

Article URL:

http://topics.maydaygroup.org/articles/2024/Hess_Huddleston_2024.pdf

The “Both/And” of Universal Design for Learning in Ableist Music

Contexts

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we address the challenges that may arise when students who have experienced Universal Design for Learning (UDL) must navigate ableist music contexts. We position the band/orchestra/choir paradigm as a facet of an ableist world and argue that teachers using UDL in the classroom will also need to prepare students to navigate ableist spaces, while simultaneously working toward creating an inclusive music educational landscape. Ultimately, we explore what it means to implement UDL within the larger context of an ableist music education, general education, and global world.

Keywords: music education, Universal Design for Learning (UDL), Western classical large ensembles, ableism

Vignette 1

Allison, a white teacher in her second year, surveys her fourth grade general music class. She had learned about Universal Design for Learning (UDL) in her teacher preparation courses and strove to implement UDL daily. Today is the third lesson on responding to music. She had selected “Surface Pressure” from the movie *Encanto*¹ to

emphasize both strength and having to carry too much responsibility. The song felt appropriate for a pandemic school environment, where students were tasked with holding a great deal of responsibility. Allison had selected two videos to share: one with the scenes from the movie and the other with lyrics displayed to offer both aural and visual forms of representation. When she plays the first video, many of the students sing along, clearly familiar with the song. After the second video finishes, she reiterates the lesson from last class: that we can respond to music in diverse ways, including through different artistic media. The task for the day is to respond to the song in small groups. She offers the students many choices for expression: dance, visual art, tableau, a short skit, poetry, a short story. She lets them know that she would welcome other possibilities and quickly forms the student groups. Encouraging the students to create a response that would extend the song in some way, groups try to settle on a medium to formulate their response. After 30 minutes of working time, groups are at different places in their progress. Allison offers an additional challenge to groups who have almost finished, asking them to come up with a prompt for their audience that gives them something to watch or listen for. She announces they will present their responses for the class next period.

Vignette 2

Julia, a white middle school teacher, has been teaching beginning band for five years. This year, like many others, she began by teaching these students using a primarily aural approach. After developing a comfort level with patterning, working in a variety of key centers, helping students to master basic fingerings on their instruments, and learning familiar melodies by rote, Julia is ready to introduce Western standard notation. As they transition into the method book, Julia introduces new, unison melodies using a variety of methods. Visually, the students see Western standard notation in their books and on their paper sheet music, but Julia also teaches these melodies aurally using rote teaching methods and solfege relationships that she established at the beginning of the year. Daily music learning often includes breaking difficult melodies down into manageable chunks and patterns, as well as allowing time for peer performances, which give students the

opportunity to actively engage with their peers in providing feedback, encouragement, and engaging with their goals. Julia also provides rubric-based check-ins to help students understand their progress and next steps. Each week, students are given opportunities to express their learning through a variety of means. Choice boards are created to provide students with different opportunities to achieve through music in a variety of ways—recording a practice session using a think aloud procedure, composing a harmony and bass line, and improvising a duet line to accompany the unison melody line from the method book (using notation supports as needed). Students share these responses with Julia, but also offer comments to a learning buddy.

Vignette 3

Josh, a Black high school choir teacher, has been teaching for 15 years. Each year, he makes an effort to incorporate connections to other content and forms of art into his curriculum. Using one of Maya Angelou's poems, "Still I Rise,"² Josh includes links to literature and discusses how authors communicate emotional intent through text, rhythm, and language choice. After engaging in analysis of the poem's text and helping students to understand the connections and similarities between the poem and some musical examples, he asks students (in small groups) to create their own text based on an emotional appeal that they will then arrange into a short performance piece. Students practice making artistic decisions to communicate emotional intent in both text and music on a topic that is important to them. Josh scaffolds feedback for his students through examples, a final project rubric, and a series of checklists over the course of the unit. He helps students to set goals for their compositions by providing feedback on their progress. Additionally, students undergo a peer review process each week to provide additional support and foster classroom community collaboration.

Introduction

The Universal Design for Learning (UDL), when well implemented, can create possibilities for classrooms and pedagogies like those shared above in these fictionalized

vignettes. UDL opens opportunities to represent and express knowledge in multiple ways, as well as engage the students creatively. UDL can constitute an excellent approach to pedagogy. The difficulty, however, lies in ableist structures that students accustomed to UDL may encounter in non-UDL music education contexts. Ableism is a type of discrimination that favors able-bodied and able-minded people. In this article, we first elaborate what UDL entails including critiques of the approach and then discuss what occurs when students encounter ableism in other music contexts, as well as how teachers might respond.

