



Equity-Minded Pedagogies

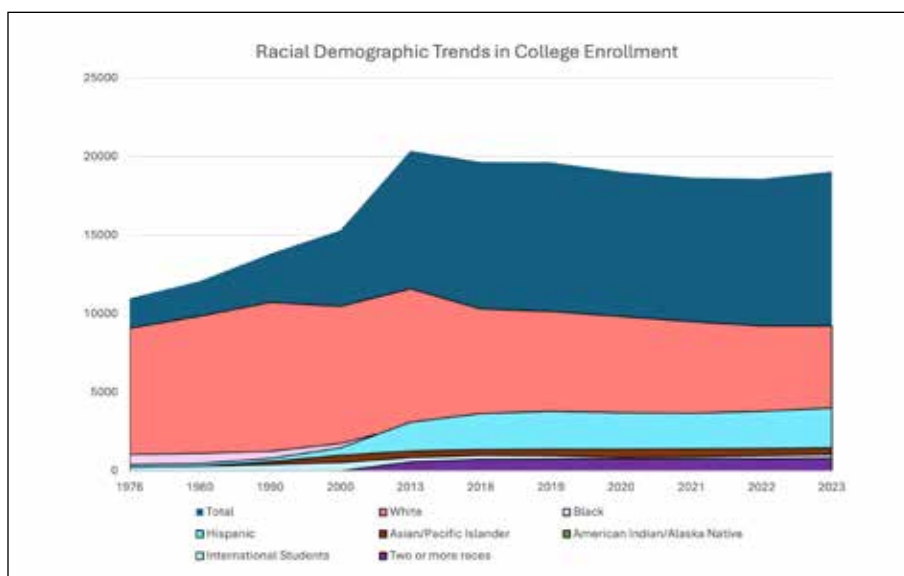
Exploring inclusive teaching strategies to dismantle barriers in technical theatre education



At the beginning of each school year, I write a “Dear Teacher” letter to accompany my child’s Individualized Education Plan (IEP). It gives helpful strategies and information to help short-cut the process of getting to know my child. In the letter, I was explaining the effectiveness of connection to a trusted adult instead of rewards-and-punishments-style discipline when I had an epiphany. I was really asking the teacher to build a trusting and connected relationship with my child that promotes intrinsic motivation rather than manipulating him into arbitrary behaviors that fit society’s external view of learning. —*Natalie*

What does learning look like? Who decided that? Which students can easily fit into that paradigm, and which students experience barriers to that view?

**BY NATALIE TAYLOR HART,
ANDREA HEILMAN, AND
MISO WEI**



Source: National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)

As we consider the concept of connected equity-minded pedagogies, we keep returning to the idea of a respectful mindset and thoughtful understanding of the student (or phrased more actively, the learner). The pedagogies presented here—Culturally Responsive Teaching, Universal Design for Learning, and Trauma-Informed Pedagogy—were formed to address barriers for students across cultures, abilities, and experiences with trauma. Anti-Racist pedagogy belongs in this group, too, and the authors are seeking collaborators from the theatre design and production community who are grounded in those practices.

The goal of Culturally Responsive Teaching is to leverage students' existing strengths and experiences. It also emphasizes asset-based approaches instead of deficit-oriented teaching methods. So as teachers, our role is to help reduce barriers to student learning. The goal is to let the students bring their personal history to their classrooms and deepen their understanding of the class content and their learning process. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) guides the design of learning environments so all students can access and benefit from learning regardless of ability. The framework, based on accessibility and brain research, fosters student agency by proposing multiple ways of engaging and participating in learning experiences. Trauma-informed (TI) pedagogy recognizes the impact of trauma on teaching and learning. The goal of TI is to mitigate the effects of past trauma and prevent

future trauma or re-traumatization.

Equity-minded teaching is a mindset shift rooted in research and specific principles. These related pedagogies derive from research in learning theory, neuroscience, psychology, sociology, and other fields. The long-term implications center on creating the best social, cognitive, and neurological conditions for learning to be successful for all learners and a mindset shift that learning consists of activities that students do rather than content that instructors provide.



CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE TEACHING

All learners process new information best when it is linked to what they already know, research shows (Muñiz, 2020). This includes their life experiences, interests, heritage, language, identity, and cultural norms. It's also worth mentioning that their culture and identity are not fixed; they are evolving processes.

