UDL in 15 Minutes
With Tracy Dabbs
Episode 117 - The Transcript with audio descriptions

[The UDL in 15 Minutes logo, a circle around the words UDL (in blue), in (in yellow), and 15 min (in red), followed by Tracy with shoulder-length brown curly hair a sweater and jeans, her husband wearing a light blue zip front jacket and jeans with close cropped blond hair and a beard, and their son, a tall high school student with blond hair wearing a letter jacket, all posing around their whippet dog.]
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 Tracy Dabbs, the coordinator of technology and innovation and UDL Lead for ESD 189, and her district of Burlington-Edison School District. Tracy is going to talk about how UDL transformed her professional learning design. Welcome, Tracy!

TRACY:
Hello Loui! Thank you so much for this opportunity to share my story with you and your audience. This is amazing! I have listened to you so much and this has been on my bucket list, so thank you so much.

LOUI:
Oh, you're so welcome! Okay, so let's get started with your role and how you came to know UDL. [The Burlington-Edison homepage with a drone shot of the high school campus on a beautiful sunny day and hundreds of students outside]

TRACY:
Perfect. So Burlington-Edison, we have an enrollment of about thirty-three hundred students. About 50% are language learners and 70% are low-income. So that's my district. I started eight years in an elementary school classroom. And then was given a chance to get to coach and coordinate technology, and I'm 20 years in that now. I can't believe it. And I found UDL about six years ago during a search for a common instructional framework, right? We had like 5 different frameworks and it was just insane. So we're trying to look for something that would encompass everything and consider all of our needs. And now I get to be the UDL lead for my district and I still get to be the coordinator of tech, so I think it's a really wonderful blend. [Tracy sitting on the floor with students as they answer quiz questions on their tablets and those answers are projected to a screen. Parents are there to learn about how students are learning while using technology]

LOUI:
That's awesome. So then, when you were in the classroom those 8 years, what was your role there?

TRACY:
So I taught first and second grade. I also have a SPED degree, so I, of course, was loaded with a lot of SPED students and a lot of language learners, and I didn't have UDL at the time, so I love reflecting back on my classroom experience on the things that I did try. And so now in my new role where I get to help other people in their classrooms, I almost wish, gosh I wish I would have known that back when I was in the classroom, but that was my classroom experience.

LOUI:
Yeah, I know I've said it on here before, and I say it in practically every professional development, I think. I want to go back and apologize to my students and I had my first year of teaching.

TRACY:
Yes! I actually have a student that is now a teacher in our district and will actually talk about that. It's really funny. It's really funny. She's lovely.

LOUI:
Yeah, luckily, I don't think any of us really do huge amounts of harm, but oh, it's hard.

TRACY:
I hope not. Exactly.

LOUI:
Alright, so you have been working through a process and that kind of the process that you've experienced of learning about universal design for learning, so tell us about that. [Tracy wearing a tan sweater leading a PD with a screen behind her that reads, "Our tech must serve a purpose"]

TRACY:
So, of course, you know, I was quite a few years in giving professional learning to teachers and thought I've got it all down. I can't learn anything new, right? And then after, I stumbled across to UDL. It really kind of shook me, right? I didn't realize how controlling I was of my learning of my learning experiences I was providing. So I kept reading the books a few of them a few times, especially your Design and Deliver. Oh my gosh, I'm on my fourth time through that book. I just but learning something new every

time. Read all the articles. I watched the videos, but I was still stuck in that "Show me the checklist. Show me what this looks like." I kept cycling that through of if you just show me the three things I need to do, I know I can do it. And then I just started designing things, right? I'm just going to try. So I started designing some PD and trying it out, and that's when the shift happened for me. It's like I started to see what it meant, and it really became "It's not a checklist." It's really funny. I remember talking to you about this earlier, that I couldn't really put my finger on what it was that happened, but now, as I really think about it, it was actually experiencing trying the design, right? And It really became, gosh, it really is a mind shift. It's this way of designing where I consider barriers and reflect upon what those barriers, how they impact, and what can I proactively do. Right? And how can I really turn that learning and those choices over to students? And I just I had to experience it a few times, then see it and realize what was happening. And the thing that was so amazing to me is as soon as I got to that shift part I couldn't unsee it, right? And so then I just started seeing it in all these places and then, like with my leadership team that I work with at the high school, a lot of people and I support high school staff. We still get a lot of people that just say, "Just show me the checklist. If you can just give me…", and I'm like, no, it's not that! Stick with us a little bit longer, and you'll see it as well, right? We have to get past that. Just show me what it looks like, right?