Introduction to the Universal Design for Learning (UDL)³

The Universal Design for Learning (UDL) emerged from architectural design (Rose and Meyer 2006). Coined by architect Ron Mace, Universal Design (UD) aimed to design “all products and the built environment to be aesthetic and usable to the greatest extent possible by everyone, regardless of their age, ability, or status in life.”⁴ Universal Design in architecture prioritized inclusive access to buildings and public spaces, and introduced practices such as curb cuts into typical design strategies (Guffey and Williamson 2020; Williamson 2019). In education, the Universal Design for Learning similarly emphasizes access to instruction. It prioritizes varied instruction and pedagogical practices across three main areas: representation, action and expression, and engagement (Rose and Meyer 2006). Ultimately, both UD and UDL are an attempt to address pervasive ableism that limits access to public and private spaces as well as education practices such as instruction.

Representation

Representation focuses on varying the presentation of knowledge. It involves creatively thinking through ways to represent knowledge in the classroom across the domains of perception, language and symbols, and comprehension. Varying representation in instruction entails providing options for students’ learning including different modalities for understanding knowledge. Representation also involves providing options for language and figures—to clarify vocabulary and symbols, as well as syntax and structure, and

support any decoding processes. These pedagogical moves might involve differentiation of instruction. Decoding processes in music may include decoding Western standard notation or learning to read and interpret chord symbols or tablature. Teachers employing UDL will also provide options to support comprehension. Supporting comprehension involves incorporating previous learning as a beginning point for further instruction; focusing attention on patterns, chunks, and relationships; as well as strategically organizing and scaffolding lessons. Guiding information processing and visualization are also part of the guidelines provided by the Centre for Applied Special Technology (CAST) for representation. In the case of music education, audiation could additionally be a part of this process. See Table 1.⁵

Table 1: Representation
<p><u>Perception</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Customize size and color of text, music notation, and visuals to meet student needs -Color code materials to aid in making content or analysis connections -Slow down rhythms, melodies, and texts to aid in processing -Enable captioning to provide visual support while listening to verbal information delivery -Show score of ensemble music to support listening -Use number systems, emojis, or other symbols to aid in understanding emphasis, emotion, and musical expression -Create a story or picture to support musical thought or interpretation
<p><u>Language & Symbols</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Create a graphic representation for musical symbols that includes a picture, textual definition/explanation, and listening example (when possible) -Teach new musical concepts in ways that connect to previous learning in music and other subject areas
<p><u>Comprehension</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Connect new knowledge to previous music content or previous learning from other content areas; consider if connections can be made to subjects such as Mathematics, Science, History, or English Language Arts -Whenever possible, demonstrate musical concepts through modeling with instruments, voice, or technology -Build and support new musical knowledge connections through storytelling, analogies, and metaphors -Highlight or color-code important musical symbols, lyric text, or climactic points within musical lines

- Provide students with organizational guides for multi-step processes such as sight reading and consider using mnemonic devices or acronyms to help
- Provide scaffolding for musical processes such as composition, arranging, and improvisation
- Break large rehearsal sections into smaller chunks for easier processing

Action and Expression

Action and expression focuses on providing students with options for how they demonstrate their knowledge and understanding of course content. This might include opportunities for students to use a variety of output formats including, but not limited to, oral, written, artistic, and technology-based responses. In offering options for action and expression, teachers should provide a variety of supports for student goal-setting, communication practices and performances, and methods and technologies that allow students to demonstrate knowledge in strategic and goal-oriented ways. In order to provide multiple means of action and expression, teachers might consider diversifying the ways that students can respond in their learning, as well as creating access to learning aids, including technology. See Table 2.

Table 2: Action and Expression

Physical Action

- Provide alternatives to marking music with a pencil—consider using sticky note flags, highlighter tape, colored pencil, or allowing students to access their music electronically and mark using a stylus
- Provide students with modified instruments, instrument stands, modified music notation, or other materials to allow all students to participate in music making
- Allow multiple methods for students to complete performance and written assignments/check-ins (recording on a phone or recording device, face-to-face, etc.)
- Provide support and scaffolding for students when working on musical elements across genres and styles

Expression & Communication

- Consider using manipulatives to assist with skills associated with musical elements such as notation, rhythms, and dynamics in Western traditions and musical elements that occur in non-Western traditions
- Allow students to select from a variety of options when responding to and interacting with music (e.g., writing, storytelling, video, visual art, dance)

- Use multiple media options as tools for solving real-world problems relating to the arts (could be within school or outside of school situations)
- Allow students to practice Western musical skills using apps and programs such as SmartMusic, Teoria, and musictheory.net
- Provide options for students to use tools and resources such as notation software, GarageBand, Keezy Classic, AUMI, and many others (see <https://nafme.org/virtual-music-making-for-students-with-exceptionalities/>; <https://midnightmusic.com/2019/11/5-ipad-apps-for-music-making-in-the-special-needs-classroom/>)
- Demonstrate and help students to use a variety of strategies to set musical goals; introduce and help students to practice musical skills using a variety of problem solving strategies to aid students in reaching these goals
- Provide opportunities for students to get feedback and mentoring from multiple sources—this might include guest teachers, older students, peers, etc.
- Provide multiple forms of feedback: written, recorded, in-person, rubric

