

UDL in 15 Minutes
With Kyle Carlin and Andrea Wichers
Episode 104 - The Transcript

LOUI:

Hi everyone, here's a brief note before we kick off this podcast. One of my guests had quite a bit of static on her line during the recording. That means you're going to be able to put your awesome executive functioning of inhibitory control into play while listening. Get ready to hear how these leaders are modeling UDL-aligned thinking and helping educators apply a flexible digital tool across all learners.

LOUI:

Hello, and welcome to UDL in 15 Minutes, where educators discuss their experiences with UDL. I'm Loui Lord Nelson, UDL author and leader. Today, I'm talking with Kyle Carlin, the Director of Special Education, and Andrea Wichers, who is an Assistive Technology Provider and UDL Coach. Both are part of the West Central Kansas Special Education Cooperative. Kyle and Andrea are going to share the pathway they've helped educators in the member districts take to improve students' access to technology support tools. Welcome to you both! I'm so glad you're here!

KYLE:

Thank you. It's great to be here. I'm excited to share our story with you.

LOUI:

Wonderful. So it's nice to meet you both. So let's hear a bit about you. What's been your journey in education with UDL, and who wants to start?

KYLE:

Oh, I can start Loui. I was a school psychologist for seven years before stepping into administration. This is going to be my sixth year as a Special Ed administrator. My journey with UDL really starts with Andrea introducing it. She has been involved with instructional technology and assistive technology across the state with an organization

here called Infinitec. And she went to a conference and came back and said, hey, this is something that I think is really going to take off, and it's kind of grown from there.

LOUI:

Awesome. And what about you, Andrea?

ANDREA:

Yes, so I first learned of UDL in 2020 from my work with KIT Cadre, which is through Infinitec, like Kyle said, and the framework just made sense to me, like how it works for all students and teachers, how it can fit into any district initiative or any coop-wide initiatives that we had. I just felt like the framework fit really well for how it could support students and teachers. The area that at the time that made the most sense to me and I had the biggest interest in was the area of representation. Because I already had started learning about technology tools, and I just loved the idea of how those tools were able to help all learners have access to curriculum.

LOUI:

Yeah, yeah, that is a really nice entry point for a lot of people, the principle of representation, because it just aligns with what we're automatically doing, I think, for a lot of people, and then they're able to connect in there and go a little bit deeper with UDL through that vein. Now I'd love to hear about your member districts. What are your demographics, and what makes your coop unique?

KYLE:

Yeah, and our coop, we serve four member districts. Hays, our largest district, there's about 3,000 students total, and then our other smaller districts add up to about another 1,000 students. Overall our demographics are pretty homogenous. We don't have a lot of diverse languages or a lot of diverse backgrounds, but we are since with a disabilities population, it's about typical for the state we're at about 15 to 16%, which is about the typical for our districts our size, but like I say we do have about 900 IEPs, 100 of those are cover students that are gifted, and then another about 800 cover students that have

disabilities. The really the one thing that makes our district or our coop unique is that our staff are really ready to for the next step in UDL. They've really been positioned well, really excited, really eager to learn more and figure out ways that they can help students be more successful in their typical classrooms.

LOUI:

Great, thank you. That's awesome. And for people who aren't familiar with how coops work, how does that work?

KYLE:

Yeah, so in, at least in Kansas, the way the cooperatives work is, it's usually to, I think, the largest coop is about 20 districts. So just multiple districts that come together as a way to share resources where it may not be cost-effective for an individual district to do it alone. It's just a way for them to kind of organize and be able to share resources, both from a staff perspective, not every small district would be able to afford a full-time physical therapist. But when three or four districts come together, that cost can be spread across and make it a little bit more manageable to accomplish.

LOUI:

Great. So I think that helps listeners understand then the relationship with Infinitec and Andrea your relationship we have listeners from around the world so it's helpful to help everybody understand what's going on. So I understand that a significant part of bringing UDL to life in your coop has been seeing how a flexible tool can be used by all learners, not just reserved for certain learners. And can you talk about that tool and then how you came to that decision?

