

UDL in 15 Minutes  
With Shannon Costley and Megan Babb  
Episode 105 - The Transcript

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 Megan Babb, who is a content literacy coach at Carter G. Woodson Middle School in Hopewell, VA, and Shannon Costley, who is a school-based interventionist for academics and behavior. Today, Megan and Shannon are going to share how a combination of UDL, shared unit planning, and their focus on Power Standards have helped guide their learners back to the face-to-face classroom. Hi Megan and Shannon, how are you?

MEGAN:

We're good. Thank you for having us today.

SHANNON:

Yes, thank you so much.

LOUI:

You're welcome. So it's really nice to meet you both. Let's just get to know you a little bit. So, what's been your journey in education and with UDL? So, let's start with you, Shannon.

SHANNON:

Alright. My name is Shannon Costly, and I have been teaching at Carter G. Woodson for the past six years. I've taught in both seventh and eighth-grade English, and this past year, I transitioned into the role of our school-based interventionist. As our school-based interventionist, I work with any student in our school that demonstrates a need outside of our tier-one education model for both behavior and academics. I also implement our tier two small group intervention block by scheduling our students based on different screener data and then coaching our teachers how to effectively implement our academic and social-emotional interventions.

LOUI:

Awesome. And so, about your journey with UDL, how about you give that to us, too?

SHANNON:

Yes. So I started teaching at Carter G. Woodson right out of college, and I had a wonderful, amazing mentor, who I would go to Panera with for about six hours, or five or six hours every Friday, and we would work through the UDL process and how to implement that into our lesson planning and going through making sure that we are creating lessons that are engaging and that are, you know, kind of meeting our kids where they are and making sure that you're implementing the standards that we needed. And going through that process and learning from her, we were able to move through, and then eventually, I was able to mold that UDL process into our tier two academic interventions.

LOUI:

That's fabulous. You had, like, one-on-one PD.

SHANNON:

Yes. Every Friday for my entire first year of teaching, and I am so grateful to have that foundation.

LOUI:

That's incredible. So Megan, what about you?

MEGAN:

I'm Megan Babb. I started teaching middle school English nine years ago at Carter G. Woodson. During that time, I taught sixth-grade and eighth-grade English Language Arts. I was the department chair for English for three years and then transitioned to literacy coach this past year. I coached teachers to help ensure that they're using best practices and can meet the needs of students in tier one. And I also work with Shannon to determine academic needs of our students in terms of literacy, and we develop a tier-two intervention to address those needs. For a UDL, I started basically right away when I first came to Carter G. Woodson. We were in the process of rebuilding our units our curriculum because, at the time, they really didn't have a curriculum. So we were utilizing UBD, and at the same time, we were thinking about the principles of UDL at the same time of, you know, what are we going to do in terms of engagement? How are we going to offer students, you know, voice and choice and things that are relevant to their lives? Are we going to have multiple means of representation when we have a lot of the content and a lot of the resources? And then also with action and expression, making sure that we have different ways that students can interact with the material and actually show that, you know, things that they know.

LOUI:

Excellent. So, can one of you offer some demographic information about Carter G. Woodson Middle School?

SHANNON:

Yes. How did you what's in is the only middle school in the city of Hopewell, so we feed from three elementary schools up to our middle school. We have a student population of roughly 900 students in grades six through eight and about 75 school staff. We have 100% free lunch and breakfast, with about 80% of our students at or below the poverty line. Our school is roughly 60% African American, 30% White, 10% Hispanic, Arab, are other ethnicities. The city of Hopewell is tiny. It is about 11 square miles, so super small city super intertwined with a population of around 22,000 people.

LOUI:

Wow, that's wonderful. Thank you. That gives us a really clear picture to send us and to the main question. So we're diving into this. This is a huge topic because it's like these three big things. So, like everybody, your learners were really affected by the pandemic shutdown. And then, they returned with some behaviors and skills that didn't align with in-person learning. But even before they came back, you guys, your department chairs, made some decisions about the teacher standards. So Megan, what was that focus?

