

Jana Nicol Transcript

UDL in 15 Minutes

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 Jana Nicol who is a grade three elementary educator at Island View School in Saint John, New Brunswick, Canada. Today, Jana's gonna share how she designs her classroom layout and promotes executive functioning. Hi Jana, how are you?

JANA: I'm great! Thanks so much for asking. How are you?

LOUI: I'm wonderful thank you so much, and thank you for being here! Go ahead and share with us your teaching background.

JANA: I've been teaching since 2005. I started out in high school and I was teaching ESL and humanities, and resource and methods, and I moved to elementary school in 2008 and have been there ever since. I've just spent about half of that time in methods in the resource and the other half in the classroom.

LOUI: Okay, so do you have other degrees? Education? That kind of thing?

JANA: Well, I finished my Master's degree in 2013, but during my studies then, that's when I first discovered UDL and I fell in love with the framework immediately, so I spent a semester researching UDL extensively and I wrote a better practices paper on increasing student engagement through UDL. This was something I had just taken on in my own as a part of my coursework...

LOUI: Oh!...

JANA: When I was doing my master's degree.

LOUI: Oh, fabulous! Fabulous! All right, so what is the makeup of the student population in your classroom?

JANA: Well, we have full inclusion in the New Brunswick education system, so my classroom is pretty diverse in makeup. I teach a grade 3 class of 22 students this year, 3 of whom are on the autism spectrum and about quarter of them have ADHD diagnosis. I also have one student who has dyslexia, dysgraphia, and miscalculia and another student is cognitively delayed. And my school has students from, well we're right in the city, but we also have students in our zone from neighboring suburban and rural areas. LOUI: Okay, you also host that website.

JANA: Yes, "theUDLProject", all one word, dot com. (www.theudlproject.com)

LOUI: Tell us about that website and how it got its start.

JANA: Well, it all started with the New Brunswick Department of Education they developed a partnership with the University of New Brunswick to create an action research opportunity for schools. So, the call was put out to us submit proposals to complete some action research on Universal Design for Learning, and I was a part of a team of four teachers from Island View school and we submitted a proposal together and we were selected. So that was really exciting!

LOUI: Yeah!

JANA: So we spent the next two years conducting our action research and our main focus was on increasing student engagement and learning through the implementation of UDL in our classrooms.

LOUI: Okay.

JANA: Well we wanted to share our findings. We also found a lot of resources and made some of our own along with some lesson plans and we wanted to share them easily with the other action research teams and any other educator who is interested in them, so we decided to make a website for this purpose and that's how "the UDL Project dot com" was born.

LOUI: Okay, and so then even after it ended, you just kind of kept going with it didn't you!

JANA: I just couldn't restrain myself! [laughter]

LOUI: That's wonderful!

JANA: Yeah, I kept the website going, added new content and blogs over the years, because the project ended in 2015 and I still maintain the website. I'm really passionate about UDL, so it's awesome to have an outlet to share ideas. I've also made a lot of contacts through the website along the way along with it's associated Twitter account @theUDLProject. And I've joined some PLN's, and I've, which lets me learn a lot from other educators from all over the world about how their UDL-ifying their own practices.

LOUI: Yeah.

JANA: So yeah, it's been a lot of fun and it's just it's a really nice to network with other educators who share my interests.

LOUI: So, it's another example of outreach and a way that people who are implementing UDL... we're just so curious to connect with one another because it is a framework and it can be implemented in so many different ways that it's incredibly important that we have these connections and ability to share our stories with one another to say, "Oh! That's how you thought about perception!" Or "That's how you thought about expression and communication!" Or rather, that's how you saw it play out in your classroom!

JANA: Yeah, and you know it's, um, and it's surprising how, you know, when we share information about how we use the principles that we find things we're already doing.

"Oh, that is UDL after all!" And you have this epiphany and you're like, "Okay I'm already doing some things." This is not so overwhelming after all.

LOUI: Yeah, things connect back and feel natural. And then, think it gives you that safety point of saying, "Wow if I'm here, that that means I can take another step forward." So like you said, it's not so overwhelming. You don't feel like you're starting at zero. All the sudden you realize, oh! There are some things that are natural to me and so now I feel good about exploring some things that maybe are just outside of my milieu, just a little bit.

JANA: Well yeah, because you know, it's um, I think it's better to take on UDL piece by piece. I don't think it's something you can just switch gears and do completely all at once.

LOUI: Yeah. Yeah, no. I absolutely agree! Okay I've taken us down a rabbit hole! I know I have, because usually we just talk about what people are doing in their classrooms and you have a great story to tell, of course, of goal direction and also executive functioning in your classroom, so could you share that?

JANA: Yes, so like I said, UDL is really big, so I find it's better to start small, and at the beginning I decided to universally design the physical space in my classroom as much as I possibly could. So for example, all of the materials that students use, they're kept within arm's reach and they're in baskets which are labeled with words and pictures. So for example, the glue sticks are in a basket labeled glue, but it also has a picture glue on it and that way everyone can find the glue even if they're struggling readers. My notebooks, they're color-coded by subject. So the math books, for example, would be blue and they're in a basket labeled "math" along with the blue sticker and this makes it way easier for the students to locate the materials and return them to the right place. Now, I have not gotten around to this yet because the need hasn't arisen, but this system could easily be adapted for visually impaired students as well, so in addition to the visual labels you could use a Braille and add Braille labels to the baskets, too. And then in addition to accessing materials, I keep a visual schedule on my wall for my entire class to follow. And each activity we do for the day has text and pictures, again, so the struggling readers can also, you know, understand them. Like, for instance, the card for dismissal has a picture of a bus next to it. And visual schedules are often used as a accommodation for students who have autism, but I like how it benefits everyone because I think every student likes to know what's expected each day.