ANDREA:

Yes, so I can start with that. I participated in a webinar series through KIT Infinitec, which you can probably tell they've been a huge support. In my learning journey. But I was on a webinar series with a team sped teacher, and we learned about using Read and Write to support our target students reading and writing delays. And through that,

we began using the tool with her whole caseload. And we saw so much success with those students. Then we expanded it from there, and that's when we approached Kyle about the possibility of expanding the use of the Read and Write tool.

LOUI:

All right, just really quickly, when you guys talk about successes, like what were some of those successes that you were seeing?

ANDREA:

So we had some really fun results that my target students, specifically, I can talk about because I think like that relates to a lot of what I see when I help students with these support tools. So he was a student who was in fourth grade reading level was more like K/1. So he had a reading disability. And, you know, his competence in reading was pretty low. So giving him a tool to help him understand that he could really access the same material his peers were in his general education classroom really helped his confidence in. We saw a decrease in behaviors. We saw more engagement. So that was then seen at a more broad level.

LOUI:

That's great. That's great. So I know we're going to talk more deeply about some other learners and other results. But Kyle, you're gonna jump in to help us understand how then you were empowering others to move forward with Read and Write. Right?

KYLE:

Yes. So with reading right when Andrea brought it to me, I started looking into it. And at the time, when we were looking at it just for students with disabilities, I was kind of looking at how many licenses we were going to need. And then, as I was talking with the company, realized that a site license which would give access to every single student in the coop, that site license was just a little bit more than the individual licenses that we were looking at. And I especially have to talk with Andrea learning what are some of the barriers to kids using it. Sometimes it's just the fact that other peers aren't.

And so by making it a tool that was available for every student, we felt like we would be able to take away at least that barrier, and it would also maybe allow for teachers and others to see it more as a tool that everybody can use and fit into that UDL model a little bit better. So that's what we did. We jumped feet first in and made it available for every student. Of course, we slowly rolled it out with each teacher as they learned to be more comfortable with it. And you know, not every single student is using it, but it's certainly it's available for any student that are school team would feel as appropriate. So if a teacher feels like kid needs an accommodation, or they just want to use it in their class as a way to kind of help promote idea creation during writing process, they're able to do that and takes away one of those barriers that may make it harder for a kid who really needs it to access.

LOUI:

Yeah. And I appreciate both of you talking about how this is a piece of technology that's intended for all learners to use. But I think it's great to talk about Read and Write, but the bigger message here is that you all understood that it didn't need to be located just with kids with an IEP or with a reading disability that all of these students are going to benefit from it. I love that the mindset is there to say, hmm, let's give that choice. Let's empower all of our learners. And so then I also understand that experience changes the design of your universal protocols for accommodations and reading. So can you talk about that?

ANDREA:

Yes. So the uPAR is a screening tool for reading comprehension and listening comprehension, we can add to that. But it really impacted who and why we administer the uPAR for. So we, of course, use the uPAR, since it's a screening tool, and it gives us some great data. We use that student data to have conversations as education teams and give support as to why the IEP student needs an accommodation. But we can now also explain it to students who maybe don't qualify for an IEP or students who just are even higher grade level access readers already, but they can access even higher level reading content when they listen, and so what I love about this now is we

used to just administer this to our special education students to get that student data and talk with parents and students. I love being able to have the conversations with individual students, and we have moved to where we administer it to whole general education classrooms, and that has been a lot of fun. And I started off with this really fun explanation. I feel like I learned this from another KIT Cadre team member during an attack and how he explained it to kids, and now how I explained it to kids. We're gonna go on a journey, and we want to see how your brain best understands written text. So this helps give a little bit of background. Of course, I expand that a little bit more, but it gives some background to why we are having them participate in the screening tool to begin with when we do a full general education classrooms. And then, when we have that conversation afterward, they had some context for what that conversation afterward might look like. Because I always tell them I'm going to show them a little graph and what that looks like. And sometimes I'll say, oh, look, this showed that your brain likes to listen to comprehend and understand written text. Whereas some students it may show that, in fact, their brain likes to continue to read with their eyes and have comprehension that way with written text. And it is just a lot of fun to see students' faces and reactions, especially those who may be struggling readers or maybe didn't even like reading, but they enjoyed listening to the text or they had success with grade-level material or even higher than grade-level material when they were listening to the text as opposed to reading it with their eyes, and that is where it's a lot of fun to have that conversation.

