

UDL in 15 Minutes
With Chynel McCrink and Colin Syron
Episode 120 - 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 Chynel McCrink who is a primary teacher and ICT Coordinator within St. Peter's Primary School and Nursery Unit in County Down, in the North of Ireland, and Colin Syron who is a primary school 4th class teacher at Breaffy National School in Ballina in County Mayo, in the South of Ireland. Chynel and Colin are going to talk about how the UDL framework has helped establish a shared language for teaching across Ireland. Hello Chynel and Colin! Welcome!

CHYNEL:

Hi Loui! Thanks so much for having us on the podcast, and before we start I just wanted to say a thank you for what you're doing to share the message of UDL with a global audience through the work of your podcast, your website, and your publications. Your podcast was highlighted to us by Loz Hartman, and I often listen to it on car journeys and when I might go for a walk and I know that Colin and I are both so delighted to talk a little today about the UDL framework within a recent project that we were part of.

LOUI:

Oh my gosh. Thank you so much. I'm really blown away by that. Thank you, and welcome Colin.

COLIN:

Thank you, Loui! Thanks for having us. It's great to be on an international podcast and we really look forward to speaking with you. I've listened to many of your podcasts and I love the way you take different angles on UDL. You don't just look at the education side of things you look at the business side of things. It's very interesting and has helped develop my understanding of UDL. So thank you for that.

LOUI:

Oh my gosh. Thank you so much and thank you for your patience in my likely mispronunciation. So you all can correct that if you have time within this podcast. But thank you for being here. And why don't we start with your individual backgrounds in education and your connections with UDL? So, Chynel why don't you start us off?

CHYNEL:

I've been a classroom teacher in early years for more than 20 years now so old hat, and half of that has also been as the ICT coordinator for the school and that just means that as well as the day-to-day at teaching duties, I have I'm responsible for the digital strategy. And implement in the skills vision for ICT. I support the teachers and the students also with their digital skills development, and my background with UDL was through Twitter or X and the Google community the educators, but it came amongst a discussion centered on many other learning frameworks. So, it was something that had intrigued me to explore further and the opportunity to take part in this project came just at the right time. So it really was just a case of right place, right time for me to get involved in the UDL journey.

LOUI:

Wonderful! Thank you, and you Colin?

COLIN:

So I've been a classroom teacher in Ireland for the last fifteen years. I teach normally third and fourth class. So, ten, nine, eleven-year-olds. It's a medium-sized school in the west of Ireland and a school that I'm very proud to be a part of. I don't have a leadership role as such so I come from a very different place to Chynel I would say. I have been the De facto ICT coordinator I suppose, for the last few years, but it isn't an official leadership role. So I've been trying to grow ICT within the school kind of from the ground up. My connection with UDL is, I suppose, a little more tenuous I would say than Chynel's in that the project we've just finished completed, I went into not really knowing a lot about UDL, quite frankly. So I'm a new advocate of the UDL world. Maybe since last kind of August, September. The most interesting thing was that reflecting back on things I've done in the past, there were always elements of UDL that were there for me and they've only kind of crystallized in the last seven or eight months because of engaging with the framework and it's helped focus me I think and my teaching.

LOUI:

Yeah, I think that's one of my favorite parts is when as you're learning about UDL and just as you said, Colin, we have those crystallization moments of saying, oh, oh! And then it helps us I think dig more deeply into why we're approaching teaching the way we are and why we're reaching out to learners. So, wonderful. Well, you've both been part of this huge partnership between the National Education Authorities in Ireland, Microsoft, and teacher leaders in Northern Ireland in The Republic of Ireland and in fact, the two of you are two of those teacher leaders. So why was this partnership created between Northern Ireland and The Republic of Ireland?

CHYNEL:

Well maybe I'll take that one to begin. To be honest, that's always a really complicated question in Ireland, but the simplest answer is something like this. Within the historical context of Ireland being separated into two parts of the one country, we each have our own educational authorities north and south of the border. And we have different structures, practices, and policies in place in relation to our education systems. So you know the content, the skills, the assessment structures, and in the north, our skills are supported and managed by an information and communications network called C2k, and that's operated on behalf of the Education Authority but C2k also offers support services, and infrastructures to guide school digital solutions, as well as being the main body who are responsible for designing and delivering teacher professional development. And that's where this project began for us in the north. But I wonder Colin, if you can speak to the differences in teacher professional development, maybe in the South?

COLIN:

Yeah, Chynel and it's something that has always been kind of to the fore with me. I feel that in the South of Ireland, things aren't centralized as well as in the North we don't have an ICT body that kind of oversees and rolls out different projects, different software, different hardwares. Everything goes through the school. Our school is almost like an island, and where we get funding and we spend it the way that we want to, which has its good sides, but it offers very little uniformity across the system. Which I find problematic, I think it leaves children, if you're in a certain school, you might have good ICT access, if you're in another school, you may have very little. So I think our government body they have programs and bodies that do some of this work but they're they're underfunded and do not have the power that they need. So I think the North is ahead in that regard, and I think a great thing about this course has been the chance to see the differences between the North and the South, both positive and negative and there are both positive and negatives. It's been very enlightening for me to see how primary schools are run in the North of Ireland and the differences but I do feel, Chynel that we have an issue in our country and I think this probably goes across the whole island of how CPD is viewed and engage with, and so I wonder how you feel about that generally in the North?

