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 Elaina Fennell a K-12 program implementation specialist in Newfoundland and Labrador, Canada. Elaina is going to talk about her own shift in how she delivers professional development. Welcome, Elaina!

ELAINA:
Hello! I am so excited to be here today, Loui. Thank you so much for taking time to speak with me.

LOUI:
Oh my gosh. You're so welcome. Thank you so much for taking time to be here and talk with me. So what I'd love for you to do first, is to describe the roles you've had in education and the role you have now.

ELAINA:
All right, so this is year nineteen for me in education. I have taught all grades from Kindergarten right to grade 12, with the exception of high school math and science. So I was a classroom teacher for about 12 years, an administrator, so an assistant principal, and a principal for a total of 3 years, and this is my fourth year as a program implementation specialist.

LOUI:
Wow. Okay, you think you've got everything. That's awesome. That's awesome and I'm betting that has a lot of influence on your lens to UDL all those different experiences that's awesome. So okay, within that role, a program implementation specialist, one of the things you do is deliver professional development, and there are lots of people around the world that do just that. They deliver professional development, and I think you've had a takeaway though that if applied by everyone, would dramatically shift PD and improve PD all over the world.

ELAINA:
Absolutely so thanks for that. So yeah, a large part of my role in what I do is to work alongside of teachers and schools to support them with anything really related to policy, policy development, curriculum, teaching learning, assessment as it relates to their own professional learning and doing. And for me, this can look a little different depending on what is needed, so sometimes I work one-on-one with a teacher. Sometimes it could be in a small group such as like in a cohort type of setting. Sometimes it's school-based, so I could do a professional learning session with a whole school or could be a larger group. For example, we do a lot of virtual professional learning and sometimes that could be province-wide or it could be just a large group of teachers who are interested in that particular learning topic. So to give you a little background on the shift in my own thinking, which has led to major changes in my practice. I

want to share a little bit about my learning journey, the mistakes that I have made, and how I used those mistakes to be in the place I am. And I've always told my learners that it's from the mistakes we make that we learn the most. So, I'm going to take that and give myself a little bit of grace with this. So, I've been learning about UDL for the last maybe five or six years, you know, how really to implement Universal Design for Learning in my own practice. And then how best to help the teachers and the schools that I support to do that themselves in their classrooms. And it was during this time that our province actually introduced a new policy called responsive teaching and learning. Which named UDL as one of the frameworks to work within to be responsive to all learners in our classrooms. So UDL, to my delight, over the last few years has really been gaining traction in our province. So as I began learning more about Universal Design for Learning, I recognized the importance of my own mindset and my own beliefs, and how what I believe really aligns and connects to what we do. And Loui, I want to give you a huge shout-out because your work around the UDL gears and that analogy, have really shaped and shifted my thinking about UDL implementation. And it's something that I use when I work with teachers to show that UDL is so much more than the guidelines. That you know, when we have all of those 4 pieces coming together to connect, that's really when we can start seeing the magic happen. So, when I think about my own core beliefs around learning and around UDL, the most important pieces for me is that learner variability piece. You know, and understanding that while we are all different that depending on the context, depending on the situation, can really mean differences for how learners understand and learn. And the belief that all learners can learn and achieve high expectations, if the right learning conditions are created. I'm a fan of John Hattie's work, around effect size and you know, I really believe that you know teacher efficacy is vital for student learning. So when I start thinking about my work around helping, you know, teachers, you know shift their practice, and you know, maybe tighten up some things, that's kind of where I would begin. I would begin the conversations around learner variability, and really trying to help, you know, start seeing that all learners in your class can learn, and you know when we really get those learning conditions created in a way that makes learning accessible to all by removing those barriers. So, this is where it gets kind of, I don't want to say funny but ironic, because somewhere along the line I forgot those things when I was designing learning for my teachers. And when I reflect now on some of the first learning opportunities and sessions that I did with teachers, I realize now that I firmly believe that all students in our classrooms can learn, if barriers were removed. If we created those conditions, but my practices and the things I was doing with the adult learners, I see now they weren't really aligned to that belief. So, when I think about how I, in the beginning, how I started designing the learning, I found myself, I was the one setting the learning goals for the sessions, thinking about what I wanted to achieve in that time. I found myself speaking a lot, talking a lot, presenting. I guess disseminating information. I was the one doing, and I was the one I guess doing the thinking in those sessions. So you know, when I think about it now and I can kind of cringe, it really was a one-size-fits-all kind of session, and I really don't like that thinking. I don't like that. But here we are so, I thought I was doing okay because I was embedding choices within those sessions. I would, you know, I had beautiful choice boards created, you know, giving the teachers opportunity to go off and read an article, or listen to a podcast or have a chat with their colleagues. But now, when I reflect on it I wonder if the choices I were given was actually meaningful and relevant to the learning that was intended. I walk away from those sessions not feeling really good about it.

