

Statement on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Theatre and Higher Education

Jacob Mann Christiansen

As both a theatre scholar and practitioner, I feel a double responsibility to the daily work of justice. We who are artist-educators must establish, uphold, and advance/evolve standards of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in both our classrooms *and* in our creative practice. I have found that university education and theatre making can be powerful partners in the ongoing fight for justice. Both have long histories of oppression and appropriation toward global majority students and faculty, toward the LGTBQ+ community, toward people who are differently abled, toward those whose gender identity is anything but a cisgender male – and toward many other folx besides. Our institutions of theatre and higher education have done real damage to these communities, and we contemporary participants must *take seriously* that damage and work for reparation and restoration. Both art making and education contain real ingredients for change, real potential to bring communities together, real imaginations for a better future. In the tension between historic (and, frankly, ongoing) oppression and a substantial power to promote healing and progress, we who make theatre and invest in university life/education must hold ourselves to a high standard, because the tools we wield are powerful ones, both for good *and for harm*.

My particular approach to DEI is informed by extensive training in [Universal Design for Learning \(UDL\)](#), which I have integrated into my curriculum. UDL principles encourage educators to be intentional about creating inclusive classrooms which accommodate and encourage a wide range of learning styles, life experiences, and day-to-day needs. As a result of that training, I rebuilt my courses to remove barriers and offer flexibility. An example: in my Dramatic Literature course, I provide a variety of prompts and formats for learners to demonstrate their familiarity with the playtexts – including traditional written reflections, audio journals, Prezis, scene annotations, video conversations, and more. I also encourage artistic/creative responses, which have the added benefit of nudging young artists to respond to art *with* art – one of the core skills of theatre making. I am continually revising my courses to be more accessible and beneficial to ensure that all students, regardless of their backgrounds or unique skills, have equal access to the growth potential of the classroom-studio. This commitment is not just pedagogical, but is a reflection of my broader belief in the importance of equitable education.

I have been taught valuable lessons through incorporating UDL principles into my curriculum and rehearsal rooms. Or rather, the young artists/scholars I invest in have changed my view of education through *their* remarkable response to a different way of learning. In making my classroom-studios more accessible to a broader range of learning styles, I've found the learning has become more effective, the creative work more brave, and the relationships more lasting *across all learners!* The work of building a more equitable classroom-studio benefits everyone, not just those who have been historically marginalized – this has become a guiding truism in my scholarship and creative practice. When we work together to make our stages more representative, our learning texts less homogenous, our curriculum and creative approaches more varied, our casting practices more equitable, our structural discrimination less pervasive, our imagination more inclusive (and, and, and...) – when we do all that, the benefit to our community, our creative culture, our pedagogy, and our measurable outcomes *is experienced by all of us*.

I have observed this effect play out in the studio on many occasions. As a director, I know that equitable and just rehearsal rooms are places where artists can work more fearlessly. Incorporating industry best practices like intimacy coordinators and cast representatives are basic ways that I attempt to empower the student-actor. In rehearsal, I make deliberate efforts to model failure and risk-taking. More importantly, I implement a real system of collaboration between all artists in the room, intentionally deconstructing long held systems of power like “The Director’s Vision” or the “quiet, compliant actor” stereotype in favor of a new vision: rehearsal as a robust relationship of working artists (of all ages and experience levels!) committed to lifting each other up through art making.

As a theatre educator, one of the most important ways I can participate in crafting an equitable future is in the selection of working material. The playscripts we choose significantly impact the diversity of experiences represented in the classroom and on stage. I intentionally participate in the ongoing work of decolonizing my curriculum and creative work. At the University of Montana, I served on the Season Selection Committee for two years, collaborating on a process [to intentionally make our productions more representative](#). In my classroom, I have undergone (and continue to undergo) a complete reevaluation of the plays I use for study and scene work. I am deliberately working to include material that represents a broader range of playwriting voices and that also allows for students to work on material with a broader range of characters and worldviews. Plays like Tarell Alvin McCraney's *Choir Boy* and Jen Silverman's *That Poor Girl and How He Killed Her* have become essential teaching/working texts. In this effort to make our shared library of theatre texts more equitable, *all* students benefit by receiving a more comprehensive, useful, and inspiring understanding of the contemporary theatrical landscape. On my podcast, [I program the material we discuss each season](#) and hold our team to high standards of inclusion. It's not enough for us artist-educators to talk about a changed future, we must be active in dismantling the systems of oppression around us; active in building a better world. I believe this, completely: if our university theatre programs are imaginative, fearless, and intentional about choosing their working material, we not only enrich the educational experience of our learners but also challenge traditional narratives that have historically marginalized certain groups and establish a new standard of community.

I believe that if we are going to ask our young artists to become more aware, to challenge their existing worldviews, to grow as humans, we educators must hold ourselves accountable to those same standards. *We must be willing, even excited about ongoing growth and reflection in our own lives, careers, and creative work.* To this end, I actively engage in anti-racist training specifically designed for educators. This ongoing professional development helps me stay informed about the latest best practices for fostering an inclusive and equitable learning environment. By continually reflecting on my teaching practices and seeking ways to improve, I aim to model the growth mindset I encourage in my students.

I live out my commitment to justice by working as a Teaching Artist with the No Joke Prison Theatre Project. In this work I have seen, firsthand, how the systems of power in the USA actively oppress persons of color, people experiencing poverty, and the LGBTQ+ community. But I have also seen the transformative power of art making. The artists I've met and worked alongside with No Joke are reclaiming their stories and their lives, speaking out against a racist and corrupt justice system, and transforming their communities through their creative work. I am more invigorated, more certain about the power of theatre to create real change because of the opportunity to work with these transformative artists.

In summary, I am committed to building an equitable future and to pursuing justice in my teaching, relationships, and creative work. I am excited to participate in the ongoing work of inclusion and antiracism. I commit to being a positive force for change, supporting and advocating for students and artists from all backgrounds in their pursuit of knowledge, wellbeing, and artistic boldness.