MEGAN:

When returning from COVID, or district really stressed the need to consolidate content standards and a priority and supplemental standards so that we can actually make room for social, emotional, and equity standards as well as offer more student voice and choice in the curriculum. We wanted a bigger focus on the social emotional needs of our students, and giving them more voice and choice would also increase student interest and engagement, we hoped. Together with our leadership in the building, we began to craft what we thought would be the most important skills in our already existing curriculum to focus on, but then to specific social, emotional, and equity standards that paired well within the unit.

LOUI:

That's awesome. So, when you guys were writing those, did you make the pairings yourself? Or did you leave that open for teachers to pair content and SEL?

MEGAN:

We actually worked together as department chairs to try to figure out, you know, where could we put those in with our already existing units. We had to make some big decisions as department leads as to what could we still teach the students and have them learn and master that would still kind of fill in the other standards that we wanted them to learn without feeling like we had to teach everything. You know, because everybody was so overwhelmed, coming back from COVID, and we really wanted to

just say, what are the main skills that you know would give us the bang for our buck, if you will. And then you know, what standards, especially the social, emotional equity standards, paired well with those.

LOUI:

Nice, and this was the focus even when it was hybrid, and then shifting back to face-to-face. So, as you were planning on this, were you seeing that trajectory, or were you really focused on the hybrid at first? How did that work?

MEGAN:

When we were first virtual, I think everybody just kind of abandoned the curriculum as is, and we just did a whole new thing. And for virtual, you know, that worked. But we found if we were going to have the kids come back in person for hybrid, especially like there were going to be a lot of, you know, new needs and new challenges that we were going to have to address, so instead of stressing about teaching all of the different standards in one unit, we were going to just say these are the ones that we wanted mastered, to have students mastered right now. And then that gave us an opportunity to build in other equally important skills that our students were now lacking, such as the executive function and social-emotional skills. So, for example, two of the content standards we focused on for our first unit was composing a thesis statement that advocates a position and then collaborating with others to exchange ideas, develop new understandings, make changes, and solve problems. We decided to pair that with social-emotional standards centered around accepting different viewpoints and then also monitoring progress toward a goal by utilizing checkpoints. We're adjusting the plan as needed. We thought those paired together really well.

LOUI:

I agree. Sounds like a really good pairing, and that just, like, sets up my next question so well, so Shannon, how did that help with your role, and in what ways?

SHANNON:

So, a lot of my role is heavily based on teaching the students the executive function and social-emotional skills like effective communication, emotional control, organization, and self-monitoring their own progress and the progress of others, which are skills that, even before COVID, were ones that we really wanted to target. With this in mind, moving forward, we implemented each of these pieces into the unit so that every student in tier one had access to these skills because, before COVID, they were previously reserved for our small group tier two instruction intervention block. But as we come back, the behaviors have shifted so much that we realized that all of these skills needed to be

implemented into the units that the kids were getting every day in the general education classroom setting.

LOUI:

Yeah. Yeah. So you guys, two of you, created a unit that was driven by UDL, and in a lot of ways, that also brought together the use of the power standards and help students work on those executive functioning engagement skills. So give folks an example or that story of that unit.

MEGAN:

So before we got started, our district was again really big on, you know, giving students more voice and choice and offering, you know, a little bit more about what they wanted and what interested them. So, we had given students surveys to get an idea of some of the things they were interested in. And one of those topics that the majority of students liked was scary movies, TV shows, video games. Since our first unit was centered mainly around understanding fiction, we thought this was like a great opportunity to build that in. And then as an eighth-grade English team, we then crafted some essential questions together from this. What does it mean to be scared? Why do people like to be scared? Are their shared fears among different cultures in the world? Since one of the big priority standards was also focused on writing, we came up with the idea to have students write their own podcast script centering around one of those big questions. It is a fun and different way to get them reading and writing. And we wanted to still make sure that we were addressing those executive skills that our students needed help with, and that's where Shannon came in.