Wondering what was going on, what was happening, and I wasn't really considering myself as what I was doing to create the learning, to create those conditions. And I would pretty much pass it off and put the responsibility back on the learners, or the, the lack thereof of the learning that was happening. So I'm an avid gardener. I love growing my own vegetables. I have a greenhouse. So it wasn't until one day I was in my greenhouse that I had this moment. So I was I went in the greenhouse to water out my my pepper and tomato plants, and everything was growing beautifully, and I noticed there was a little tiny green pepper plant in the corner of the greenhouse. And it wasn't growing as well as the rest. I looked around and I'm thinking, like what is happening, what is wrong with this green pepper plant? And then it hit me. It wasn't the green pepper plant. It was the conditions that I was creating for that plant that was inhibiting the growth. It was in a small pot in the corner. It wasn't as warm, and then I realized then the problem of what I was doing in these sessions. That I was the creator and the designer of the learning and I wasn't creating the optimal learning conditions for the people that I was basically responsible for. So I remember running back to my house and opening up my laptop and going back through some of the sessions that I had created, and with a more critical lens. Through the lens of me being responsible for creating those conditions. And I started seeing ways that I could improve. I realized the bias in my own thinking, I guess. And it was that moment then that I really started shifting my thinking and believing that while I would speak and talk to the teachers I work with, to think about the fact that all students in their classroom can learn. I had to make that shift in my thinking that all the teachers that I work with, they were my class. That I believe that all of those people could learn and that I had to find ways to remove barriers for them to do that. Once I realized that it was me who was basically in control of creating those conditions, like I said, I really started to take a more of a critical look at what I was doing. So I realized I had a lot of unlearning because I realized what I was doing, was again, disseminating information. I was creating passive learners in my spaces. And I needed to change that. I knew with everything that I had been learning about Universal Design for Learning and what I believed, I really had to shift my thinking am I doing, to, you know, make things better. So I went back to the UDL guidelines to really help me find the areas that I needed to improve, and I realized the engagement principle was kind of where I had to focus a little more on. And then I use the UDL Gears as well to really dig into the skills that I thought that I needed to work on, and that's kind of where I focused. I recognized pretty quickly, that some of the practices that I was using within the professional learning sessions, that I was actually creating barriers instead of removing them. So one of the other pieces to, when I really sat down with myself, I remember having a self-talk. I really wanted to look at the whole piece of how I worked with teachers, of how I showed up in those spaces. And looked at every part of how I designed and created the learning, like from the setup of the room to the body language I used, to the medium that I actually used to present, you know I noticed some of my slides were really, there's a lot of things that wasn't necessary, you know, so to speak. And even like how I organized the day, and the session, and the amount of time I talked I knew I needed to change. So, again, you know, I used the advice that I would tell my own teachers. Start small. Choose 1 thing, you know, the plus one approach. What's something that I was okay with taking away, and what's something that I wanted to to try. And I gave myself a lot of grace. So what I noticed when I started making some small changes is that the decisions became more intentional. So when I started to look at how I was designing the learning, I was more intentional about being present in the space. So at the

