 - Support planning and strategy development](#); [Checkpoint 7.2 - Optimize relevance, value, and authenticity](#)

Connection to antiracism: Promote active citizenship (locally and/or globally) for authentic problem-solving and promotion of social justice (Bell 2020; Darling-Hammond, 2017; Kendi, 2019; Kishimoto, 2018; Knowles & Hawkman, 2020).

Technology:

- Open educational resources and online videos can provide music or pose questions that can gain learners' attention.
- Writing tools ranging from paper & pencil to Word Online, or [Media Space](#) audio recording for students to record and share their thoughts.

Strategy #9: Try Ungrading

The basics: Ungrading is a set of practices designed to encourage compassionate critical thinking about the process of grading and evaluation. Ungrading encourages us to ask questions about who benefits from grading, what purpose grading serves, and whether grading supports learning as well as other processes might. Some elements of ungrading suggest that instructors:

- Provide qualitative feedback rather than letter grades for assignments.
- For larger projects, break the assignment into smaller chunks to provide more opportunities for feedback.
- Obtain feedback via student consultations with the instructor, self-assessment, or peer assessment, tutoring services, research consultations with librarians, or other campus service offices.
- Determine course grades via negotiated self-grading, peer grading, portfolio analysis, presentation to service communities, contract grading, single point rubrics, or student-created rubrics.

Contact CETL if you are interested in pursuing an Un-grading certificate.

Connection to UDL: To understand how this strategy connects with Universal Design for Learning, visit the CAST website section on [Checkpoint 5.3 - Build fluencies with graduated levels of support for practice and performance](#)

Connection to antiracism: Talking with students about their goals and supporting their agency in the learning process provides a more humanizing environment than efficiency approaches like automated grading calculations, which treat students as objects to be normed and put into a hierarchy based on how well they comply with instruction (Stommel, 2020a). However, for ungrading to be an antiracist practice rather than another "hidden curriculum" it needs to be done in conjunction with intersectional antiracist teaching methods (Stommel, 2020b).

Technology:

- [One Note class notebook](#) can be used to create portfolios or to support students in monitoring and tracking their learning progress.
- D2L Brightspace Grades: Consider flexible qualitative (no points) feedback options, such as using Text or Selectbox Grade Items or creating a qualitative Grade Scheme.
- D2L Brightspace Rubrics: Try a no points evaluation option in rubrics to provide individualized feedback that does not require rating or ranking student work.
- D2L Brightspace Discussions: Use small group discussions for peer grading/feedback; Or create individual private discussions to turn evaluation into a conversation with a student.
- D2L Brightspace Quizzes: Use Quiz Results Display to hide scores from students but display feedback. Use un-graded quizzes to collect student responses for negotiated self-grading or contract grading.

Strategy #10: Big Ideas, Real World Thinking

The basics: Social justice issues are embedded in all disciplines. Allowing students to investigate the social justice implications embedded in, for example, environmental science, statistics, or management

can help students see how the numbers we collect have human implications. It can also help us guide students in challenging some of the ideology we absorbed during our own educational experiences.

First, model various examples of how to analyze and apply learning to social justice issues. This includes identifying the problem and proposing possible solutions. Then allow students to choose a social justice problem they would like to explore with an antiracism lens. Some examples include:

- Geology/Ecology: Evaluation of groundwater quality could invite analysis of the systemic racial disparities in access to clean water, both historically and currently.
- World Languages: Studying history and culture of target languages offers space to examine racialized stereotypes and the impact of colonialism in the past and present.
- Agriculture: Legacy of land theft, broken treaties, and genocide that foreground land currently used in agricultural business. Learn from, celebrate, and understand Indigenous histories and present practices of land management, supply chains, and food production processes, etc.
- Mathematics/Statistics: Analysis of ableism/racism inherent in stereotypes related to mathematics ability, representation of Black, Brown, Indigenous scholars in the field, misuse of statistics to support racially biased claims, critiques of Galton/history of statistics.
- Education: Critical analysis of systemic issues of racism, including laws, public policy, instructional practice, that lead to racial opportunity gaps and the perpetuation of the school to prison pipeline.
- Nursing/Psychology/Health science: Critique historical and ongoing practices of pathologizing non-normative bodyminds by learning about the social contexts in which categories are created and applied (e.g., drapetomania, hysteria, overdiagnosis of schizophrenia among Black populations, undertreatment of Black patients in pain).

Connection to UDL: To understand how this strategy connects with Universal Design for Learning, visit the CAST website section on Checkpoint 5.3 - Build fluencies with graduate levels of support

Connection to antiracism: Antiracist teaching methods incorporate power sharing and mutually supportive learning environments. This includes decentralizing authority and empowering students (Kishimoto, 2018).

Technology: There are many technologies that could support this strategy including:

- Flip video discussions - Consider for modeling analysis, brainstorming,
- One Note class notebook - Create graphic organizers with analysis prompts you can provide to each student to support their work, use the collaboration space for peer review
- Media Space for creating video and audio to share analysis
- Free online graphic design software

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