Executive Functions

- Assist students with setting personal learning/practice/performance goals based on their individual entry points into the content
- Provide check-ins, rubrics, and specific guidelines to aid in goal setting
- Create and use visual displays such as color-coded graphics to assist

Engagement

The third guiding tenet of UDL involves varying modes of engagement for students (Rose and Meyer 2006). Utilizing this tenet, teachers should strive to prioritize activities and learning based on student choice and autonomy, relevance, as well as value based on student interests, in an effort to create a safe and inclusive learning environment for all students. Engagement emphasizes the need for sustained effort and persistence, creating meaningful goals and objectives, and varying instruction to optimize challenges. In addition, teachers can offer opportunities for collaboration and community in the classroom. Prioritizing specific feedback toward improving understanding and skills is also an important aspect of engagement. Additionally, engagement through UDL means providing opportunities for self-regulation. Teachers might include self-assessment, reflection, and goal setting to facilitate student agency. This tenet provides multiple entry points for student engagement. See Table 3.

Table 3: Engagement
<p><u>Recruiting Interest</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Create a variety of performance opportunities (peer performance, part of the concert, community/school event) -Provide a scaffolded set of musical goals with options for students that are based on what they perceive as challenging -Allow students to set goals for daily learning, classroom activities, practice sessions, or performances
<p><u>Optimize Relevance, Value, and Authenticity</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Allow students to make decisions/share musical genre choices that are relevant to their lives or based on personal preference -Provide musical opportunities/choices that promote self-expression which are culturally, socially, and developmentally relevant -Create an environment where students can explore and experiment with self-expression, emotion and personal choice in safe spaces -Create opportunities for students to respond, assess, and reflect in individual ways (providing choice and a variety of methods)
<p><u>Minimize Threats and Distractions</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Create classroom routines (students know exactly what to expect when they enter the music room) -Provide a schedule of the day's activities that is presented visually and aurally -Provide options for social performance demands (perform live for the class, perform for a peer or small group, create a recording, etc.)

UDL is designed to serve every student, making learning universally accessible—in a way that is not simply related to disabilities. Assessment using this framework allows unique representations of knowledge and possibilities for a variety of different interactions with content. Because these assessments do not necessarily value the same skills from student to student, this framework facilitates opportunities for creativity and critical thinking. Teachers who implement UDL facilitate learners to be purposeful, motivated, resourceful, knowledgeable, strategic, and goal-directed.

UDL in Music Education

UDL has become a topic of interest among music educators with many teachers and researchers discussing the ways it can serve to benefit music students. This literature highlights music educators' aims to make music more inclusive for everyone. Jocelyn Armes,

Adam Harry, and Rachel Grimsby (2022) discuss how music educators are using UDL, “by shifting their instructional paradigm from accommodating perceived student deficits toward addressing instructional barriers” (49). In other words, music educators who utilize UDL as part of their classroom practice can make music more accessible by helping accommodate the needs of every student. They can work to account for ability, by making adaptations to a curriculum that was designed for the so-called “normative” student (Darrow 2010; Bernard 2023).

Along with discussions of benefits for using UDL in the music classroom, the literature is rich with suggestions for implementing UDL in various music education settings. Bruce Quaglia (2015) discusses ways to implement UDL in a music theory class. While originally written for collegiate music education, we argue that many of the suggestions could easily be implemented in K-12 music education. Quaglia offers considerations regarding assessment, such as barriers that may arise when testing skills and information that are not in alignment with goals and objectives. Additionally, he cautions educators not to assess based on tasks that place some students at a disadvantage due to emphasis on speed or repetition. Karen Salvador and Mara Culp (2022) also offer suggestions that call for teachers to assess their current methods, identifying exclusionary practices. These suggestions include ideas such as being open to learning about and integrating cultures different than their own, finding ways to include family and community as instructional partners, and being intentional about demonstrating support for students’ backgrounds, interests, choices, and input.

We use the vignettes that open this paper to explicate some of the possibilities for UDL in music education. In the first vignette, Allison used a musical selection from a movie with which her fourth grade class would potentially be familiar, but also related to their experiences during the pandemic. This selection aimed to add relevance and authenticity to the lesson and activities. Allison represented the musical example both aurally through a lyric video, and visually by displaying the scenes from the movie with which the music was paired. Students were able to select the way that they would craft their response. Allison provided many options for student choice and offered opportunities for collaboration

through small group work. It was acceptable for students to be at different places in their work process after 30 minutes. This flexibility allowed students to develop their own strategies for completing the task at hand. Additionally, Allison facilitated an extension activity as an extra challenge for those groups that finished before the others were done. Final project presentations gave students a vehicle to develop their expression abilities through performance.