beginning of the sessions, if it was a school-based professional learning day, I would be present in the staff room. I would make sure that I'm chatting with teachers first. Building those relationships became really important. If I was doing some work with teachers in their classrooms, I would go a day or 2 before to meet the students, capture some moments that you know, were really good, and I would highlight those things as I would start working with teachers. Highlighting all the really great things they were already doing. And trying to help connect what they were already doing with the UDL guidelines, with the practices, and with some of the things that we were going to work on. So that really seemed to help. The other thing. and I guess you know again, those small changes, the other thing I really wanted to try was to include more teacher voice in the sessions because I was creating the learning for them. It's not about me. It's about me letting that control go, and having them see themselves in those learning spaces. So sometimes it's really hard for me to visit the schools, and visit the classrooms that I'm going to be working in, so one of the strategies that I'm using now is I send out what we call a feed-forward survey. So before the learning session takes place, I send it a Google form with just some simple questions asking about what is it that you would like to learn. What are some things that are tricky for you right now? What are your learning preferences? What are some things you really don't like about full-day professional learning days in your school? To get as much information from the learners so that I could take that and then co-create, I guess in a way, the goals for the session and really try and include as much of their feed-forward in the session. But on the side of that, while I'm doing the sessions, while I'm working with these teachers, I've started being more intentional about sharing with them that I have used their voice. I have used their suggestions, as I've been designing and creating the day for them. And seeing that they really appreciate that. And again, it's you know, they see themselves in that day versus me creating the day for them. Another piece that I think has really changed in the way that I work with teachers, is while for me to create the learning I do have to create some of the learning goals to keep me focused, to make sure that I'm hitting on what I need to hit on. I always create space at the beginning of the day, or at the beginning of the work with teachers, so that they can really reflect and think about where they are with this particular learning goal, and then create their own personalized learning goal for the day. And then I ask them to keep me accountable as I go through it today to make sure that I am providing the options and opportunities for them to work through their own personalized learning goal. And then it becomes their own. Then, you know, they're in control of what that day looks like so when I give them time to collaborate, to reflect, to process, and you know, I'm providing options in how to do that, then they get to choose what they need at that time. And thinking about their own learning to make it meaningful for them. Yeah, that's been really good with, I guess, some of the changes that I've made. The one piece that is the hardest for me, I guess, in shifting practice, is limiting the amount of time I speak or I present. And I've kind of have like an an unwritten rule for every 15 minutes that I present or that I speak in the session, that I want to give the learners in the space at least that amount of time again, to you know, to reflect, to process, to doodle, to do whatever they need to do to try and understand, to comprehend, whether that's to collaborate with their partners or maybe there's even something an email or something that they have to do right now that's creating a distraction for them in that learning space. So again, it's, you know, those small simple changes that has made such a huge impact on the learning that I'm able to facilitate for some of those teachers.

LOUI:
Well Elaina, you have given us just a wonderful rich story, and I really appreciate you going through and talking about how you started. You definitely have a core belief with UDL. You align with it, but we all have the best intentions and that you have also shared that aha that you had within your own am really going to speak to the variability of my adult learners then I need to make some shifts, and then that powerful activity that you did that we know is so strong within a cycle, of going back and not just reflecting but actively making some changes and some shifts. And then like you said, just saying okay where am I just going to start? I'm not going to try to go for this whole thing at once I'm going to start with the the plus one, the 1 thing, and I'm going to build this. Then I also point you know getting the voice of the learners beforehand. That feed-forward survey. Beautiful. Wonderful. And I also agree with you that when we articulate to our learners, I've made this design based on what you gave to me and you know here are some ways. That's just it's, there's so many wonderful nuggets in here for people to take away with them. I just really appreciate this so much. We have definitely, we've gone beyond our 15 minutes. That's fine because I think there's such rich, wonderful things in here. So thank you, so much for all of this.

ELAINA:
Oh, was absolutely my pleasure and hopefully you know there may be some things that, like I said, other people can take away and you know when I work with my teachers, I keep telling them, you know, just try one thing and see how see what happens.

LOUI:
Yeah.

ELAINA:
So, you know, me modeling that too is really important. Sometimes we have to take our own advice.

LOUI:
Yeah, exactly. Exactly, exactly! Ah, well thank you so much for this Elaina, and I hope you have a wonderful rest of your day.

ELAINA:
Thank you so much, Loui!

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 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.