Because Culturally Responsive Teaching (or CRT, for our purposes here) deals with identity, it isn't just limited to racial and ethnic identities but expands to other identities such as socioeconomic class, language proficiency, disability status, LGBTQ status, etc.

Culturally responsive teaching is not a one-time event or something that can be completed by attending a single workshop. It is a living and breathing practice. Without proper training and application, even with the best intentions, it may lead to a direction you don't intend to go. One of the biggest misconceptions about culturally responsive teaching is that it is primarily about incorporating diverse cultural content into the curriculum. CRT is more than multiculturalism. While integrating cultural perspectives and materials is a component, CRT is about transforming teaching practices to better invite and integrate students' backgrounds and experiences into their learning process. A culturally responsive teaching environment does not mean creating a bubble for the students. Rather, it creates a challenging environment for students to reflect on and learn about their identities while learning from their peers. By providing this experience, we can deepen the students' knowledge and enrich their lives.

Take communication as an example; family communication patterns, geographic location, community culture, and school environments all influence a person's communication style. Guiding students to understand how their upbringing and cultural background affect their communication patterns can help them progress and mature. It also assists them in better understanding and listening to others from different backgrounds.

Why it matters

When we look at the demographics of college professors currently employed in the United States, 49.8% of all college professors are women, while 50.2% are men. The most common ethnicity of college professors is White (66.3%), followed by Asian (11.3%), Hispanic or Latino (10.1%), and Black or African American (7.1%). Sixteen percent of all college professors are LGBT. When looking at college student demographics, we can see a more racially diverse student

Putting Culturally Responsive Teaching into Practice		
Principle	Instructor Strategy	Desired Outcome
Create a welcoming environment	Demonstrate inclusive behavior by addressing students by name, showing genuine interest in their backgrounds, co-creating shared norms and agreements, and arranging the physical classroom so that all seats are integrated into the learning space, with no one isolated or placed off to the side.	Students feel seen, included, welcomed, and safe to bring their authentic selves to the learning environment.
Include learners' perspectives and values	Foster open discussion in the classroom to help students learn from diverse perspectives. Share your own stories and experiences as a way to invite students to share theirs. Encourage them to connect course content to their cultural backgrounds or to current events that resonate with their lived experiences.	Students deepen their learning by integrating personal experiences and are enriched by engaging with a wide range of perspectives.
Engender competence and belonging	Clearly communicate classroom norms, assignments, and grading through a transparent syllabus. Avoid assumptions about prior knowledge. Provide accessible support systems, such as office hours, TAs, or campus resources.	Students understand what is expected, feel supported, and are empowered to seek help and take ownership of their learning.

body over the years. We start to see a bigger gap between the demographic background of the teachers and the students.

Key CRT Takeaways

CRT means everybody's experience is equally important and valuable in the classroom, so we want to hold a space to invite people to engage themselves fully in this learning process. By leveraging people's known experiences and knowledge, we strive to deepen the learning experience.



Graphic courtesy of the authors

UNIVERSAL DESIGN FOR LEARNING

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) works on the belief that designing learning to include people with disabilities benefits all learners as a whole. UDL sees the curriculum as *disabled* rather than the student (Tobin & Behling 2018). When you intentionally design for including disability, you often find that the pedagogy broadens access and engagement for populations who have differences in culture, trauma, or other needs.

The goal of using the UDL mindset is that students don't have to ask for special treatment to navigate barriers created by disability, or by extension, other personal barriers. Three principles guide the implementation of UDL.

Multiple Means of Representation

Multiple means of presenting, or representing, information affects how students perceive information and how they cultivate meaning. This includes offering important information in a variety of formats (text, audio, video, transcripts) or meeting Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG 2022) so that students with disabilities or neurodivergence can access instructional content. It also means presenting information in a way that your learners are most likely to connect with it. Matching instruction to learning styles has been debunked as a myth (Newton 2015; Driscoll & Burner 2022).

Instead, match modality to content. If you are teaching knots, you would have students practice with ropes rather than explain how to tie a bowline in text only. Strive to represent content in ways that promote connections to students' prior knowledge and experiences. Offer content in multiple modalities when it is feasible to aid information processing and manage cognitive load. As an example, students with ADHD or learning disabilities may not need audio recordings to access written text based on vision ability but being able to listen to text while following along with their eyes may reduce difficulties attending to the text. Learning simultaneously through

coordinated visual and audio content (called dual channel processing) aids in cognitive processing while promoting attention (Driscoll & Burner 2022).