SHANNON:

And in this unit, we explicitly taught students how to effectively communicate using our accountable talk stems that allowed them to have those positive and really productive and sometimes hard conversations about their progress. Even if they had differing opinions from others in the classroom. First, we created a space where students were tasked with keeping a binder and, a table of contents, and different rubrics that he prompted them every day to keep track of at the beginning of the unit. It was an explicit teaching part of the day. But as we move through the unit and we started to kind of get into the routine, we gradually released the responsibility of keeping up with those things to the students. And they responded really well to that sense of responsibility and ownership. In addition, we also created opportunities for the students to monitor their own progress and the progress of others. We came up with a bunch of self-reflection checklists and rubrics during this phase of our unit to make sure that our students understood that they own this, this is theirs, and they need to keep track of their progress but also the progress of their classmates too. So that way, it became a team

collective effort. And finally, we explicitly taught our students text annotation strategies that prompted their use of metacognition. This is the hardest executive functions skill to teach sometimes because the thinking about your thinking can seem pretty abstract, especially in the middle school classroom. But when the students were pausing to jot down their thoughts about what they either heard because we had different means and modes of presenting the information, whether that be audio, visual, or having them read it themselves, it really happened naturally because they were pausing to say, Hey, what did I think about what just happened? And that use of metacognition started to become a habit for them in the classroom.

LOUI:

So this is just really awesome. My brain is exploding. So obviously, any of the resources that you used along with this unit, I know people would be really excited to see. So, whatever you're willing to share, then I can put those up on my website with the podcast. That would be great. I absolutely adore the fact, like Shannon, you were laying out that there was explicit instruction and then that it was released to the students. So then they, they had that model, and they could work from that, and it's so valuable. And looking at my time, I know I'll only get to ask one more question. And so I'm curious with the screening that you guys have done over the year, and you've been doing this work with students, is the pairing of these standards. Have you seen growth in your learners? When it comes to their needs?

MEGAN:

Absolutely. I think that when we built all of this together in, you know, kind of a new and fun way, but still addressing these needs and making sure that, you know, they were explicitly taught, making sure they became like routines and almost habits. I know that definitely by the end of the year, we had students who may have started the year like little squirrels, you know, their stuff was all over the place, you know, their backpacks, you know, were falling apart. But by the end of the year, like their binder, you know, had their table of contents, they were able to keep track of their assignments, you know, things were a lot better organized. And students actually could interact with each other a lot more appropriately, too. Where we had students at the beginning who were almost really anxious about talking to other students, you know, face to face, by the end of the year. They could have conversations where instead of just giving your own opinions, they were able to go off of someone else and say, oh, yeah, like I agree with what so and so saying like, and I'm going to add on this. Or you know, I hear what you're saying, but I disagree, and here's why. It was really nice and so powerful to be able to see them using those stems and being able to have these great conversations and still be able to learn the content that we wanted them to.

LOUI:

That's excellent. Okay, I know I've hit time, but I have to put this part in here, too, because we haven't necessarily explicitly talked about UDL, but I hear it all the way through what you guys are discussing. And so what I want to ask is because you two are so experienced with Universal Design for Learning, I'm not sure if the rest of the staff is that experienced, and so the unity you guys created, to me, it reflects the UDL guidelines, and then you share this unit with others, is that right?

MEGAN:

We actually worked on it, her and I together but also as an eighth-grade English team. So we worked, you know, with our other English members and like crafting all of these different lessons and making sure things were built in. Checking with one another to say like, Hey, I found that this works for my classroom, you know, but did you have something that may have worked better for your kids? Is there something that we're not thinking about in terms with maybe the different options that we're giving them for representation, you know, for the final product, for example? It definitely was a team effort.

LOUI:

Nice.

SHANNON:

And it was definitely a kind of condensed version of the intensive PD that I had my first year. And we really tried to implement that model of coming together and talking through things and saying, like Megan said, what worked, what didn't work, but then also making sure that we were tying them back to the UDL standards and making sure that we were going through the guidelines and matching things up and saying, wow, this really did work. Or maybe we need to revamp this for next time. But then going back and always tying it back to the guidelines and our unit standards.

LOUI:

Excellent. Thank you so much, and the patience of the listeners also for hanging on for a slightly longer UDL in 15 Minutes, but Megan and Shannon, you had such a powerful story to share, and I'm so glad you did. So, thank you so much for coming on to the podcast.

MEGAN:

Thank you so much for having us.

SHANNON:

Thank you.

LOUI:

You're welcome! So, 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](http://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](http://www.theUDLApproach.com). And thanks to everyone for your work in revolutionizing education through UDL and making it our goal to develop expert learners.