

UDL in 15 Minutes
With Doug Smith
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 Doug Smith, who is an adapted physical education specialist at Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools in Charlotte, North Carolina. Today, Doug is going to share the strategies he uses to help physical education teachers learn about UDL and apply the framework on behalf of all learners. Hi, Doug. So nice to have you.

DOUG:

Thank you very much. Glad to be here.

LOUI:

Wonderful. It's so nice to meet you. So let's know a bit about you. What's been your journey in education with UDL?

DOUG:

So I've been an educator for 25 years. The first 20 I was a physical education teacher, and I taught physical education and adapted physical education. And the past five years, I've transferred to a district position, a district leadership position as the adapted physical education specialist. Sometimes, I call our we call ourselves consulting teachers. We work with students and teachers, but we are the specialists for our district, and over the past five years, that's what I've been working with students in that realm.

LOUI:

Lovely. And can you help people understand what adapted physical education is?

DOUG:

Absolutely. So adaptive physical education is specifically named in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. So it's basically if a student has difficulty with success and safety in the physical education realm, and with the curriculum accessing the curriculum, then adapted physical education has to be provided. Which is can be modified instruction, modified equipment, modifying the environment. So, it is part of the law, and it is required. And so it is a necessary thing that has to be provided.

LOUI:

Wonderful. Thank you. Thank you for clarifying that. And so, what's your journey with UDL been?

DOUG:

Well, I think I have always used a little bit of it. And just I think a lot of people on your podcast

have said we always used a little bit. We just didn't know what we were doing. Right. And specifically, I know even going back to being in college, we would write lesson plans, and we would have to write about how do we address visual learners and auditory learners, and in physical education, how we address kinesthetic learners. We know a lot of kids are kinesthetic learners. And so we were kind of doing that all along. But it wasn't until I really started my journey in Adapted Physical Education where I started looking at students of different ability levels and looking at strategies that work specifically for those students. And as I was reading and researching more and more about those students and about their strategies, I found these common threads. So, a student that has ADHD, or students on the autism spectrum, I started seeing different strategies and different common threads, like they benefit from visuals, or they benefit from verbal cues or demonstrations. And I saw these trends, these commonalities. And I thought, oh, there's that universal thing I think I've heard about before. And so that's where I started my journey well, not started, but continued my journey into discovering more and more about universal design. I'm not an expert by no means, but I have enjoyed the process of working our way towards being a more inclusive environment using UDL.

LOUI:

Nice. And so then, can you also share a bit about the Charlotte-Mecklenburg schools just to help people get a picture in their brains about the context within which you work?

DOUG:

It's a big place. Charlotte, North Carolina, is a great place, but we are the 18th largest district in the nation. One hundred seventy-six schools, I believe, around 140,000 students, and I as a consulting teacher and specialist, I'm itinerant, so I travel around and work with different schools and working with students and then consulting and working with teachers to help them have the best adaptive physical education service.

LOUI:

Wow. So, 176 schools. So, are you assigned to certain schools? How does that work?

DOUG:

Yeah, so I'm the right, so I'm the lead, and we have several people on our team, and we divide and conquer and support as much as possible. We provide professional development, and then we actually get out there and work with kids as well.

LOUI:

Okay. And so then your role, part of that, is to evaluate a student to qualify for Adapted PE services, and then you meet with a physical education teacher. So, what is that conversation sound like? And how are you bringing UDL into that conversation?

DOUG:

Great question, because once a teacher, always a teacher, and so when you're a teacher, you're always trying to take your content, and you're trying to make it relevant and make it memorable for your students and make it sticky. And it's kind of a term that people use, I'll

remember it. And so I do the same thing with my teachers. I've taken the universal design for learning concepts, and you've got the three, you know, multiple means of engagement, representation, expression. That's a lot to explain. I mean, it's still a lot for me. I'm still always still studying and learning more about it, and love reading about it. But I had to make it a little more simple, and I had to make it so that I could quickly communicate this for teachers as a consultant, and so I started looking at those multiple means and let's take the first one, for example, that multiple means of engagement. As I read through all that, I kept seeing the word environment pop up, and so that just meant it just seemed perfect, like okay, the engagement, the engagement of environment, engaging environment, and then I started looking at the other words like expression, and then I started looking at representation and representation is basically providing the content and a variety of ways, so what is that? that's educating. And so it just popped in my mind like, the three big E's, this is the way I communicate to my kids, to my teachers, the three big E's and so environment, educating and expression. That's the way I look at it. Now, this is not, again, this is not UDL or how UDL is explained, but this is the way I kind of look at it, and this is the way I help with working with teachers.

LOUI:

Right. So early on, you were talking about how you came into UDL because you just, you are primed with the mindset, is how I like to talk about it. You already saw that there were strategies and supports that were going to meet a lot of students' needs, whether or not they had some sort of a diagnosed disability, but there are a lot of supports there to help, and also, you clearly understood that you need to plan for those things upfront and you're creating an environment that's going to meet as many needs as possible, upfront. And so, you know, we first talk about those variability in UDL. So I'm thinking about that in your conversations about environment. and educating, expression, and so where do you, when you're talking about the planning part, are you talking about, like, planning for the environment? Planning for the educating, which sounds like the representation? Planning for the expression?

