ADCET Workshop

# Liberatory Pedagogy: Where UDL Meets Anti-Racism

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# Case Study 1

Jaylen is a second-year undergraduate student majoring in Psychology at a mid-sized, urban university. He is Black, a first-generation college student, and was recently diagnosed with ADHD. Jaylen has been referred to the university’s Accessibility Services Office after struggling with time management, staying focused, and maintaining academic performance.

The Accessibility Services Office promotes a Universal Design for Learning (UDL) approach, encouraging proactive, flexible, and inclusive design across campus. The office has been praised for modernizing its intake processes and shifting away from rigid accommodation lists toward more “holistic” support.

But Jaylen’s experience doesn’t feel holistic at all.

When Jaylen arrives for his first intake appointment, he’s asked to submit extensive documentation and complete several forms outlining his diagnosis and challenges. Some of the questions feel invasive. He wonders why, after already submitting a letter from his clinician, he’s being asked to “describe how your ADHD impacts your daily academic functioning.”

He tries to explain that his challenges are made worse by the fact that, as a Black student, he often doesn’t feel safe asking for help. In his first year, an instructor accused him of “looking for an easy way out” when he requested an extension. He also finds it hard to trust university staff. He’s aware of other Black students who’ve had bad experiences in counseling, or whose concerns were minimized.

During the appointment, the advisor smiles politely but quickly redirects the conversation: “Let’s focus on the disability-related barriers. We want to make sure your accommodations are based on functional impact, not personal history.”

Jaylen ends up being approved for standard accommodations — extra time on tests, priority registration — but nothing more tailored, even though he tried to talk about his anxiety in group work and avoidance of office hours due to past racialized interactions.

He leaves the meeting feeling like the system wasn’t made for students like him. It seemed neutral on the surface, but his race — and the way it shapes how he experiences his disability — felt invisible in the process.

## Reflections

* How do our institutional processes take into account (or overlook) the intersecting identities of students, such as race, disability, and first-generation status?
* In what ways might our current approaches to accessibility fail students like Jaylen, who navigate multiple, overlapping barriers?
* What are the risks of framing student support services as “neutral” or “standardized”?
* What specific actions can educators and staff take to build trust and create more culturally responsive, affirming support spaces?

# Case Study 2

In a foundational course, an instructor is praised for their strong use of UDL principles. They offer flexible seating, multiple modes of assessment, and scaffolded supports for executive functioning. Students can demonstrate understanding through written responses, visual art, oral presentations, or digital media. The classroom is diverse, and one Black student is very expressive and often shares personal connections to the literature being studied, especially when issues of justice, power, or resistance come up. He is deeply engaged, but often feels silenced when he brings up race in texts by white authors.

Over time, the student begins to participate less. He’s reprimanded for being “disruptive” or “off-topic” when offering culturally relevant insights not aligned with the teacher’s interpretations. He is also frequently asked to change his tone or language when he speaks passionately, even though other students are encouraged to speak freely.

The student later shares with another instructor that he feels like “UDL is for everyone except people like me.” He notes that while he's allowed to *choose* how he shows what he knows, the content and cultural expectations still center whiteness.

## Reflections

1. How is race shaping the students’ experience of “access” and “engagement”?
2. What assumptions about behaviour, language, and participatio**n** are going unchallenged?
3. How could the educator better centre racial equity within their UDL practices, beyond offering choice?
4. What would it look like for this student to feel fully seen, heard, and validated in this classroom?

# Case Study 3

A mid-sized university recently adopted a campus-wide Universal Design for Learning (UDL) initiative aimed at increasing equity in academic engagement. One of the core strategies includes offering all students access to advanced speech-to-text software, designed to support learners with diverse needs, including those with learning disabilities, ADHD, or difficulties with writing due to anxiety or neurodivergence. The Accessibility Services team worked in collaboration with faculty and IT to integrate the tool across learning platforms and promote its benefits through workshops and orientation sessions.

Despite these efforts, staff begin to notice that uptake among racialized students, particularly international students and students who speak with regional or non-dominant English accents, is significantly lower.

In a student support meeting, one advisor checks in with a student named Amir, a multilingual engineering student who identifies as South Asian and has a diagnosed learning disability. Amir explains that he stopped using the tool because it often fails to accurately recognize his accent. “It takes more time correcting it than just writing it out,” he shares. “Also, it feels awkward using it in class or study groups — people already treat me like I don’t belong, and I don’t want to seem like I need more help.”

Another student, a Black woman in the nursing program, expressed that using the app in public spaces draws unwanted attention. “It’s one more thing that makes me feel different,” she says. “People already question why I’m here, and now I’m talking to my laptop in the library.”

Though the UDL policy was introduced to reduce barriers and promote inclusion, some students are experiencing it as alienating, or even marginalizing, not because the technology isn’t available, but because the context of its use doesn’t account for racialized experiences, language diversity, or campus culture.

## Reflections

How does fear of stigma or being perceived as “needing help” affect racialized students' use of accommodations?

What can staff do to create a stronger sense of psychological safety and trust among students who are navigating both disability and racialized identities?

In what ways might technologies designed for accessibility reinforce exclusion if racial, linguistic, or cultural experiences aren’t considered?

What would a racially and culturally conscious approach to UDL look like in this context?