CHYNEL:

Yeah I would agree with Colin's point. You know what was evident across both of our sectors that teacher training had become stale. You know our methods for professional development were outdated and limited in terms of the impact they were having when teachers returned to their schools. So, there certainly was a clear disconnect between what was needed and what was being provided. I think the partnership between the

bodies between the Odyssey Trust, Microsoft, C2k, and the Universities north and south of the border in Ireland, and Lasell University in Boston came about following a teacher device rollout that was happening in the north, and also there were discussions about what was possible when institutions actively listened to those professional development needs of teachers, but not only delivered those opportunities but involved the teachers in crafting those opportunities by involving their voices and views of stakeholders which the teachers were part of. And I think taking part in this course, Empowering Learning Through Universal Design for Learning allowed us to come together across those issues of geography and different systems of education that we have in the North and South and allowed us time and conversations to examine those persistent inequities in the classroom while being supported by the UDL framework and I think it reaffirmed personal beliefs in both of us that regardless of the differences in our governing structures, our students had to be at the center of what we were designing in terms of our teacher professional learning. We felt that for those involved in the project, that impact was becoming evident in a changing skill culture which ultimately is enacted by the principles of UDL where engagement, representation, action and expression, are at the heart of that learning design.

LOUI:

So first of all I have to thank you both for just facilitating this podcast. You've done a great job of each asking each other questions. It's been fabulous. So everybody's gotten a really good view of this. What I'm reflecting on here is that even like the design the background of this whole thing of the Odyssey Trust, and Microsoft, and C2k in the universities north and south of the border in Ireland, and Lasalle University in Boston coming together, I mean already there was this clear design of partnership and I am assuming listening and so then that just it transferred into gathering those voices and views of the stakeholders and especially teachers, and I'm loving this. But my next question is, so that partnership came to be and you both came but how did you end up as a part of the project in the first place? What was the beginning like?

COLIN:

For me, it was I think I came from left field to this. A place I often find myself. But, so I had been, I basically had done some work with Minecraft education I had done a pilot at a competition that was run in the South of Ireland and my class had done very well in it. But what I saw when I was using these different education tools was that the children on the periphery, the children that didn't always have a voice within group roles in the classroom, became leaders. Became the go-to children, and I found it really powerful at the time. So those on the periphery finding their voice really stood out to me now. Now little did I know that that was UDL in practice. That's what was happening. This was before I had engaged with UDL, but I could see that this was something that like you

know, sparked me and I really wanted to engage with it. So I ended up doing a little bit of work with Microsoft and I was approached by someone in Microsoft to head blindly to Belfast one June afternoon and see what this course was all about. To me Loui, this course was going to be about tech. It was going to be some sort of tech professional development course. What I gathered very quickly up in Belfast was that we were being asked. We were not being told. We were being given agency. We were being given the language and the power to control what way we wanted this CPD to go. Did it go the exact way that I taught when I left Belfast? No. Absolutely not. I still didn't really know what UDL was at that point. But I could see that what was being facilitated was going to be, even within the course, was going to be led by us. So I found that fascinating and I jumped on the course because I felt that it was something very different to the CPD that I was used to in. In our schools, if we do a summer course which is CPD, we get 3 extra days off a year, so most teachers just do a summer course so that they can have the three days. It's not that that's not child-centered, that's I need more holidays-centered. So it doesn't it doesn't facilitate serious CPD where a teacher can you know, really flex their muscles, but I could see with this one and I've done leadership course before where I was just going through the motions. I could just see one I could just see that this was going to hit different and I felt it was something that I could do. But how I came into it is from somewhere out in the left field.

LOUI:

Yeah, yeah, and so Chynel what was it like for you in the beginning?

CHYNEL:

Well I have to be honest about this I was involved in a few projects with C2k and EA in the months leading up to this, and my connection with that would have been with a man called Emen, who will make a phone call and when you get a phone call from Emen you answer the phone call. And my own principal has said to me often that I have left you know serious meetings where we have been in talks because Emen has called. And Emen brought along the idea that Chynel you have been involved in some of the projects in regards to teacher device rollout, now we have another project. We're thinking of doing this, would you be interested? And as I sat in my storeroom on a stool talking on the phone to Emen about this project. He put it to me like this. It's about doughnuts and buns, and how many v and buns you can take and I had to think and I said to Emen I'd like to take all the doughnuts and all the buns. So rather than a fear of missing out Loui, I jumped onto this project because it was going to explore something that was on my to-do list something that was a pipe dream for me to be involved with professors like Liz Hartman and Emily Maynard who were delivering and courses on the design of Universal Design for Learning and I just was one of the excitable bonnies getting involved in this from the ground.