In Vignette 2, Julia used both visual and aural instruction, allowing students to engage with new knowledge in multiple modalities. She provided daily practice opportunities through chunking and patterning in full group rehearsal as well as facilitating peer performance opportunities. These activities depended upon the activation of prior knowledge to use previously learned skills and to allow students to provide peer feedback. Through peer performance, Julia also provided opportunities for students to engage with their own musical goals—a focus within action and expression. She created rubrics and a choice board to provide guidance to students on selecting appropriate ways to demonstrate what they had learned. Student projects were then shared with both the teacher and a learning buddy, promoting further means of collaboration.

In the third vignette example, Josh established relevance through engagement as he facilitated work with topics and content that were important to students, but also provided an opportunity for student choice. Josh nurtured connections between poetry and music, making use of previous knowledge about literature and texts. The teacher further engaged students through collaborative activities as students arranged short performance pieces. Through the use of examples, rubrics, and checklists, Josh utilized assessment strategies which allowed him to provide meaningful feedback, but also allowed students to build self-assessment skills and to set goals based on their progress. Additionally, weekly peer review activities allowed students to gain support and work collaboratively as they progressed toward their goals.

Criticisms

While UDL has been heralded as a potentially powerful approach for education (CAST n.d.), scholars have also leveled some critiques against this framework. First, Edyburn (2010), Hollingshead et al. (2022), and Rao et al. (2014) point to an ambiguity of definition. The 19 UDL experts that Hollingshead et al. interviewed to more clearly describe the complexities of UDL, for example, were not aligned around a particular definition of UDL. Moreover, researchers argue that there is a lack of empirical evidence substantiating the effectiveness of the framework (Boysen 2021; Edyburn 2010; Murphy 2021). Indeed, CAST has published much of the literature about UDL, most of which was not peer-reviewed (Murphy 2021). Literature focuses on teachers' abilities to plan and teach with UDL practices, but does not address effectiveness for students (Murphy 2021). Moreover, inclusivity is not necessarily centered in the framework for learning (Hollingshead et al. 2022). In Hollingshead et al.'s (2022) interviews with experts, inclusivity was rarely mentioned; researchers wondered whether this omission occurred because inclusivity was assumed. As Boysen (2021) notes, "Strong claims about the impact of UDL and calls for its universal adoption are not supported with strong evidence" (12).

In light of these critiques, we tread carefully when calling for the use of UDL in music education. We offer vignettes to describe with specificity how we are defining and operationalizing the different facets of the framework. In doing so, we aim to remove some of the ambiguity associated with this approach to pedagogy and also center inclusivity. Given the lack of empirical research that substantiates the effectiveness of UDL, we call for additional research, while engaging with the philosophical underpinnings of UDL which broadly aim to make (music) education accessible to all through providing multiple means of engagement and representation, and options for students' expression of learning (CAST, n.d.).

UDL and the Social Model of Disability

We argue that UDL aligns with the social model of disability in its attempt to avoid constructing barriers to access, and by providing multiple possibilities for engagement,

representation, and expression. The social model of disability originated in the U.K. via the Union of Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS)—a disability rights organization (Oliver and Sapey 1999; UPIAS 1976). UPIAS distinguished between an impairment and a disability. For UPIAS, an impairment rooted in the body only becomes a disability when the environment is disabling (UPIAS 1976). The medical model, conversely, understands impairment as deficit—something “wrong” with the body to be corrected (Linton 1998; Dobbs 2012). Indeed, Dobbs (2012) argues that in the context of the medical model, “the individual must be adapted to the environment, rather than the environment to the individual” (10). The social model targets the environment. Disability rights activists in UPIAS argue: “In our view, it is society which disables physically impaired people. Disability is something imposed on top of our impairments, by the way we are unnecessarily isolated and excluded from full participation in society” (UPIAS 1976, 3). UDL targets full participation.

UDL attempts to remove barriers that students might encounter when there is only one vehicle for representation, action and expression, and engagement by providing multiple access points into the class material. Like the social model of disability, UDL aims to provide barrier-free access so that impairments do not become disabilities. It enables students to cater their learning to their own needs. As noted above, however, UDL has limits, and is not well defined. Moreover, outside of the music classroom and school, and even within education, the world operates in ableist ways. Rather than barrier-free access, barriers are ubiquitous (Shakespeare 2014; Oliver and Sapey 1999; UPIAS 1976; Dolmage 2017). We worry about what occurs when students, particularly disabled students accustomed to UDL, encounter ableist barriers both in the context of schooling and beyond.

UDL in an Ableist Context

Teachers who work to implement UDL aim to make their classroom and pedagogy accessible to all students. Society, however, does not function in this manner. Ableism pervades society including education contexts (Dolmage 2017; Hehir 2002) and many activities are not planned with access in mind. Buildings, while often ADA-compliant, often

do not ultimately offer access across a range of disabilities. People using wheelchairs, for example, may only be able to access the top stair of a tiered lecture hall or classroom. Education practices including pedagogical approaches, similarly, may allow students in the door, but may not enable full access to material. Society features a tacit assumption that everyone will be able to process and produce in a normative way, without acknowledging the full range of ways that people process and produce.