LOUI:
Yeah.

TRACY:
Right? It was just a really interesting shift for me, but it did it took a lot of books. It took a lot of articles in re-reading, but like I said, as soon as I really started myself trying it out a little bit and experiencing that, everything kind of just came together. There was this coalescing moment, right? where it was just really interesting. [Tracy continuing the training from the front of the room]

LOUI:
Yeah, I think when somebody like you did, experiences where they've been digging into it, but still wanting that checklist but that flip moment, then like you said, it is like the top of the funnel opens up, and everything just comes rushing in. And it just seems to fit into our brain and go, oh, ah, oh okay.

Yeah, and so, you and I and so many people in our position, we just we first we love to see that, and then it's so exciting when somebody experiences it,

TRACY:

Exactly!

LOUI:
…and B it is our constant um gosh push to try to find our way to help others experience that.

TRACY:
Right? And you can't do it for them.

LOUI:
Mm-mmm. [A screenshot of the Burlington-Edison UDL and Inclusive Practices Resource Bank section of the Burlington-Edison website]

TRACY:
And it's almost like you just got to trust, and I just kept saying that to our high school staff, just trust me for a bit longer. And then it was interesting to me how we kept, kind of going back to those foundational pieces behind UDL that you speak to in your books where, do we still agree that learner variability is a thing? Okay, yes, so that gives us this ammunition to keep trying. And okay, oh my goodness, do we still believe that expert learning has to be the goal? That it's not just our content, it's this deeper layer beyond. Okay, we believe that. All right. That gives us a different way to look at what we're doing with students. And then that third one that always resonates with me is that you always must have a firm but flexible goal for any learning experience. And so that kind of having those 3 big grounding things gives us the energy and the purpose for why we then want to look at and reflect on the lessons we've always taught, right? Or think of a different way to design. So those foundational pieces have been just this really great grounding piece for me to share for myself and for our staff of just let's go back to these big purpose points, right? Because if we believe those to be true and that we have to do something about those, then it gives us this reason to do what we consider at first really hard lift, big work. And then we can see how that's slowly over time, not too slowly, actually. It's amazing how quickly it doesn't seem like as much work when we build in. Oh, there's a routine that I'm always going to do. Oh, now I have this framework of I'm not redesigning every lesson; I'm using this same thing and all my lessons, and that was kind of a nice, ah deep breath for our leadership team, so that was just really powerful. [Tracy's bio on Edutopia followed up with Tracy pointing to the screen while leading a PD]

LOUI:
Yeah, and so when you're talking about the reflection, you know our personal reflection, but then as you're helping other people reflect, and that makes me think about the

feedback loops that you've talked about a lot and how powerful those have been and so I really want you to talk about that.

TRACY:
Oh my goodness, okay, so this was the biggest change that we've had. The biggest change. So, in just starting with our high school, just to get them to even want to do anything, I asked them, well, how is instruction going, right? And like, oh, it's fine. It's fine. Okay, fine is not great, and who is it fine for? And then there was just silence. Right? And it was have we ever asked our students? And it started this wonderful journey on, oh my gosh, if we're not asking them on a regular basis, how is learning going for them? What do they need? We're completely missing out. And then what I love so much is that it so mirrors what we have to do in our professional learning. If we're not doing that for our teachers, if we're not asking them how this PD is resonating with them and working for them, we are so missing out. We are doing PD to them or professional learning to them, not with and for them. So, this has been the biggest shift for me. I actually got to write an article for Edutopia that they published on this. It really was really exciting but just asking them, are we meeting our goals in professional learning? We started with 30% of our high school teachers saying that we were meeting their needs professional learning. Pretty typical, and I know high school can be ornery, but I love them. But after a few sessions of asking them, showing them how we were shifting the PD based on what they said, we're at 97 to 100 % on all of our sessions now with them feeling listened to. We've completely shifted some of our PD from really large group to small groups that are all getting the same message but in smaller sessions for them based on what they asked. And then, in some cases doing very, very open exploration on a topic, depending on where we are in the learning, is to very structured. These are the 2 things I want you to get out of this. And here is how I'm going to support you to kind of explore what that is. And it's based solely on what they're telling us. And just the feedback from staff that they've never had PD like this before they've just. This is like, unlike anything they've experienced, right? It is just amazing. And then shifting that to our high school team that's really trying this work. I had a math teacher. "I don't feel comfortable asking my students for feedback. They're just going to blast me as a teacher." But then, she's like, I'm going to give it a try, and she was blown away by what they shared with her. How they shared it impacted their learning, and now she's asking them all the time, and now it's the thing I love, whether it's professional learning or our classrooms, it's shifting a way that the lesson design is mine, and I've created it, and I'm responsible. Where I'm taking your feedback, I can only make this as great as you help me make it for all of us. And so now it's not as personal. I don't feel as attacked on a feedback survey because it's our we're going to work on it together. And so just this shift and release of I'm crafting this lesson with you helping me. It's been super powerful in our classrooms and our professional learning. It's amazing to me, and now I'm using like

