

UDL in 15 Minutes
With Arie Werder
Episode 118 - 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 Arie Werder, the educational tech district consultant teacher from Burlington-Edison school district. Arie is going to talk about how UDL is home for her. Welcome Arie.

ARIE:

Oh, thank you so much. I'm so glad to be here and I'm just really excited to have the opportunity to talk with you.

LOUI:

Oh you're so welcome. So what does your role include?

ARIE:

Well, it's a little complicated but wonderful. My current role is I am the ed-tech, educational technology consultant teacher in our district and I get to work with Tracy Dabbs the coordinator of technology here, as well as our teaching and learning team. And my role includes the opportunity to help provide professional development for teachers where they are able to leave their classroom and come and get tech-related support. Thinking about "how do we move beyond our tools as just a textbook, but how do we use them and kind of exciting new ways and ways for production?" Then I get to go into the classroom and work directly with those teachers and with students in their classrooms. So I spend about 50% of my time in classrooms, in our K-8 system is where I spend most of my time. I also get to be our AT lending library specialist. So I work with our special-ed team and our assistive technology devices. Check those out for them and tools that might help students be able to have the least restrictive environment and to access their pieces. Additionally, I get the opportunity to help create curriculum related to social studies because that was my area. I was a teacher for 15 years in middle school for social studies. So I help with our inquiry-led units and designing those lessons as well. And so I get to work with kids, students, adults all throughout our systems.

LOUI:

You're not busy at all. No, not at all.

ARIE:

No, not at all. No, I, you know, bring it on! Whatever we need to do. My job is to support teachers so that our students can have the best opportunity. Oh and I forgot,

LOUI:

Ya.

ARIE:

I'm also part of our inclusionary practice team, so I get to help be the lead from our district area for one of our buildings in the district. So I work with those teachers and then providing

professional development around UDL, of course, how could I forget that, around UDL at the building level supporting that as well.

LOUI:

I am so appreciative of the fact that you have the hat of the ed-tech and AT together. So often those are separated in schools and it just leads to further silos. And the fact that that's together is just lovely.

ARIE:

You know, that's a huge piece and I really appreciate that about our district and in this case, Tracy Dabbs' vision with that too. So we are fortunate that we have the AT together, we have our teaching learn together, and technology so that we're looking at curriculum we are looking at it so we can really fit in that UDL piece too, right? When we're looking at what does our classroom? What are our learning environments? How do we remove barriers? And if we are siloed, we miss out on so much. It might seem more efficient, but in the end it does not serve our students or our teachers as well.

LOUI:

Yeah, so if there's one thing I want people to take away from this podcast is to take away that idea. Take it back to their leaders and say hey, there's school districts that's doing this, and it's a really good idea for all kids and for all teachers. So.

ARIE:

I hundred percent agree.

LOUI:

But I know there's going to be more. So that's just point number one so we can move point number 2.

ARIE:

Alright.

LOUI:

So I'm just wildly appreciative of you because you're going to share your own story. It's your own personal story and that's brilliant and brave and I'd love for you to tell your journey about you as a young learner.

ARIE:

Well, thank you. I appreciate that intro. It's taken me, I'm 47, and it's taken me a long time to really be even able to articulate any of this kind of is a big step for me as I think it is for anyone who has had different trials and tribulations in the process. So I am dyslexic, I have dysgraphia, and I also struggle with attention deficit disorder, right? Like I have a lot of energy and I think and I speak in circles and that I'll come back around and connect, but it is not in the typical linear way that our education system valued. I'll put the -ed at the end. Hopefully that's shifting. Had valued in the past, and so I had a really interesting experience getting to where I am in education and being an educator. I think that, unfortunately maybe my story is true to some and also for other reasons and not, some students maybe not have had as much success as I have at this point. I started out as a kid loving school. I had the opportunity to be involved in Montessori. I really kind of maybe my first introduction to what I think UDL offers in some ways

