

UDL in 15 Minutes
With Arie Werder Part 2
Episode 119 - 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 for a follow-up to her initial podcast. Arie is the educational tech district consultant teacher for Burlington-Edison School District. Arie is going to continue talking about how UDL is home for her and how it affects her professional life. Welcome Arie!

ARIE:

Thank you. Thank you for having me back and wanting to hear and share these stories.

LOUI:

Oh, you're so welcome. Thank you so much for returning and again for being so brave. These are just stories that I think a lot of educators need to hear, and I'm sure there are a lot of educators who will connect with you based on their own personal experiences. Whether it's their individual experiences, experiences being parents or caretakers, or just close to those who experience disabilities. So, as a brief recap, you shared in the previous podcast that you have Dyslexia, ADHD, and Dysgraphia, and what your experiences were in K-12 and in your undergrad. So, for anyone who has not listened to that, you need to back up one episode and listen to that because it's gonna have a direct impact on how you listen to this episode. But you graciously accepted the invitation to share what it's like to go into teacher prep, what barriers you were facing, and how did your story move forward?

ARIE:

Well, thank you for having me back and I guess what I want to do is just step back into that college part. I did get into a small Liberal Arts college kind of against the odds, and I found a place that was great for me. But that first year was a struggle. Figuring out that when I was asked to write a 10-page paper, read a 400-page book for each of my 4 professors, and have that ready at the end of the week was very difficult. And my papers came back with a lot of red marks, and I went to the writing center and I felt not smart, right? When other kids are trying to help you figure out like the spelling or those pieces and figuring out how do I, how do I do this. I spent the first year figuring out how to play college, and luckily at that small school where I talked to my professors, they knew who I was. I was able to kind of start that. So I went from struggling with C's, really working hard for those. And I knew I wanted to be a teacher. So I did go into this teacher program and I took a class with the most amazing professor Daniel Duarte and I was in his class and he said you can keep taking these classes. You definitely need to be a teacher, but here's my recommendation. Figure out what you want to teach. Do your 4 years and come back with for the fifth-year master's program. It'll be good for you financially, it'll also be good for you to be well-rounded, and I really really respected this man. And I did that. So I went on. And by the end of college, I graduated Magna Cum Laude. The biggest part was I found a friend who was really good at helping me edit my papers. He did not change anything in

my writing. What he did is he finally said, stop using spell checker because of the wrong words. Just leave it the way you have it spelled, and I will help you fix it. So that was like not only did I have the tools, I also had to advocate for myself to go in and back then, it was books on tape, but they didn't have the books on tape. I had to go in and advocate and say this is my IEP, this is the paperwork I have, I can't keep up with the reading in my class. So they actually hired someone for work-study to read the textbooks because back then we didn't have a lot of those things online and accessible for students. And if I hadn't advocated for myself, I would not have been able to keep up, and be a part of those discussions, and then be ready to write my papers. So it was definitely learning to advocate for myself, and part of that was, like we talked about last time, was starting to build that resilience and the belief that I could up against those struggles. That takes me to my getting into my teacher prep, and in a Magna Cum Laude, walked across that stage, so proud! Here I go! And you were guaranteed an interview, and I was very, they only took 25 students into our master's program. And I was ready to go in, and I went in, and guess what? I was going to use my accommodations because you had to do a written exam. So I was going to use my extended time and able to use a computer. I was going to use those things that were written in. But guess what? They put me on a computer, and they turned off all the things that would help me. So I had to type so that I could read my writing, but spell checker got turned off. I couldn't have it read back to me. All of the things that were the tools that were built in to support me disappeared. They turned it off, and here I am, and then I go before this board of 3 people. One of them was my professor, Daniel Duarte. The others were too, that it were new to me, and I listened to a very well-respected educator, who said "I'm sorry, but I don't vote for you to be in our program because I don't believe that you will be successful. Because of your spelling, and the paper that you just turned in to us, you will not be able to represent." I think really, in the end, their program or a teacher. You're going to have struggles. People are going to doubt you, and my vote is no. And I mean crushed, right? This is year five. I've put all my eggs in this basket. I've worked my tail off to get here. Faced again with this, "you're not good enough. You didn't try hard enough. You don't have what it takes." That shame, right? The shame that comes into it. And, Professor Duarte said well, wait a second, in response, (I'm listening to all this too, which is kind of crazy) the response is if we do not have people in education that represent our students, how are we going to help them? His big class was culturally responsive teaching and most of his stuff was focused on ML at the time, or poverty. That was really the area he was focusing and teaching in their programs. And he said you know, special ed is not my area, but if we do not have people that understand these struggles, how are we going to expand our system to support all students? And that changed your vote, and all of a sudden, I was in the program. And here I am.