Disability studies scholar Tobin Siebers (2008) theorizes what he called an “ideology of ability,” which, at its most basic indicates a preference for being able-bodied and/or able-minded. This ideology of ability pervades societies globally and leads to ableism or the type of discrimination that targets individuals with disabilities. Ableism is also prevalent in music education spaces. While UDL pedagogues aim to better serve students across the full range of ability levels, doing so may not prepare them for the ableist music spaces they may encounter beyond the classroom that uses UDL.

Ableism pervades music education in a number of key ways. Indeed, multiple scholars identify the ubiquity of ableism in music education spaces (Rathgeber 2018; bell 2017; Laes 2017; Darrow 2015; Lunn 2021). Teryl Dobbs (2012) examines 17 studies that focused on disability published in the *Journal of Research in Music Education (JRME)* by engaging in a rigorous discourse analysis. She identifies three discourses pervasive in the literature on disability: “(a) disability deserves particularistic and deep disclosure, (b) disability is an embodied, functional deficit, and (c) a hegemony of normativity is inscribed via systemic ableism” (21). She argues, therefore, that disability is “textually presented as a state of less-than rather than a dynamic continuum that is shifting and contingent, imbued with personal, social, historical, economic, and political meaning, conceptualized through multiple lenses” (21).

We address points two and three and begin with her third point—the hegemony of normativity inscribed via systemic ableism. The hegemony of normativity aligns with Siebers’ (2008) contention that the ideology of ability indicates a preference for able-bodiedness/mindedness. adam patrick bell (2017) notes the prevalence of a dichotomy assumed

between a supposed majority of people with normal performance bodies and others whom have been ascribed various labels such as “special needs” (Adamek 2001, Melago 2014, VanWeelden 2001), “special learners” (Hammel 2004), “students with disabilities” (Lapka 2006), “children with disabilities” (McCord & Fitzgerald 2006), and “emotional disturbances” (Price Jr. 2012). (111)

Tuulikki Laes (2017) too observes the ableist scripts that “narrate the majority as *normal* and the special as *other*” (138, emphasis in original). The hegemony of normalcy inscribes Otherness to people with disabilities, which in turn reinscribes ableist tropes.

Dobbs (2012) also identifies the prevalence of medical model/functional deficit frameworks in music education that situate the “problem” in the individual instead of the environment (which is the shift that the social model makes). Here the disabled student is viewed as a problem. bell (2017) notes that the articles he cited in the *Music Educators Journal* often focus on students’ music literacy skill development or their integration into an ensemble. He notes: “The field of music education presumes that all students should fit into these existing social structures; if a learner is a misfit, the music educator’s role is to solve the problem” (111). Disability is thus mostly constructed as deficit whereby the student must be made to “fit” into existing models.

Ben Lunn (2021) identifies four key problems in the academic and professional environment that must be addressed in order for disabled musicians, composers, and musicologists to “begin striving for some sense of real equality” (237). He identifies these issues as (1) a lack of representation; (2) a lack of historic figures to draw upon; (3) a lack of aesthetics that encourage disabled creatives; and (4) a lack of awareness in musicology (238). While Lunn focuses his attention on music in higher education, some of these issues also affect students in K-12 classrooms. The lack of representation and historical figures, for example, may impact what disabled students can imagine for their musicianship and music participation (present and future). A lack of aesthetics may similarly impact how students can imagine their musicking practice. While a classroom that uses UDL may be purposeful with issues of representation, finding disabled role models and historical figures, as well as aesthetics in other music spaces may prove difficult.

In typical music environments, students may also encounter ableist policies such as restrictive attendance policies that don't account for the variability of disability (Birdwell and Bayley 2022). Ensemble policies about absence can be particularly restrictive (Hess 2024). The bureaucracy required to receive accommodations can also prove insurmountable, and also expensive in countries that have a healthcare system that requires payment to receive paperwork from doctors and other medical professionals to excuse absences (Hess 2024).

While UDL is not the answer to ableism, if teachers are purposeful about its implementation, it can remove many of the barriers that are ubiquitous in music environments. When students, and particularly disabled students, experience a classroom in alignment with UDL that has carefully addressed many of the possible barriers that students will encounter, other issues may ensue. Unfortunately, these classrooms do not necessarily set students up for the near-constant ableist environments they will face elsewhere, in music environments and beyond, via policies such as standardized testing.

The Juxtaposition of UDL and Ableist Contexts in Music Education

Music educators are using UDL in creative ways that challenge traditional music education practices. David Knapp (2020) discusses Modern Band and the ways in which it complements UDL. Informal learning theory, the basis for Modern Band, parallels UDL with its prioritization of student needs and interests. Modern Band also engages students through performance, analysis, response, as well as creative activities such as improvisation and composition. Unlike traditional band practices, however, Modern Band mastery is not necessarily dictated by a final performance (Knapp 2020). This approach frees educators from the burden of teaching simply with the aim of a perfect performance. Additionally, this provides students with options for demonstrating facility with goals and objectives that goes above and beyond their ability to execute a flawless performance.

