

UDL in 15 Minutes
With Patrick McGrath
Episode 123 - 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 Patrick McGrath, a Head of Education at Texthelp specifically focused on Europe, Middle East, and East Africa. Patrick and I are going to discuss the question, can we grow UDL organically? Welcome Patrick!

PATRICK:

Hey, Loui. Thanks for your lovely warm welcome there. I'm very, very excited to be on your podcast today. Thanks for having me.

LOUI:

Oh, thank you so much. And it was great to meet you in person a few months ago, and then for you to say yes. So thank you, thank you so much. I'd love for you to start by giving the audience a brief introduction about yourself, so what's your background and education with UDL?

PATRICK:

Yeah, so I have been focused very much on what I suppose we used to call educational technology, but for me, it's just technology. Assistive technology, Ed tech. All of those words, but technology for education and outcomes, I supposed, for nearly 20 years now. The last, I suppose, seven years of that have been with the company you mentioned, which was Texthelp. And I suppose seven years ago that was my first opening to UDL, and trying to understand UDL and where it might fit. And I know you have a global listener base, but I think it's really important to stress that from a UDL perspective, it was always seen very much by us Europeans here, as a very sort of North America-centric framework or structure, and not something that many of our teachers or educators have talked about, or had even implemented, of course, here on this side of the Atlantic. So seven years ago, I started really on the UDL path of trying to understand how we can talk about UDL specifically for me with my expertise through the lens of technology. And for me, that's really driven by my very sort of firm commitment through those 20 years of technology of inclusion in the widest sense of the word. How can we make sure we include every single pupil or student? Not just those pupils who we can identify with a specific need, but those pupils that maybe fly a little bit under the radar, and UDL for me, was really that almost that perfect encapsulation of what we could do in terms of a framework that wasn't prescriptive. And

since then, I've been leading sessions. Fortunately enough to do those globally. Workshops, hands-on and in-person. I suppose really just evangelizing about UDL. Bringing it to as many people as they can across the UK and Europe and showing them that removal of barriers, through UDL, can be a very, very powerful thing in their classrooms.

LOUI:

That's wonderful. Two things that stood out for me. Not prescriptive. Yes, so on the same plane with you, and so as everybody else who truly understands UDL. So it's not prescriptive, it's giving us all of these opportunities. But then I also loved your word of evangelizing. (laughing) We are there together too.

PATRICK:

I think it's really important, Loui, you know because I think the challenge in education, particularly for people like me, whose job has been for so long to go around and talk to people about what they could or should or may want to implement in their classroom is, you can fall into that acronym land of. And then you get the rolling eye emoji equivalent, that a room where people go, here's another new thing...

LOUI:

Yup.

PATRICK:

And I've always been very clear to stress that UDL is a framework, it's not prescriptive, it's not restrictive. It's a new way that we need to be thinking of. And of course, we all know about the checkpoints and the balances on everything that we have within the wonderful framework, but it is that, and I think that's very important, because a lot of people think you're bringing them something brand new, and you're asking them to change fundamentally everything that they do in the classroom, and of course, you and I both know that's not it.

LOUI

Ya, exactly. It's providing that safe safe space and safe understanding of recognizing, oh, oh, here's what I'm doing that links and then oh, here are a few things I can start with that align with the framework, but make everything so much better for so many more students.

PATRICK:

And also, I suppose, and I guess we're going to touch upon it later, but recognizing that good practice that you're already doing that aligns or fits within the framework, and

building on top of that, as well, I think is a really important step. There are things that we commit to as educators, things that we do on a daily basis, that actually are clearly part of the UDL framework and how we approach our learners. And so I think that's important to always recognize through these workshops, these events that I speak at.

LOUI

Yeah, I absolutely, absolutely agree. Well, we are focusing on that big question of, can we grow UDL organically? But of course, we have such a short amount of time. So we're going to try this, we're gonna do our best. But this question stems from work that you did, and you've done with a group of schools who adopted one-to-one which for those who aren't familiar with the term, each learner has a piece of technology hardware that they're using in the classroom. But they did not partner that, their one-to-one adoption, with UDL in the beginning. They did though, eventually add it in and I know there's more to that story. So that's where we'll get started. So sharing some of that getting it set up.

PATRICK:

Yeah, and I suppose that as a background or to that because again, I know you have a global audience Loui, but in the UK, and I talk specifically about England. So the bit in the middle, for those of you looking at a map, we talk about England. We have a system of schools there, which are part of what we call Multi-Academy Trust. And if you're listening from North America, that basically like a very, it can be a very large school district equivalent or a very small one. In this case, district schools, seven schools. They're all primary and they are called the LEO Academy Trust. And one of the things they did just pre-COVID, so just in 2019, was make a commitment to this one-to-one device roll-out that you talked about Loui. Which effectively was a Chromebook for every child, operators of primary and a tablet device at the very youngest ages. And it was very much a technological commitment to the school to look at digital skills and future learning. What wasn't, and they'll very readily admit this back in the day, it wasn't a view on how can we make our classrooms more inclusive. It wasn't a view on special education needs or SEM as we would talk about here, and it most definitely wasn't a view on UDL. It was about technology in the hands of learners, and improving the general, I suppose, attainment, outcomes, or skills for those pupils across primary. And so that is really four years old up until 10 or 11. And so we embarked on a journey with them. They adopted some of the Texthelp tools throughout that, as a way to leverage some of those digital devices. And sort of post COVID as we kind of got enveloped in technology for technology's sake almost. It was a means to an end. We needed to have that in place. Things like Google Classroom started to get embedded. It was very clear that whenever schools came back just after that, that they wanted to formalize what