LOUI:
Wow.

ARIE:
And it was a great program. I learned a ton. That same professor that was kind of blockading at first, she taught the cooperative learning class. I used every single bit of the things I learned in her class to support my students in my social studies classes. So, I learned a ton from her. And neither of them are wrong. The truth is, I needed to be in that, and I'll tell you what my first year

of teaching, I had a parent. I was social studies and language art core, and first year teaching a student, a brilliant young man, doing a great job, very smart, but he didn't and do his spelling packets because it was a curriculum base. I had a certain the spelling packet. He wasn't turning it in. He didn't have a good grade. Came in for parent conference, mom laid down a letter I had sent home with underlines of misspellings of things I had messed up on. Put it on the table and said who are you to give my child a grade? So, my professor wasn't wrong. It was it is something that I face. Doesn't mean I can't do my job, but it is a barrier.

LOUI:

Yeah.

ARIE:

And that also became that, all right, who's my colleague that's going to be like my friend in college that I trust to not look down on me but also be that second eye before I send it out.

LOUI:

Yeah, yeah. Oh, so much in there.

ARIE:

Right?

LOUI:

So much in there. Oh. These incredible stories of advocacy, and then I mean just this that zinger that you put in the end. And then just having that trusted colleague. My gosh, we all need trusted colleagues. But then like you explained, having that trusted colleague for you to be able to produce.

ARIE:

To be vulnerable.

LOUI:

Yeah, to be vulnerable and yeah and produce the work that you need to work on. And boy, just looping back to that original argument of the professor that was saying you don't belong in this program. But then to have Professor Duarte say no, "we need representation of all of our learners!" And that is such a powerful statement, and you're the living, breathing embodiment of that. So then, you've moved into teaching, and you talked a little bit about that. But how have you continued to advocate for yourself? And how has that affected how you advocate for your learners?

ARIE:

Well, I have to say I loved being in the classroom. Fifteen years, middle school social studies teacher. Burlington really was changing while I was there. We were having more ML students. Our poverty rate was changing, and honestly, it wasn't something that everyone was equipped to deal with. We had more variety in our classrooms than we had ever had before, and maybe