UDL has also been used at the collegiate level. Quaglia (2015) discusses using UDL to teach music theory in postsecondary education. The author acknowledges how this approach differs from some of the traditional methods used to teach theory. UDL would

facilitate an approach in which visual, aural, and kinesthetic modalities are valued as ways of representing material. Quaglia also suggests the use of Standards Based Grading (Duker et al. 2015) which allows teachers to create rubrics for separate learning objectives within a single assignment. This type of system allows teachers to provide feedback for students based on their progress toward mastery of specific learning standards (Duker et al. 2015). Further, in alignment with UDL, Quaglia (2015) argues that using peer-assessment and self-assessment are beneficial.

In her article on using UDL in the college music classroom, Shannon McAlister (2023) shares approaches that challenge traditional methods of teaching, assessing, and participating in a music class. The author discusses informal assessment through check-ins, reconsidering qualifications of participation, and facilitating a healthier classroom environment to “dismantle the stigma associated with disabilities and discourage excessive comparison of one’s abilities to others” (40).

The classrooms that utilize a UDL approach to teaching and learning create openings for multiple ways into material, as well as fostering student autonomy and agency and inviting students to take ownership of their own learning. Such opportunities for multiple entry points and guiding of one’s own learning, as well as a high degree of learner autonomy in relation to engagement with knowledge and expression of understanding are not readily available in the average music classroom in the United States and Canada. While it has been heavily critiqued (see for example Allsup and Benedict 2008; O’Toole 1994), the band/orchestra/choir paradigm of music education is still prevalent in the U.S. and Canada. Indeed, in his analysis of band, Roger Mantie (2012) goes so far as to call the paradigm the “band-as-music-education” paradigm. Ensembles have unfortunately often become synonymous with music education. Critiques of the supremacy of the ensemble date back to the 1990s and continued into the 2000s with Lee Bartel’s (2004) edited volume entitled “Questioning the Music Education Paradigm” which aimed to interrogate the assumptions upon which music teaching and learning relies. While music teachers may, on occasion, take a UDL approach to teaching and learning, these classrooms are still in the extreme minority, and, as noted above, often take place beyond the ensemble paradigm in Modern Band

(Knapp 2020), music theory (McAlister 2023; Quaglia 2015), or music history (McAlister 2023). The ensemble paradigm, however, operates in the majority of music spaces. When students experience UDL in various music spaces, they will likely still have to participate in ensemble spaces as they continue in music if they choose to do so. We argue that, if not carefully considered, the band/orchestra/choir paradigm of music education is often ableist.

The traditional ensemble model often presents a one-size-fits all approach to music education. In some cases, the idea that the “repertoire is the curriculum” prioritizes the preparation and presentation of musical selections (Reynolds 2000) over collaborative and individual learning opportunities focusing on the needs and abilities of each musician. While the intent to stimulate musical growth and achieve aesthetic goals is considered the priority, this approach depends largely on the abilities of the performers in an ensemble in terms of technical facilitation and the ability to demonstrate specific musical knowledge through a final performance. Students have to capitulate to normative ways of processing and producing in order to be considered successful. There is no consideration of how an ensemble director may need to create multiple points of entry for students in order to facilitate engagement and learning, or offer multiple means of demonstrating musical knowledge. This type of musicking often does not “foster the experience of ability in music” for all students—a situation that calls for a critical look at pedagogy (bell 2017, 122).

Frank Battisti (1989) discusses how many band programs are “geared toward entertainment and the short-term reward of competitive recognition rather than toward the development of musical skills, understanding, creativity, and the long-term appreciation of great music” (23). In other words, recognition for a performance-based achievement seems to be more highly valued than a musicking experience that fosters student interest, creativity, and depth of understanding with multiple points of entry and many forms of learning and knowledge. The emphasis on competition is a source of contention among some music ensemble directors who claim that such emphasis limits the repertoire to which students are exposed, jeopardizes music learning, and eliminates the possibility of school ensembles being a “purely artistic outlet” (Hoffman, Jr. 2014, 102). Sean Powell

(2023) goes so far as to call the competitive climate of music education an *ideology* that has a profound effect on music programs in the United States.