the framework for all of our professional learning. We use it exactly like we would do a lesson plan. And it's amazing how well a learner is a learner, right? It's amazing how well it's worked and how it's really bringing things out for us. [A screen shot showing "Foundational beliefs with UDL and Inclusion" and buttons labeled learner variability, expert learners, and firm/flex goals].

LOUI:
That's awesome. It's a huge benefit when I get to work with a group, you know, several times, right? So sometimes I only get to go once because that's been the request, but when I have that opportunity to work…

TRACY:
Right,

LOUI:
…with a group multiple times., what I found is, with adults, and in the PD setting, and of course, like you, I'm using the framework, obviously to design the whole thing, but the first time that I ask for feedback and, of course I give some kind of multiple choice or fill in the blank type things, but then I'll leave room for paragraphs, and there's just a little bit there. And then come back and say here, this is what I heard. This is what I saw. Here are the responses, and then it opens up a little bit more. There's that trust relationship that we have to create with any learner, and so our adult learners need that trust relationship, too. Which you're just you're speaking to so well and then, like your math teacher and other teachers have the experience, "I need to trust my learners, but I need to give them the chance", and then once that is there, it's, whew! It opens up so much! So many doors. It's incredible. [The Burlington-Edison homepage showing students in seated in two rows facing one another for a discussion activity followed by screen captures of The UDL Approach website and the UDL in 15 Minutes logo]

TRACY:
It is. It's amazing, and it's just like any other skill. When our students first start giving us feedback, it's probably not going to be great, right? And then talking through what is great feedback. And then that just goes through so many different skills, right? How do we give great feedback to people? How can I take in that feedback? So that piece is so powerful, and I just, I reflect on how we would give a lot of surveys in the past but that we'd never come back to them. And that was that big missing piece, right? We never made it a loop. We just, ah, we took your feedback and you had no idea how we used it if we even looked at it, and so that powerful piece of closing that loop and just continuing it with, this is what you told me this is what we're going to try now and we're

going to keep coming back. It's just making learning seem very much like a cycle and focusing on that process. So just so powerful.

LOUI:
Yeah. I know it's outside of a learning cycle, but like when you fill in the survey for the company, and they're like, we want to hear your feedback, but then you hear nothing back, and it's like that was worthless. That is not worth my time because you didn't tell me anything.

TRACY:
Oh yes.

LOUI:
We're not supposed to have favorites, but I will admit that I really do think my favorite checkpoint, out of the entire set of guidelines, is in mastery-oriented feedback, under sustaining effort and persistence. So, increased mastery-oriented feedback. So you know if that's of course to us as the designers, but then also it's for our learners so they learn how to give mastery-oriented feedback. We all benefit from mastery-oriented feedback.

TRACY:
Yes, exactly.

LOUI:
Oh, this has been such a great conversation. I really, really appreciate it, Tracy. I think people are gonna have key takeaways about some steps they can take and the encouragement to keep going so that funnel will open up. And then also this concept of feedback loops, and how valuable they are for any instructional designer and learner to have regardless of age. So, thank you so much.

TRACY:
Thank you, Loui. This is just such a pleasure and honor to get to speak with you. Thank you so much.

LOUI:
Oh, 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 in revolutionizing education through UDL and making it our goal to develop expert learners.