not the support needed and background in order to be successful with that. And so what changed for me, well, first of all, I did a lot of cooperative learning. I taught the way I needed, right? Which is also something like, I know more about UDL now. We all tend to come forward with the way we learn. So, I learned a little bit differently than a lot of my colleagues. A lot of, especially when you get in middle school and high school, we have people that are experts in their fields, and that is really their focus. I did a lot more with what we would call an UDL executive functioning. I had middle schoolers. So a lot of that was breaking down like, well how do you learn? What does work, and when did it work and why does it work? And why did it work today and not yesterday, and how do you want to be seen? And how do when we work as a team? How do we honor what other people bring? So a lot of those executive functioning pieces ended up being what I was building into my middle school classroom. The next piece which really brought me to where I am now was I had a colleague who had brought some iPads into classrooms, and I was able to start using those with my students. And I started an after-school program working with my ML and sped students where they became experts and I watched that flip in the classroom. They picked out the apps that we were going to use to show what we know. So instead of a typical essay, they became the experts, and it was amazing to watch the classmates go, "Oh my gosh, they know so much!" but having a chance to pre-record and then share versus being on the spot. It totally shifted some of the power dynamics in my middle school classroom. Which led me in the direction of this technology piece. I had always been interested in some assistive technology because of my own needs. Like I knew I needed spellcheck. When those things are coming out, I'm not into the fancy new tech, what I'm interested in, what are the tools that help us show what kids know. What are different ways in which we've do that? So then, we were using this tech, and I had a colleague of mine and a good friend Charlie Collins, who came running down the hallway. She was our ML teacher, at one point, she'd been a sped teacher. She'd been a classroom teacher, and we worked together to support my students. Which I think is super key. You need someone when you are creating opportunities of choice, student-led, inquiry. You have to have some other support to pull all those things together when you have 150 kids in a day. So Charlie comes running down because I couldn't explain what I did, or how I did it, and it didn't make sense to a lot of other people. Other than they always put every student with an IEP in my classroom. Every kid with a behavior, like all of them were always in my class, and we did well together because of these pieces. And I also knew I needed supports. I had learned this about myself and then also to support my students I needed support. We cannot do this in a silo, especially as we load teachers with every student that needs this. Within UDL, it takes a lot of pre-planning. It takes a lot of opportunity, and down came Charlie in the hallway, and she's like, "This is it!" And then she had the guidelines on her other hand. "This is what you do! This is, this thing right here!" Like this is why we say it's home, right? This is the thing you're doing. Like these are the things. look! Like you can explain it to people if you show them this, right? Because I didn't have the words or the language when talking about those columns that were in a published piece that everyone saw. At that point, it was still seen as a special ed part. This is, you know, about eight years ago, and it was still really siloed in the special ed, but it was like this is what every classroom teacher and special ed teacher and ML teacher. This is what we need as a framework. And that kind of became this common understanding where I could start speaking to some of those pieces. So when my job in the district opened up to be a support with technology,

knowing that you were going to getting to support teachers and students like that was the plan for this position, I was able to come forward with some of these ideas without really using the UDL terms yet, because it wasn't something that had really changed. But now in my position, right, I'm so excited. In Washington, across this country, UDL language is showing up in our standards. It's also, you know, giving students voice. All of these things are, you know, really this idea that we can't do equity work without UDL. Without this idea, this framework piece is totally shifting. The opportunities that I get to help support because my job is to support teachers so they can support their students. So I've moved from figuring out how to advocate for myself. Then, working in my classroom with my students, to going, okay, I know other teachers want to do this too. Every teacher loves their kids and their classes, but they need help to do that. And so, I've been fortunate that I've been in a position for the last seven years to support that type of work. So when I say technology, the technology is just a means to providing a different way for students to access information and to show what they know and to be successful and not always in the way that we anticipate. Remembering that this big thing in UDL, that's really been hitting me home lately is the barrier is not the student. It's the environment. So it's our job to change it.

LOUI:

Arie, I am so appreciative of you. I know that this is the first public platform you've ever used to share your story, and I am incredibly incredibly honored by that.

ARIE:

Thank you.

LOUI:

Thank you so much. I believe that your story is going to be heard far and wide. This podcast does go around the world.

ARIE:

I'll admit that scares me a little.

LOUI:

No, it is gonna be so valued around the world, and we've said the word here already vulnerability, and I've said that you are very brave.

ARIE:

Well, I couldn't have gotten here without wonderful people. Like as much as they're scary, there's a world full of people and colleagues that choose to support students and choose to support each other, and that's what this is about. So I couldn't be here without the love and support and belief that others have put as well, so.

LOUI:

Thank you so much.

ARIE:

And the work that you do, I mean we have this happening, and it makes a difference every day for kids.

LOUI:

Oh, thank you so much. I appreciate it. So, with that I'm going to move into the closing but boy is that hard because I want to keep the conversation going but this has been beautiful. Thank you so much.

ARIE:

My pleasure.

LOUI:

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 and an associated blog on 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.