In many school districts, ratings at large group adjudicated events (e.g., music competitions) provide valued standards for ensemble achievement which can also create implications for music teachers. Achieving a high rating at such an event can be effective for maintaining administrator and community support (Pope and Mick 2018). Kenneth Hoffman, Jr. (2014) notes that pressure from community and administrators was influential in directors' decisions to participate in contest events. Despite potentially positive outcomes regarding support, however, research on adjudicated events also indicates that middle school and high school band directors do not believe large group adjudications to be "an appropriate measure of teacher accomplishments" (Hoffman 2014, 94). Philip Hash (2013) discusses how adjudicated event ratings could be used in some school districts as a form of assessment similar to standardized testing in order to compare ensembles and directors. The researcher also discussed the ramifications of using ratings as a part of teachers' evaluations based on student growth.⁶ By doing so, teachers may be tempted to spend more time simply rehearsing the musical selections that will be judged, or worse, excluding students who may not be able to perform at the same level as the majority of the ensemble (Hash 2013). Both the exclusion of students with a variety of skill levels and the drilling of music with the intent to perfect a performance are practices that reinscribe ableism and penalize those students who may thrive through engagement in a non-traditional ensemble experience. This creates a space where non-conformity to tradition including variance of human bodies and minds is unwelcome and punished.

Learning the Codes

Years ago, Audre Lorde (2007/1984) spoke at the New York University Institute for the Humanities Conference on the single panel where Black feminists and lesbians were represented. She famously observed:

Those of us who stand outside the circle of this society's definition of acceptable women; those of us who have been forged in the crucibles of difference—those of us

who are poor, who are lesbians, who are Black, who are older—know that *survival is not an academic skill*. It is learning how to take our differences and make them strengths. *For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house*. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. And this fact is only threatening to those women who still define the master's house as their only source of support. (Lorde 2007/1984, 112, emphasis in original)

In the case of UDL, learning to succeed in ensemble contexts that operate in an ableist manner capitulates to the master's tools, and ultimately will likely not serve in dismantling the master's house. Lisa Delpit (2006/1995), however, takes a different approach. She recognizes the codes and practices of the white world that BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color)⁷ students must navigate to be successful and argues that teachers must explicitly teach these codes and practices so that these students will, in fact, be able to navigate white contexts. Taken together, Lorde and Delpit offer lessons for this discussion. Students who benefit most from the implementation and active practice of UDL in the classroom also must navigate the ableism present in most other spaces, including in ensemble settings. Being explicit about the ableism they will encounter may better prepare them to grapple with it. At the same time teachers work to prepare students to encounter ableism and to participate in ensembles and potentially continue on to music study in higher education spaces, teachers can also work toward “dismantling the master's house” (Lorde 2007/1984, 112) in a way that starts to move toward the world as we envision it.

Toggling the Both/And

Teaching with UDL in the larger ableist context makes teaching for a both/and (navigating the full spectrum of ableist/inclusive environments) important. Given the pervasive ableism in different music contexts and in the world at large, as music educators we need to both prepare students to navigate an ableist world, including in ensemble contexts, while also showing them a better possible world that focuses on agency and choice. We assert that implementing UDL across all classrooms and schools would serve all students and provide options for representing, acting and expressing, and engaging with the

class material. While UDL has been critiqued for an ambiguity of definition (Hollingshead et al. 2022; Rao et al. 2014) and a lack of empirical evidence substantiating its effectiveness (Boysen 2021; Edyburn 2010; Murphy 2021), our own experience of UDL as educators have shown us ways in which the ambiguity of definition allows for teachers and students alike to shape the approach as they need.

To return to architecture, architects created curb cuts with universal access in mind to specifically support wheelchair users. Curb cuts, however, also benefit people using strollers or walkers, wheeling suitcases or other bags, or using shopping carts (Williamson 2019). Like Universal Design (UD), Universal Design for Learning (UDL) can benefit all learners with careful implementation (Darrow 2010; Johnson and Fox 2003). Everyone inherently learns in different ways and UDL allows students to draw on their strengths to express their learning and comprehension. Implementing UDL across all classrooms minimizes the degree of ableism that students encounter in their daily lives. As Williamson (2019) notes in the context of Universal Design, however, designing for an entire population simultaneously may lead to uneven forms of access (see Chapter 7). In putting forward UDL, then, we call for educators to attend to the complexities that may emerge when trying to find entry points for everyone at the same time and make adjustments as needed so that the classroom is truly inclusive and not unevenly inclusive.

Because ableism is so pervasive⁸ and ensembles are a seeming fixture of U.S. and Canadian music education, educators are also responsible for preparing students for the ensemble spaces they will likely encounter if they choose to continue with music. Like Delpit (2006/1995) argues, we need to give students the tools they need to be able to navigate these environments. At the same time, we learned during the pandemic that a wealth of musicking possibilities exist beyond the ensemble paradigm. During the pandemic, we anecdotally observed music teachers engaging in songwriting, creative musicianship, and project-based learning with students, as well as a plethora of cooperative learning and collaborative opportunities that centered student agency in regards to learning, expression, and musicking. The pandemic allowed us to see a different possible educational landscape for music education. Bettina Love demands that we not return to the

status quo typical of education and we apply her insights to music education as well (Haymarket Books and Schomberg Center for Research in Black Culture 2020). Thus, we argue that implementing UDL while also preparing students to navigate more ableist music contexts is currently a both/and. We would like to see music education eschew ableist practices (including ensembles that function in a didactic manner) and move toward a consistently inclusive education that centers UDL practices in the classroom.