Multiple Ways of Demonstrating Proficiency (Action and Expression)

The UDL principle of providing choices in the ways that students demonstrate understanding of content shares strategies with the theories of Culturally Responsive Teaching and theories of Situated Cognition that see learning as an activity that is intrinsically connected to the community and the real-world context of the skill being taught (Driscoll & Burner 2022). This is particularly relevant to theatre education because the process of producing theatre provides both a real-world context and a community of practice. How can our assessments align with the expectations and deliverables in our industry? Sometimes, it is easy to start with the choices; for example, can students demonstrate knowledge in an oral presentation or a video as well as a multiple-choice test?

A more thorough approach starts with the learning objective and the skill. Is writing part of the learning objective? Then look for assignment formats that include writing. Would an article format with images be as effective as an essay? If writing is not part of the objective of that assignment, what is the context in which the student would perform that skill in a real-world setting? Strive to match the assessment to that context. This method can reveal deficiencies in our systems and physical spaces. If a staircase is preventing a wheelchair user



from accessing the real-world context of the stage manager’s booth, the physical space is not compliant for the instruction. If language or cultural barriers inhibit access to the real-world context of the skill, then the system is at fault or at least the system should share responsibility for solutions with the learner. Analyzing why an assessment is or isn’t effective can produce vital information about our systems and reveal assumptions about learners who have traditionally been excluded by our instructional choices.

Multiple Means of Engagement

The practice of providing multiple means for students to engage with the content centers on understanding your students. You are inviting them to show up in a dynamic conversation between

their authentic selves and the instructional content. This could mean translating or allowing students to translate information into forms that they recognize. For example, if your students have only worked at your institution’s proscenium theatre and all of your examples are taken from outdoor theatre in the round, you need to draw connections for them. Or maybe you have international students who understand theatre differently and you need to explain jargon and historical practices. This principle encompasses the learning culture of your students.

Are they used to learning that is intensely collaborative or deeply based in rules? This principle instructs us to give clear instructions and regular formative feedback to assist student agency and executive functioning and to provide

options that allow students to navigate barriers without asking for special treatment. In assignments that use plays as texts, provide alternative plays that meet the same learning goal criteria. Allow students to notify you of their choice in a low-stakes way like an online form. For students who are navigating competing adult responsibilities, wellness issues, or even production responsibilities, create a clear path that will allow them to defer a due date, but catch up with the learning path of the class. If you pre-build this option and provide low-stakes means of notification, you reduce the emotional barrier of asking for help or even imagining what help is required. As instructors, our goal should be promoting authentic engagement and upon deeper examination, we can let go of many assumptions about what engagement must look like.

Three Principles of Universal Design for Learning			
Principle	Student Choice	Instructor Action	Examples
Multiple means of representation	Choice in <i>recognizing</i> content	Present information in multiple ways to meet the needs of different learners	How you present the content, alt text, multimedia, text to speech
Multiple ways of demonstrating proficiency	Choice in <i>reporting</i> content	Provide multiple means for students to demonstrate their understanding	Alternative response methods, different assessments
Multiple means of engagement	Choice in <i>engaging with</i> content	Provide multiple means of connecting the content to student interest or prior knowledge	Choice of activities, ways of accessing resources, mode of delivery

(Tobin & Behling 2018)

When we do that, we broaden access to education and our field while maintaining learning outcomes.

UDL certainly includes accessibility standards (WCAG 2022), both those required by law and others, but ideally, UDL decision-making should happen in the *design* of courses and activities to fit learner needs, not in providing accommodations to broaden access to inaccessible course designs. The practice of backwards course design involves starting a course design with learning outcomes then aligning assessments to measure those outcomes. Next, instructors align learning activities to the assessment. Intentional learner-centered backwards course design allows opportunities to align activities with learner needs as well as content, assessment, and outcomes (McDaniel 2010). Start with viewing curriculum as something students do to learn rather than content that instructors provide.

Key UDL Takeaways

- UDL aims to making learning more effective for everyone.
- Represent content in varied ways to broaden connection with the content.
- Provide options in the ways that students demonstrate understanding of content.
- Offer flexibility in how students engage with content and activities.



