

UDL in 15 Minutes
With Kelly Cray
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 Kelly Cray, the cultural and language support teacher at Burr and Burton Academy in Manchester, Vermont. Kelly is going to share how she guides her students to create brain stories and then apply that information when they co-create rigorous rubrics for classroom discussions and presentations. Hi Kelly. I'm so glad you're here!

KELLY:

Hi, Loui. It's wonderful to be here. Thank you so much for allowing me to share my passion with your audience.

LOUI:

Oh my gosh, you're so welcome. It's lovely to talk with you. So, share a bit about your history and education and with UDL.

KELLY:

Well, I've had a bit of an unconventional path. I didn't have the best experience as a student in school, and that ultimately led me to consider teaching. I wanted to make the system better. I've taught in South Korea, Arizona, and now I'm in Vermont, and I've also served education adjacent roles in New Zealand and Hawaii. UDL is a lens I started exploring around 2014, but it felt like ages until I was really good at it, and I'm still learning every day.

LOUI:

I get that! And you've been a lot of places like a variety of places. That's incredible. So share a little bit about Burr and Burton Academy.

KELLY:

Honestly, I'm so lucky to have found myself here. I think I'd still be traveling if I didn't happen upon BBA. It's an independent school in Vermont, but it also serves the public. So, in rural Vermont, not every town has high schools or elementary schools, and BBA is the school that the local Manchester students and some of the adjacent towns send their students to. And we also have an international program. We have some tuition-paying students from other areas as well. We have three satellite campuses, including like a farm studies program, a mountain school, and a target program for extra support. We've got an international program and partnerships with the local trade school, and for being a small school with only about 755 students, at least this year, we're proud to offer 180 unique classes. So there's a lot of different opportunities here for students. So I feel

really blessed. I wish I could have gone to a school like this when I was a student.

LOUI:

Oh, I'm just thinking about the master schedule. That's gotta be incredible to put together. Wow. Okay. So you help your students become aware of their own learning needs as well as learning needs of others, which is so beautiful because you're supporting self-determination and creating community of culture of understanding and support at all times. So, I'd love it if you would talk about that process and how you've seen student behaviors and learning shift with that process.

KELLY:

Absolutely. So brain stories are an idea actually got from a website run by autistic creators called NeuroClastic. And they've got all the materials right on their website. I got really entranced by brain stories because sometimes it's really hard to find the words to describe how your brain works. I'm neurodivergent, and it took me decades, and I'm still learning how to communicate the nuances really well. So brain stories are basically a mind map with the brain in the center circle and pictorial representations of many of the things we need to consider when we think about how we experience the world and things that we need to consider when we're understanding how others experience the world. Some of the areas we talked about are interoception, neuroception, time, motor skills, things like that. And while all people have slight variances and how these things are experienced, neurodivergent people like myself often experience the world very differently in these categories. So this serves as a really good tool to explain the differences to others, but also to reflect on the differences yourself. So, students draw lines from the pictorial representations to the brain that represent the relationship between their brain and each category. Neurotypical people will have a bit of variation. Some lines might be thicker to some categories, some might be thinner, but for the most part, they draw fairly straight lines from the brains to the categories. Divergent folks like myself draw a much different picture as some of our categories are incredibly intertwined, and some of our lived experience just looks a lot different. Like a chaotic, visually messy space makes it really, really hard for me to take an auditory input. It's kind of like when you're driving in a snowstorm, and you turn down the radio. I think everybody kind of does that a little, but it affects me a lot more. So, when I'm doing my brain story, which is included in the pictures that I sent you, I have some pieces going through other pieces. Like my hearing piece and my visual piece are directly connected before they go back to the brain. Doing things like this makes students really think about how they learn, how they think, what things affect them in the world, and it also gives them this tool to talk to others and because I don't make the students give me a key. Some will choose to, but they can kind of express this drawing however they want. It gives them a sense of privacy because it gives them the choice what they want to share, what they want to make really clear to me, and what they want to keep a little bit more abstract and keep private for themselves. And then this is a tool that they use to describe the way that they think, and understand the world to their friends, to partners, to whoever they need to communicate or work with. We pull these out when we do group work sometimes. Lots of different things.

LOUI:

So they truly have these tools as a tool for themselves. But they can also use it or parts of it to communicate their story, their personal way of being in the world to others, right?

KELLY:

Absolutely. We all have access needs. We all have things that help our lives run more smoothly. Like some people can concentrate and write in a busy cafe. Others need a completely silent room. Those are access needs. When we do our brain stories that really helps us decide on our access needs. And then when we learn to work together, we have these great conversations about access needs, about when they conflict with each others, when they conflict with society. So that students can problem-solve in a way that completely takes away any stigma or guilt out of it. It's just I have an access need. You have an access need. How are we going to fit these together?

LOUI:

Got it. Okay, so the process doesn't stop there. You help your students apply the information. And from what you've told me, it's really practical and rigorous. I can't wait for you to talk through the rubric development process that you use and and how that's tied to brain stories.