LOUI:

That's excellent. That's excellent. And just so listeners know, uPAR is a product out of Don Johnston. So if that's something that anybody's interested in looking up, you just use the letter U and then P A R. All right. So another question that I think people are gonna have is, do you use this across all grade levels, not just the uPAR, but the Read Write and those tools?

ANDREA:

So I can speak with that so uPAR you know what I have found in administering it. I administer it to first graders, but for your data might not be as strong, or there's gonna

probably be some discrepancies just because they're still learning how to take a test or a screening tool, and this is online. So sometimes, you may get some data that looks a little off or may not be quite as accurate. I have found that, like second grade and up for that, uPAR specifically is good. And my support tools I have found using those starting with second grade has been some really good success. I had a teacher who wanted to use the speech-to-text for the writing portion for all students, so I went in and set that up, and it was amazing. She was so excited because the kids were using higher-level vocabulary and better sentence structure. And they were using that for their writing, and it was more engaging for them and each other when they've got to listen to their peers writing or when she was reading it because they weren't worried about their spelling, you know, and they weren't worried about, I want to make this short because I don't know how to write that. So it has a lot of benefits to using those tools.

LOUI:

All right. Excellent. Excellent. And Kyle, just one last quick question for you. So from your point of view as a director, and helping promote a tool across all grade levels and for all students, is there anything that you would say to other directors of special education to do this shift? The shift from just having it used in special education but then shifting it to all learners?

KYLE:

Sure. I think one thing that really helped us gain momentum was the use of the uPAR because it was able to demonstrate the variability in students that UDL emphasizes so much. With the uPAR, we were able to demonstrate that students can be successful in the classroom. Just because they can't read the words doesn't mean they don't understand it. If it's being presented in another way. That started to open the door to more possibilities. It opened the door for more staff or other building-level administrators to think about all learners as having variability and how this tool may help students that have other needs. Or even just recognizing that some kids their variability is just because they're tired that day. And this tool can be a way to help them engage in class a little bit more meaningfully. Really starting with that uPAR, it gave a visual

representation of that variability, showing that just because a student reads at this level doesn't mean that that's how they comprehend everywhere. And so finding those ways to visualize it, to make it feel real to people, and then be able to give people the permission to fail. We didn't expect everybody to start using it all at once, and we still don't. It's still a matter of, hey, we're going to show this to you and when you see value. Come join us, and we'll help you through it. And that's what we're giving Andrea time to be able to be that coach to help bring more people along. We've slowly but surely been able to improve things. One very impactful way that we've been able to improve is for the average student across the cooperative, we've reduced the amount of pullout service time by 150 minutes per week using ideas such as this as well as other strategies that we've tried, but this has been a huge part of that the UDL approach, along with assistive technology to support that has just been very powerful in getting real change.

LOUI:

That's huge. That's huge. Well, thank you so much to both of you for taking time to come and talk about Read and Write and, more importantly, how to make tools accessible to all learners.

KYLE:

Thank you, Loui. It's been great.

ANDREA:

Thank you, Loui.

LOUI:

Oh, you're very welcome. For those listening to this podcast, you can find supplemental materials like an image montage with closed captioning, that montage with audio descriptions, a transcript, and an associated blog at my website www.theudlapproach.com/podcasts. And finally, if you have a story to share about UDL implementation for UDL in 15 Minutes, you can contact me through

www.theUDLApproach.com . And thanks to everyone for your work in revolutionizing education through UDL and making it our goal to develop expert learners.