Graphic courtesy of the authors

TRAUMA-INFORMED PEDAGOGY

In a pre-COVID study, 85% of the college participant group reported at least one significant trauma (Frazier 2009). We know that many things go unreported or unacknowledged for years. It is also true that trauma does not impact populations equally. “Women report more trauma in all categories except for combat/warfare

Fundamental Principles of a Trauma-Informed Approach	
Principle	Description
Cultural, historical, and gender issues	Since its initial publication (in 2014), TI has started to pivot to the social justice lens through which all the other principles are viewed. TI practitioners must be aware of the impact that forms of privilege, oppression, and power have on the outcomes of TI.
Safety	Working to create an environment that is respectful and accepting for all participants, that allows space for mistakes and growth, and that fosters physical and emotional security.
Transparency and trustworthiness	Building trust through clear, honest communication, consistent practice, maintaining appropriate boundaries, and clarity around course expectations.
Peer support	Developing a community that values lived experiences and operates nonjudgmentally, supports students in the classroom, and connects them with outside resources to engage with the larger community.
Collaboration and mutuality	Recognizing and valuing power dynamics and differences to achieve collaborative, mutual relationships rather than mere consensus, where classmates are not in adversarial positions but as co-creators to help with each other's success and shared decision-making.
Empowerment, voice, and choice	Ensuring those in positions of power amplify the voices of those typically silenced through shared decision-making and agency, focusing on resilience and strengths as pathways to competency.

than men, while ethnic minority status is associated with greater lifetime exposure to combat, physical violence, and unwanted sex” (Read 2011). With all of this in mind, when you look at your classroom, chances are some students have had something happen, probably more than once.

According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA 2014), trauma arises from events or circumstances that are perceived as physically or emotionally harmful or threatening and that have lasting adverse effects on an individual's functioning and well-being. It is important to refrain from imposing our ideas of trauma on others, as each person's experience is unique. Only individuals can truly understand what is traumatic for them, as the same event may affect different people in various ways. Trauma's impact varies widely, even within the same household, as seen during the COVID-19 pandemic. This variability highlights the importance of avoiding generalized responses to trauma. Therefore, creating options and choices supporting individual success is crucial. A modern trauma-informed approach is rooted in a deep understanding of brain function, neurobiology, and mental health. Without a grasp of these three key areas, educators may struggle to fully comprehend the profound effects

of trauma on students' physical, psychological, and social well-being.

TI is not solely about supporting individuals; it also involves examining how systems and structures can cause harm, often linked to power, control, and inherent bias. To address this, departments, colleges, and other groups must work together to identify issues, assess damage, and plan and implement changes. In the past, higher education has been reactive to trauma, encouraging students to get help when they show signs of distress. It is an important shift to TI to actively prevent the distress from occurring in the first place or to minimize the traumatization. Educators working within a TI framework should make a fundamental shift in the mental approach from “You are bad” to “Something bad happened to you.” This is a mindset pivot that can help students and teachers move into the TI space.

TI practitioners do not need to know the specifics of an individual's trauma to offer support. The aim is to improve the learning environment, gather feedback, and make ongoing adjustments. While the environment may not be perfect for everyone, creating a space where learners feel empowered to manage their well-being and where educators can recognize and assist those in need represents a significant step forward. In theatre classrooms, educators are



sometimes seen as therapists or parental figures, but TI recommends that educators set clear boundaries around these roles. Instead, it clarifies our roles as teachers, especially when dealing with challenging material. It is crucial to equip students to handle complex content while fostering supportive organizational changes.

Key TI Takeaways

Start with a lens of cultural, historical, and social justice and an awareness of your bias to build a foundation of safety, transparency, and trustworthiness to begin a TI practice.

When to Engage in Equity-Minded Teaching

Learners and educational settings change alongside an exponential expansion of technology, important global events, and rapid changes to our cultures and well-being. Teaching strategies must be agile and adapt to these constant changes.

When people think of these three pedagogies, they often believe that they need to be experts to be able to do it. Becoming an expert requires a lot of reading, attending countless workshops, receiving school support, and undergoing years of training before educators

can integrate these theories and methods into their classrooms. For example, the need for *multiples* can make UDL feel daunting or feel hard to mesh with current pedagogies. Susan Yager identified faculty constraints that reduce implementation of UDL practices: time for course design, experience with UDL, and lack of understanding of student access needs because many professors were students with low accessibility needs themselves (Tobin & Behling 2018).