too, which is you have a goal, you pick a center. In that center every single thing is going towards that math learning skill, but as a learner you can try to get there in different ways, right? So I had this foundation in a very hands-on tactile way where I was able to express what I knew and to learn and grow and that fit me well. I changed states and schools and I found myself struggling with reading and writing in a traditional way. And unfortunately, this is a lot of how our system works which is triage based, right? Guess what year it was? Third grade. Third and fourth grade is where we start to look at, oh you are not meeting standard. You're not where you need to be. Now we're going to acknowledge that we can test you or do this. And at the time it was the 80's, and if you needed to be tested. My family recognized, my mom, my grandmother tried to support me with, "Okay we know you're smart. We see there's a barrier. How do we do that?" At the time period your only option was really to look for outside testing, so you had to have the dollars and money in order to go through the process to be identified. My grandmother said, "You're just as smart as the other grandkids," and helped my mom out with getting that original piece of the testing going for me. That was a big piece and I was in the experience of went from loving school to feeling like a failure. And I remember this is when I first like got the spelling test that dread within me where, I was getting it all wrong, and you passed it to the kid behind you, and then all the other students saw how horrible your grade was and it came back to you. I remember very vividly like taking my spelling notebook and like hiding it underneath my bed and then lying about it. It was the first lying I'd ever really done which was, "I don't know what happened to it," because I was embarrassed and I didn't want to turn it in. And school became somewhere very different for me. It became unsafe because I didn't really believe in myself and I was embarrassed. And I think that happens to a lot of our students. Luckily for me, my story didn't end there. I had support from my dad and I was able to get into a school that was designed, every student was on an IEP. It was for students that were twice exceptional in one way or another and that was like this blossoming opportunity again, right? So all of a sudden I went to this environment in which every kid had an IEP. They knew what your goals were. They're like our goal is for you to leave this and go into another school, right? Kind of a new way to look at that. That started shaping my idea of being able to be an expert learner, to advocate for myself, to start believing. I can do these things and I know what I'm good at. I know where I can get help and that started shifting things for me. Fast forward a few more years I moved into another system, and back into more traditional school setting. Fabulous special-ed teachers. The school district was known for supporting IEP's and special-ed really well. At the same time, I'm met my first students that fit a lot of the systems I see, right? Where this is middle school and the kids said, "Shh, don't show them you know the answer! They'll give us the answers! Just sit there! Sit there long enough and they'll give you the answers!" And it was true. We'd get pulled out for our testing or pulled out for environment and if you just sat there long enough, someone would feed you the answers and then you would get the points and that was my first experience into that. And I don't blame the students either. I think that they learned a skill because they didn't have that other little piece that I'd had that was the support in the same way. They figured out how to game their system. But that was hard because it was a pullout system, right? So I'd gone from an inclusionary place where I was part of a classroom. We all had different goals. We were working together. And then I went back into a system where I was excluded. And as a middle schooler I felt like my friend network and all of that was so small because it was only the same six kids I was always being pulled with. I didn't have the exposure to the other 200 kids that were at my grade level. I also got stuck in that wheel of I'm going to give you a math workbook and until you can prove you can do this without mistakes, you don't get to move on to the next concept. So I actually ended up finding myself getting behind grade level because I was stuck in this wheel of showing competency, even though I understood the concepts, I was still moving digits in the wrong places and things like that. So that was kind of the first piece and then I got into high school and I said I'm not going in that room anymore. So then I had support from my family that said all right, well she's not going to

get pulled out anymore. Which was really difficult, right? When we have IEP's, we often say you have to have this many minutes and therefore that's how you're served. And so it was a battle for me to basically go full inclusion. I know my teachers were making accommodations for me, but I wasn't working with the special-ed department or being pulled out anymore because I felt that I wasn't be able to make the connections with my peers and I wasn't really happy with that. So I don't know that everyone and every student has that family support or school systems that allow for that. So I think that was a little different. So that really shaped me learning who I was and what I needed. I knew that I did well having conversations, being able to show what I knew verbally. This was the beginning of me starting to use computers, right? Computers were just coming out. Spell check was still horrible and I mean you can't tell the word is spelled wrong having it underlined and red doesn't make a lot of difference. But it was the beginning of me trying to figure out those pieces kind of on my own and I knew I wanted to be an educator. So I was aiming for grades that would get me into college. I wasn't sure what I wanted to teach but, after having so many different types of learning experiences and different schooling pieces, not all positive, I kind of highlighted positive ones there, but I had some, a real lot of real self-doubt that was built into those times. I had a lot of, "You just need to try harder," from family members too. "If you just concentrated." There was a lot of, "Why don't you just apply yourself?" and I felt like I was working so hard all the time. And to still be lucky to get a C, it was hard. Especially when your peers, it was simple. It was easy. Why don't you get it? That definitely shaped the type of teacher and the type of environment that I wanted to create.

LOUI:

You know so far I'm hearing such a strong story about how a system that relies primarily on competency, and it does not look at different ways to measure and accept and appreciate proficiency, it just held you down in so many ways. And, of course, there's so much more to say, but what I'd like to do as we move toward the end of this first episode, because you're so gracious you're going to come back for part 2, is maybe you'll talk about your college experience because I know in the next episode you're gonna talk more about being in teacher education and then becoming a teacher. So I'd love for you to share the college experience.

ARIE:

So I think that was a difficult one. So as a high schooler I knew I wanted to get into college. Example would be I had to take geometry twice, right? And I did everything I could to get that C- because I had to have at least that to be able to apply for college. Then I also knew that I was going to need to go to a school that was not a large school. I knew that if I was going to be successful and I wanted to be an educator, I needed to be in a place that would allow me to have conversations. So I was looking at smaller, Liberal Arts schools that provided that opportunity. They're also really hard to get into, right? I knew when I saw a large school that had 200 kids in a class, that was a textbook, that is not where I was going to shine. I was going to shine in my relationships, being able to collaborate, being in teams talking with people. So as I started looking at schools I had people say, "Don't get your hopes up. Your grades, you know..." I was at a 3.0 and I worked really hard for that. But you know that my SAT scores weren't the top. Trying to take an SAT score back in the day too, especially with Scantrons, very hard for someone with Dyslexia. But I got into a school even after being told "Don't expect to," and it was the perfect place. I ended up in a small university. Pacific University. And it took me the first year was just learning how to master classes. What they wanted from me. But I ended up thriving in that environment but it was hard to get there.

LOUI:

I think the other part that you shared both here in the college part and then also earlier K-12 as you said, relationships. That's something you're excellent at doing and it shines in what you do, professionally. And gosh, your ability to go beyond that whole, "Don't get your hopes up," but that you had the familial structures. You had other structures around you and we know that so many learners don't have those so we have to create those. But.

ARIE:

Yeah.

LOUI:

I am so appreciative that I know that this conversation is going to keep going in another episode. So I want to say thank you so much for this Part 1. Thank you, Arie and I look forward to the next one.

ARIE:

As do I. Thank you so much.

LOUI:

Your 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.theudlproach.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.