An educational landscape that centers UDL would ideally honor all kinds of learning and create opportunities for students to perform at their best. Such a landscape would optimally lead to a professional work environment that also centers these ideals. UDL directly addresses ableism and incorporating these principles into postsecondary and professional music education environments would allow greater access to music spaces that follow K-12 experiences. Until that time when we can focus on making all spaces inclusive and move away from accommodating inherited traditions that often have embedded ableism, we call for fierce advocacy in music educational policy to resist ableist mainstays of music education. Those ableist mainstays might include the cherished band/orchestra/choir tradition. As we suggested in the vignettes, there are certainly inclusive ways to do ensembles. We learned, however, in 2020 that the ensemble paradigm is not as essential to education as many music educators might have believed. Educators can find ways to open up our ensembles to diverse ways of representing knowledge and engaging students, as well as offering multiple means for students to express and demonstrate their learning. Moreover, music teachers can offer ensembles alongside the plethora of music education practices that center collaboration and creativity that occurred during the pandemic, which may allow music educators to refuse ableist practices and center access in meaningful ways.

Moving away from ableist practices also requires policy changes. Patrick Schmidt (2020), music education policy scholar, advocates for music teachers to get involved in policy decisions by developing what he calls *policy knowhow*:

Policy knowhow is an innovative way of looking at policy that invites music educators to become fully involved in the educational process, showing that this is not separate

from their classroom responsibilities, while helping teachers to see how it may impact the life of their students and the role music education can play as an integral part of schooling. (xi)

He argues that policy creates our environment as educators. Resisting ableist music education policies is thus an entirely appropriate stance for music teachers. Policies to consider may relate to the accommodation process, the documentation of absences, and the use of UDL in instruction. Teachers may advocate for such policies to be more teacher-driven and student-centered.

Until ableist practices are ideally eliminated (or more realistically minimized) via powerful reconceptualizations of the ensemble, and intentional inclusivity and access to facilitate creative work are the foci, however, we require a both/and: taking a stance against ableist mainstays of education while showing children and youth the world that is possible when accessibility is a central concern and goal of education. Working toward a world that centers accessibility across all facets of education is a worthy aspiration. When teachers represent knowledge in multiple ways and allow multiple paths to engagement, alongside encouraging students to express their knowledge in ways they find intuitive, educators build a strengths-based education that recognizes the assets that all children and youth bring to their educational experiences. Classrooms like those in the vignettes become commonplace. When students learn that they are both valued and valuable, what they might achieve increases immeasurably. This strengths- and assets-based philosophy aligns with culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings 1995, 2009, 2014), culturally responsive teaching (Gay 2018; McKoy and Lind 2023), and culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris and Alim 2014, 2017). We have emphasized what might become possible when an anti-ableist lens and a UDL approach is added to previous discussions. As we advocate against ableist policies, we normalize the importance of differentiating our pedagogies in order for children and youth to participate in ways that feel organic and affirming. While consistent use of UDL may not ultimately facilitate the ability to navigate ableist spaces, its focus on accessibility for all (“universal”) creates an aspirational music education. We look forward to the day when music teachers can use UDL without concern for the way that ableism

overdetermines music education. In the meantime, embracing the both/and by working to prepare students for the ableist spaces they will encounter facilitates students' ability to navigate both ableist and inclusive activities.

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Notes

¹ Listen to “Surface Pressure” here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tQwVKr8rCYw>.

² See <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46446/still-i-rise> for the text of the poem.

³ This section elaborates the tenets from <https://www.cast.org>. See the website for further information. For an elaboration of the tenets in a music education context, see: Armes, Jocelyn W., Adam G. Harry, and Rachel Grimsby. 2022. Implementing Universal Design principles in music teaching. *Music Educators Journal* 109 (1): 44–51. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00274321221114869>

⁴ See this web archive link for The Center for Universal Design: https://web.archive.org/web/20171004210213/https://projects.ncsu.edu/ncsu/design/cud/about_us/usronmace.htm.

⁵ The tables build on the suggestions provided by CAST, incorporating specific ways those ideas can be used in the music classroom. See https://udlguidelines.cast.org/?utm_source=castsite&utm_medium=web&utm_campaign=one&utm_content=footer to create your own possibilities.

⁶ Ratings at festivals are sometimes used as a portion of teacher evaluation measures. With the subjectivity of most rating systems, these scores are often an unfair measure of student growth and learning. They do not account for learning above and beyond the “perfect” performance.

⁷ This term is intended to point to the different ways that people are racialized.

⁸ In a music education context, Dobbs (2012) found that most music education utilized a medical model approach to disability—one of deficit and illness. While the medical model

can be useful and is not inherently ableist, a deficit approach to music teaching enacts ableism.