DOUG:

Yeah, absolutely. So you're right. It is the difference between, let's say, sometimes you look at differentiated instruction, and UDL is the thinking ahead, not reacting but being proactive. Some of these are very proactive in nature. You have to think ahead, especially let's start with the environment. To me, environment is everything. So if you set up the right environment, if you build it, they will come, right? If you build that environment and make it the best accessible environment, it helps our students to be more successful. So, I look at it three ways. Like it's sensory, the environment is sensory. A lot of times, our students have difficulties coming into the environment because it could be, I mean, let's face it, the gym is a crazy place. Compared to the rest of the school, right? I mean, the gym can be loud, it has echoes, it can be too bright. Sometimes it smells bad, the temperature, you're inside or outside. And so we have to think about that environment first, and our kids, our students, have difficulties with that sometimes. I mean, you'll see a class come in, and you may have a kid who's covering their ears and holding their ears. They have some sensory concerns with the loudness and the echoes that might be in there. So thinking about those kinds of things are very important in just getting the students into the gym. We do have students that have difficulties in transition, coming from the classroom to

the gym, and that can be in anticipation of coming into that space that might be difficult for them. So, we do look at environment first. It can be behavioral, again, maybe related to sensory, and then it can be structural. I mean, universal design is based on architecture, right? So structural, looking at the gym space, making sure it's accessible for all students to be able to get it. Is your space too big? Can you make it smaller? How can you have a predictable schedule? So those are play into the environment, and that's part of what I work with my consulting with teachers is alright, let's see what you have going on here. And I'll tell you one more thing that happens very typically, is, you know, the gym space sometimes gets used as storage. You know, maybe somebody says, well, we have all these boxes of books that we have to distribute, but we're going to store them in your gym for the time being. Well, that's very attractive to some kids, and they'll want to climb on them or what we call these attractive nuisances that you have to be very aware of. So don't store things in the gym. It's not good for our students.

LOUI:

Yeah. The gym is a learning environment.

DOUG:

Yeah, yes, it is. Absolutely.

LOUI:

Well, so I'm really intrigued, and this is like on the spot, but I think people would love to hear some ideas that maybe you've shared around how to help modify or just shift that structural space just a little bit for any kind of learner coming in. So I loved that you talked about transitions. Because everybody, we all transition. Here's a fun. I can't remember the term now, but there's actually a term because when we leave a room, and we can't remember why we went to another room to get something, there's actually a name for that. Look, I can't even name it. Yet, so every human brain we, when we transition, it's tough. So I'd love to hear anything that you would suggest. I know there are like probably hundreds, but what would it be anything?

DOUG:

Well, one thing I didn't mention is making sure you have a good emotional climate. So, making sure it's a positive environment. For the physical education teacher to meet and greet at the door and help students come into the gym and have access to the gym and just building a really positive emotional climate. One thing that I did for years is I took even just gymnastics mats and divided the gym in half. And so they learned that we're going to use half of the gym we had to make it smaller. We have a lot of students who, you know, a larger space can be too overwhelming for them, and they may just run, and we have to kind of bring them back and get them refocused, so making the gym smaller somehow. Some of the larger gyms have a net that go down to the middle and divides the gym in half. That's a great way to do it as well. So thinking about making a smaller, making smaller groups. So, getting into, again, a larger class can be overwhelming. And some of our students are in smaller groups based on their individual education plan. They have to be in small groups, but that's important as well. Even if you have a large class, you can always make it small. Yeah. And then the last thing I'd say is a predictable schedule, making sure you have a solid routine that they know the routine, and that's a big part

of making sure they're successful.

LOUI:

Yeah, actually, so I do have one question when it comes to predictable schedules. So, so many gym classes I've been to, and one of the big things is going to be like a warm-up, right? To get everybody just warmed up to participate in whatever that's going to be. How do you make the warm-up time, you know, so it's different for different students? So, so often, I walk in, and everybody's running laps, and I know that that's not great for every kid. So I don't know if you have ideas that you share around that.

DOUG:

I'll tell you the best idea and. I implemented this for all students years ago when I was teaching, and that is you don't have the students run a certain amount of laps, you set a time period. So let's say our warmup is going to be five minutes and during that five minutes, students will be able to use the gym and do their laps at their own pace. You're gonna have students who might, I don't know run or jog five laps in five minutes, and some students may make it one time around, but that will be their success that will be a goal that they have. So every student has their kind of own individual pace or goal as they're using that timeframe. So that's important, versus saying everybody has to run three laps, just having that time is important.

LOUI:

That's wonderful. Well, obviously we could keep talking forever. And I think this is a really important topic and I just I love that we got to have this conversation. Because I think Physical Education well, I'm somebody who thinks it's incredibly important across the curriculum and for all grade levels and for lifelong learning about our bodies and continuing to keep our bodies moving. So thank you, and thank you for bringing UDL into that environment. And I think people are really going to be interested in hearing about the three E's, the big E's and how you break that down for people and help and use that to introduce UDL so thank you so much for participating on the podcast.

DOUG:

Thank you for letting me come on, it's awesome.

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, which is 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 and revolutionising education through UDL and making it our goal to develop expert learners.