LOUI:

That's awesome. That's so great. Okay, so just letting everybody know we're going to have a slightly longer podcast because I have another question that I want to ask, and I'm just not going to cut it off so we're going to keep going. So we've talked about the differences between Northern Ireland and The Republic of Ireland. We've talked about how the design of this was different from other professional development opportunities you've attended, but you both had major a-ha's on the very first day and what did it mean to you as a professional and how do you think that initiated your understanding of UDL?

CHYNEL:

Well I just remember how nervous we all were in those first few days, you know there was so much information to take in and there was a lot of realization within the initial few sessions that UDL was going to be something completely different to what we had all experienced before. And we were listening and engaging with the days content of the course that we were crafting but I remember at 1 point feeling really overwhelmed Loui, about processing all that new learning, and shortly after Liz Hartman who was one of the visiting professors from Boston offered a different way to engage with the content. So, rather than watching a video. She suggested that we might like to read an article and move outside to a different area just outside the teacher's room to engage, and I remember nervously hopping up and down on the seat you know deciding what to do and looking around to see what everybody else was going to do, and Liz noticed and she gently encouraged that I take the choice and I did. And as I sat outside listening to the article then through a screen reader and getting a summary of the information through an AI chatbot I realized I was in the right place and that UDL was going to change me as a person. And I was going to have to let go of what I previously thought to be true about teaching and embrace something that I think has turned out to be the most important personal and professional journey I've taken in my career so far.

LOUI:

Very powerful, very powerful. Colin, what was yours?

COLIN:

Yeah, it was., it's funny that it's myself and Chynel that have ended up on this podcast when it was both myself and myself and Chynel were the only two that left the room to read that article. It was an aha moment I think for both of us. When we saw that this wasn't this wasn't just something that was you know going to be talked about. This was something that is that was being put into practice, put into action. But it's funny Loui, since we've spoken last, my aha moment kind of I suppose has changed. So a couple of

weeks ago, myself, Chynel and all the the other ten people on the course, visited Lasalle University just outside of Boston for two weeks we visited schools in the local area. We attended lectures of Amy Maynard and Liz Hartmann and the whole experience was enlightening and just wonderful. With a wonderful group of people. But what I realized in Boston and I suppose coming to the end of the course and all that we'd engaged with UDL, was what UDL had done was UDL has given me confidence in my own skin, confidence in my teaching, confidence in my own pedagogy, confidence, most importantly, for me my own leadership skills because that's something that I don't feel was there beforehand. So of all the things I've done no course, and no framework has ever given me that strength and that enlightenment. I'm no longer on the periphery or in left field. There was a ball analogy we looked at it in Maynooth, where you aimed the ball, and the professionals aimed the ball and pin towards the two and the seven, or whatever the ones on the edge are, but it catches everything in the middle and that struck me in Maynooth was something that I am that was very powerful for my students and I kind of always thought I was just one of the pins in the middle.

LOUI:

Yeah.

COLIN:

But what UDL shows me is that we all need to be brought in from the periphery. We all have certain ways that we need to learn, and want to learn. So I thought I was in the middle, I'm not, I'm on the periphery and we need to bring everybody in. I think UDL has done that for me, it's given me strength.

LOUI:

Beautiful. So here's two takeaways that I just got from your responses so, like Chynel you had that experience of going outside and having an article using the screen reader, using the AI chatbot, just the fact of of shifting your context. But what I adore about your reflection and your movement forward is you didn't say, oh, but because I'm an adult, I have those options. I can't give those options to my learners. You have fully adopted UDL on behalf of your learners and have said, no I need to give everyone these opportunities so they can shine as the learner, who they are, and provide all of these different ways to come at learning, and that's a true adoption of UDL. It's true adoption. Then Colin, what you were just talking about of that shift from seeing yourself as possibly formerly, oh I was part of that average. I was part of those middle pins, but saying no, everybody, every single one of us works along that periphery, and even CAST has shifted their language because we used to talk about you know learners in the margins. But no, we're all, we all exist in those margins it depends on the context. That's what variability is. That's why we all need to adopt it. But then also what you were

saying Colin, is that you have gained your own confidence in your own pedagogy and again that is an outcome that I so desire every educator to have as they're growing alongside and with Universal Design for Learning because people are like oh when do I know I've really applied the guidelines? Well, it's upon that self-reflection and when you reach these points of having that confidence in your pedagogy have that confidence and saying I'm going to try these options with my learners, having the confidence to reflect and go whoops didn't work. We're gonna try again, something else later. That's when you know you have walked into the melee of UDL. So this has been beautiful. Thank you so much.

COLIN:

It's been a pleasure, Loui. Thank you for having us.

CHYNEL:

Louie, you're very welcome. Thank you so much for having us on your podcast today.

LOUI:

Oh you're so welcome. You're so 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.