LOUI: Yeah, so this is a great example of understanding the variability of your students, but then you're like, okay, everybody's gonna benefit from this. Exactly what you just said, everybody's gonna benefit, so let's, let's put it up there and then the students who maybe, like maybe they can easily do the schedule in their head. It's not hurting anything. It's right there for them. And so those students who do want to reference it and refer to it, they can look up there really easily. It's beautiful!

JANA: Well, and it's also less work for the teacher because if you, like me, have two or three students in your class who have autism, you don't have to change the visual schedule on each of their desks. You just have one on the wall for everybody, so it is a mutually beneficial arrangement for sure.

LOUI: Right, right. And then you've physically placed tables, chairs, and then you have some flexible seating, right?

JANA: Yeah, the tables in my room are arranged so anyone can get around them easily, even if you're, say using crutches or a wheelchair. And my room isn't especially big, I just avoid collecting furniture that isn't necessary to have. For example, I retired the big clunky teacher desk a few years ago and I will never go back. [overtalking]

LOUI: Oh, Wow!

JANA: It took up a lot of space, yeah!

LOUI: Yeah, you're right, you're right!

JANA: And it's really not necessary. There are definitely other ways to store your materials, and when I do need, like a table to work on, I either sit by the students or make use of our guided reading table.

LOUI: Nice! Oh, that's a great example because, you're exactly right, this big clunky thing, it just takes up space! And then...

JANA: So then it makes more room for the students, you know, and you're able to have way more open spaces for your students to meet or have more room to arrange your tables so people can navigate around the room easily as well.

LOUI: And, it's truly student-centered! That's lovely [laughter]. That's really good, and then flexible seating. You utilize that too, don't you?

JANA: I do! All the students have tables with traditional chairs at them, but they can opt to put their chairs away. We stack them in a certain spot and it takes up very little space. And they can use yoga mats, or milk crate seats. We also have stools and cushions. My students do have the freedom to choose where they sit, within reason, and they have access to the clipboards to write on if they need them. They really like having the ability to choose where they sit and what to sit on.

LOUI: Yeah, so that's your physical space. Now we also talked about how you use goals and goal-setting in your classroom, and then student participation in that. It's, it's a wonderful story.

JANA: Oh thank you! I was pretty happy with my physical space so I decided to shift my focus to making goal-setting at the forefront of learning. I began by posting my learning outcomes in student-friendly language and I thought, "Hey, this is great!" But in the beginning, I, I wasn't referring to them very often and I think it was just noise on the wall that students tuned out so it all changed when I did two things: I created a goal board,

and I had, I the goal reader as a classroom job. So, my goal board has a white board for each subject and I keep that updated regularly and they're written in student-friendly language, but then, like in a lot of elementary classrooms, I have a jobs board. They love helping at that age, and so in addition to things like line leader and pencil sharpener, there's also a goal reader. And so that person's job each week is to read the goals aloud that we're working toward for each subject area. So when we begin math, for example, the goal reader reads the math goals before we begin the lesson.

LOUI: What have you done with your environment to support students who maybe just aren't so comfortable reading out loud?

JANA: Well, I, it doesn't take long to get to know your kids.

LOUI: Right.

JANA: And the, the jobs are on a weekly rotation, so you know, if there was someone who might freeze up at the possibility of reading in front of everyone, I probably wouldn't select that person for a job, but there are still plenty of other classroom jobs that they can do and that they enjoy doing. So it's not like..

LOUI: Right...

JANA: they're left out of the whole process. You know, it certainly wouldn't be fair to put someone on the spot. And if a student said, "I don't feel like it today," they can certainly choose a classmate who, to do it for them and I'm open to that. I mean, I think it's important to be flexible.

LOUI: Absolutely! And you just nailed it! So you've got this great system there that are helping your students really work on that executive functioning piece, right? That goal-setting piece, but at the same time, you've done a beautiful job of supporting them all the way through those affective networks because we know we have students who just get uncomfortable when they, "Oh my gosh! I'm gonna have to read out loud!" You know? uncomfortable when they, "Oh my gosh! I'm gonna have to read out loud!" You know? They just, they just don't feel confident there and you've created this environment where (a) obviously you've gotten to know your students but, (b) that flexibility is there, so if they're like "Hmmm, I'm not feeling so comfortable with this right now," or they look at you and you're seeing, like fear in their eyes, you're like, okay, let's let's switch to the next student. And that's the beauty of understanding these underlying pieces of UDL and having that deep understanding of why you're doing what you're doing. You just, it's a great example and I'm so glad that you shared it!

JANA: Oh, thank you!

LOUI: Oh, you're, you're very welcome! So we have come to our 15 minutes. It is always so fast, but I really think you have given some great, like I said, some great and beautiful examples that are gonna help some teachers think through that deeper question of why they're doing things, because we can all kind of do what the guidelines

say, but you've really helped people, I think, dive a little bit more deeply into the why behind what they're doing, which is the major kind of instigator of the UDL framework. So thank you so much for being the guests on this week's UDL in 15 minutes!

JANA: Oh, you're welcome and thanks so much for having me! [over talking] It's been a lot of fun!

LOUI: Oh great! I'm glad, I'm glad! So for those of you who are listening to this podcast, you can find supplemental materials like an image montage with closed captioning, that montage audio description, a transcript, and an associated blog at my website, the UDL approach dot com /media. And then finally, if you have a story to share about UDL implementation for UDL in 15 minutes, you can contact me through theUDLapproach.com. And thanks to everyone for your work in revolutionizing education through UDL and making it our goal to develop expert learners.