KELLY:

Absolutely. So, one of the first things we do right after we do our brain stories, and we might converse with a neighbor or a partner about them as I work with the students on co-creating rubrics. I started co-creating rubrics with my students a few years back here and there. I started doing it so that they could focus a little bit more on learning targets and expectations because it would drive me crazy when a student had invested time and effort and created a beautiful product that didn't actually meet the learning targets or that didn't align with the rubric or wasn't important to what I was trying to assess. And it gave me a gray hair because I really wanted to honor that effort and work but I didn't have the proof that they were able to apply what they needed to apply to hit that target. So I started making the rubrics with the students because that really got them invested and it helps them focus, and it worked just better than if I did a sample where they used the rubric if they were actually part of making it. So when we started brain stories, I started challenging the students with, well, how do we make these rubrics inclusive? How do we honor different forms of communication? How do we honor different access needs? And in fact, it absolutely drove them crazy because they wanted to be inclusive. They wanted to say, oh, you know you don't have to look at the speaker, if eye contact doesn't work for you, or you can draw if that's the way that you learn best. But what happened was they also needed to hold each other and themselves accountable. So it got complicated. So what we started doing as we started filling out the rubrics with everything that made sense. Any categories that we could agree on, we would put in. I would type it in and I would print it out. But the categories that we couldn't, we left blank. And students, on the day of the presentation or the assignment, would pencil in what that meant to them. So, a student might say when I'm engaged, I tend to stick my tongue out of the corner of my mouth when I'm really concentrating. Or when I'm engaged. I look right at the speaker, and I sit up straight. And when I was going through

their rubrics, I could look at what they were displaying for me. And I could actually assess them fairly in an inclusive way. So, no matter how they thought or how they presented, they had a way that worked for them.

LOUI:

I'm thinking about how you're needing to observe all of these different ways of engagement across all of these different rubrics and what that looks like for you as the one educator looking at every one. So, how does that part work?

KELLY:

So sometimes it can be really difficult, like I have a current class of 22. That's really different than my classes of seven. Seven, you can kind of glance everything over ahead of time. 22, it can be really different. Sometimes, for the first couple times, while students are getting used to this, I have them exchange rubrics, and they can kind of grade certain pieces of the rubric for each other. Sometimes, I'll turn on like Zoom, and I'll just use Zoom to record the class. And then, I'll have them play back their recordings and self-assess on the rubric. And sometimes I'll go through, depending on the student or the situation, I'll go through the recording, or I'll focus in generally if a student is being really successful, and hitting their learning targets, in giving me really good feedback and being on track. They're not who I need to stare at the most when it comes to something like engagement. So sometimes I'll triage it a little bit, and I'll focus it on the students that I know are struggling to learn how to engage well, and I'll pay a little less attention to students who I know have figured out what works for them.

LOUI:

Great, awesome. So my last question here is if somebody's really intrigued by this. They're like, oh my gosh, how do I get started because of your talking from having gone through this experience several times, I'm assuming, and do you feel like the way you started it is a good way for other people to start it or is there another way you would suggest they scale that or just find their starting point before they start scaling that up?

KELLY:

I would probably suggest starting to talk about communication what it looks like in your classroom and for your students. We all tend, I do it too, to judge things like communication-based on the expectations that I had when I was a student and we live in a really diverse world. I am neurodivergent but I can make good eye contact. I'm fairly comfortable with eye contact at this point in my life. So when I'm engaged, you can tell I'm engaged because of my eye contact. But when working with students, I've found out that sometimes some of these things that we might think are just discomfort or actually physically painful. I had someone describe making eye contact as if the amount of pain of staring in the sun or touching a hot stove. So these initial conversations on communication, both verbal and nonverbal, can look really different to different people. And what it looks like to you and, what it feels like to you and how are you going to show that you're engaged? How are you going to show that you're focusing? Especially if it doesn't look stereotypical? I'd say having those conversations would be a really good first step and then going from there because remembering those conversations

does a lot of the grading work for the rubric for you because you can kind of glance around and you notice right away if a student's body language or behavior isn't matching what they've told you, and then you can kind of jot that down later.

LOUI:

Oh, nice, nice. Oh, Kelly, thank you so much. I think this is going to be so valuable for so many people. First of all, the brain stories of and helping students really think about how they just exist in the world. How they take in information, how they communicate information out. And then this wonderful next step of now with a need to put that information into use and apply it, and it is really hard to create a rubric that is a really rigorous activity for any of us adults. And my gosh, for students especially so, this is just golden. Thank you so much for coming onto UDL in 15 Minutes and sharing this.

KELLY:

Thank you so much for having me. There's so many things we can teach students, but honestly, if they leave my classroom understanding what works for them, how they learn, and how to make the most out of their educational experiences now in the future, that I feel really good with the job I've done.

LOUI:

I would agree with that. I would totally agree. Thank you. 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. 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.