These pedagogies do take time and labor to implement but they can be approached as a shift in mindset, rather than a curriculum overhaul. Start small—choose one course per semester and experiment with the principles mentioned in this article. It may be in the way you interact with students, how you frame an assignment, how you write your syllabus, or identify points in your curriculum where students tend to struggle or ask the same types of questions.

Tobin and Behling (2018) advocate for a “plus-one” approach. Add one more way for the students to engage with the content (or other principles) than methods that are currently available. Observe how students respond. If the results are positive, try incorporating other ideas. If the results aren’t satisfactory, reflect on

why the strategy failed and try different approaches. This approach helps you to divide the time and labor of revising your pedagogy into small updates that are spread out over time. Approach your teaching like flowing water or a rolling stone: keep moving forward by continually adapting and evolving.

Shifting Your Mindset

Equity-Minded Teaching principles demonstrate respect for the learner and their ability to present themselves authentically. They convey the message that success with the content doesn’t have to look the same for everyone to be valued.

Focus on these mindset shifts as you engage in this work:

- Actions and steps will vary between classrooms and student populations.
- This work is always evolving.
- You can start with small incremental changes.
- You can adapt existing curricula and syllabi in small ways.
- You can learn more about the practices as you go.
- You have time to implement changes.

Equity-minded practices develop as learners change and develop. This work requires an ongoing commitment

from instructors to challenge their own biases, understand student needs and circumstances, and the ways that students communicate their needs. It asks instructors to connect authentically with students rather than pushing them into pre-determined models or “othering” students who don’t fit those models. But the resulting practices invite deeper engagement and a broader population of students. Fostering better teaching and inviting more people to the table will strengthen our disciplines overall.

Equity-Minded Teaching practices are making more diverse, equitable, and inclusive learning environments for students across the nation. Start this work in your classrooms and use your success to influence your institutions and organizations. Connect to other teachers doing similar work. Make one task more accessible this year to continue your teaching journey.



Andrea Heilman is a freelance scenic and lighting designer with more than 20 years of experience in higher

education. They hold an Ed.D. and an MFA, and are formerly head of design and production at California Lutheran University. They integrate trauma-informed pedagogy and collaborative practice to support student agency and creative risk-taking, and are happiest when work bridges design, education, and wellness, fostering inclusive environments where artists can thrive.



Miso Wei is a stage and production management professor at Carnegie Mellon University’s School of Drama. With a background in theatre and social work, she has worked across Taiwan, Hong Kong, Belgium, China, and the U.S. Culturally Responsive Teaching and cultural intelligence shape her inclusive, cross-cultural pedagogy, continually challenging her biases.



Natalie Taylor Hart is an instructional design project lead with eLearningDOC, a

provider of custom learning solutions for education, nonprofit, and business clients. She is a USA829 scenic designer and formerly the co-chair of performing arts at Elon University. She has an MFA in scenic design from Ohio University and a M.S. in instructional systems and learning technologies from Florida State University. In addition to equity-minded teaching and Universal Design for Learning, she is excited about the intersection of learning theory, technology, and theatre skills in immersive/XR/VR learning and game-based learning.

The authors share a commitment to building community around equity-minded teaching. If you want to connect, please contact the authors at EqMT.Theatre@gmail.com.

Ben Nye®

Updated Makeup Kits Now with Talc-Free Face Powders!



New Talc-Free Face Powders

In January, we introduced talc-free face powders that feel light on the skin and match the entire line. Theatrical and Personal Creme Kits now include them! A college costume supervisor lauded them for their “natural look, with no powdery appearance!”

Theatrical Creme Kits

Ben Nye offers amazing diversity and realism for all staging. *Contour Wheels* in all seven Kits include cheek, tattoo cover and lip shades that are useful for the contemporary actor! Select from two *Fair*, two *Olive* or three *Brown* Kits.



Personal Creme Kits

Nine Kits include curated foundations, contours, and face powders to enhance complexion choices and effectiveness for subtle staging. New *Olive-Medium* PK-35 naturally blends to mid-olive tones.

Catalog Request

Go to www.bennye.com to view our entire line. Click on CONTACT to request a catalog via the Message form.

BENNYEMAKEUP



YouTube

Ben Nye Co. Inc.

3655 Lenawee Avenue, Los Angeles, CA 90016

Ben Nye®