they were doing and they embarked on, in fact a two year longitudinal study and impartial study with an academic at Dr Fiona Aubrey-Smith and we were fortunate to be involved in that. And what happened throughout that time, as we observed throughout this sort of 2 and a half years of that project, that was, it didn't start as a UDL piece at all, and it definitely didn't start out with an inclusion piece in our schools, our definition of the word. But it started to move, and we started to see an involvement in the classroom and the approaches that the teachers were taking, that made the classrooms ultimately, far more inclusive. Ultimately removed an awful lot of barriers through technology and other things which maybe we'll come to. But also things like at the end of the project, the register of special education needs that that Trust of seven schools went down by a factor of a third in the timeframe, where they adopted these strategies. And the need for what we call LSAs, Learning Support Assessments in the classroom, also went down by the same level. And what it's got down to is with effectively embedding UDL across that period of time, and more inclusive practice, you're now in one of those wonderful situations Loui, that you went to a classroom, in any classroom, in any of those schools, and it is absolutely impossible to identify a child, a pupil, or student with any specific learning needs, or any part of the special education needs register, because kids there have ultimately the opportunities to use the tools that benefit them. They have a significant amount of barriers removed in their day-to-day learning. And it's very much focused on pedagogy. So whilst it didn't start back in 2019, as we're going to implement UDL, it very much got to a point through the strategies that were put in place to drive inclusive practice, that actually it's a really, really, really fine example of how UDL is now put in place. And to the point where, in the early days, we wouldn't necessarily look at the CAST website, we wouldn't look through the UDL guidelines, but working through on professional development and the identification of removal of barriers and moving from sort of that differentiation post-learning approach to removal of barriers, learning design at the start, that the checkpoints and the guidelines, became a very, very important part of both professional development and the culture within the Trust, as to how teachers would actually approach their design for learning. And it was really, really fascinating to see because I think as you and I have talked, we talk a lot about sort of not necessarily using these words, but deliberate implementation of UDL, and a very defined strategy to get our teachers, and our colleagues, and our wider stakeholders in our school systems on board. And that can be a challenge when we're the person driving that, but this happened incredibly organically for lots and lots of different reasons.

LOUI

Yeah. So I'm guessing that people who are listening to this, and I get a mix of listeners based on the feedback, and so some people that are really deep users of the framework, and then of course, those who are just brand new to this, but I think a

question that's going to be popping up for everybody is, was there a sense, was there a feel, for when you actually, you and others, actually first uttered the phrase Universal Design for Learning? Because like you just explained, they were already starting to think about and using strategies that drove inclusive practices. They were already moving into that mindset of removing barriers from the beginning and they've started down that path. But at some point, Universal Design for Learning was introduced. Was there a certain feel? Was there an assessment of what teachers were doing because you had this wonderful collegial partnership with a researcher? How did that work?

PATRICK:

Yeah, and Loui, I actually remember the day that happened.

LOUI:

Oh!

PATRICK:

It was that sort of specific and what had actually happened is, I had been working with the Trust for awhile, and I noticed lots of really good things happen, which were quite subtle, but for example, how they prepare their space. So if you think of a set of schools that go one-to-one, everybody has a device. Ok, all good. But they had put simple things in place where they said, actually, every child has a device, but every child now needs to have access to their own individual pair of headphones. And they also said every child also needs to have access to a stylus within that. And those are very interesting, tiny, subtle changes. But what was clear to me when we talked to them was, that was almost unintentionally removing barriers because they said, we want choice, if you want to listen to your text read aloud, you can pop your headphones on, everybody's got a pair of headphones. Nobody's gonna make a difference, or a child may use headphones in different ways. Same with a stylus. Some pupils will want to write in a journal or workbook. Other pupils want to write on screen. Other pupils want to use their fingers. Other pupils will want to type, but the choice was ultimately there. And I saw the same through their approach to the tools that they would use. So they might have a modeled piece of learning at the front, but they had a very, very flexible approach to the types of resources that pupils could get access to. And also the types of assessment pieces that pupils could follow through to. You know, complete a rap, through to, type up a document, through to complete a video, but ultimately the choice for those younger pupils was that on their own, how they wanted to interact with their learning. And I remember getting them the leadership team on a podcast, not dissimilar to this Loui, and talking them through those various steps that in their head were revolving around inclusion. And I asked them how they looked at the UDL framework. And at that point, they actually hadn't. They'd come across it, but they hadn't looked at

it. And we're able to go through each of the steps that they've done within the classroom environment, and actually align it perfectly with so many, and actually those three core boxes that we all know of UDL, those multiple means areas. And we were able to literally come out of that podcast on our end, and understand that there was actually a lot of good UDL practice was going on, it just wasn't formally tied to the guidelines and the structure. And there was a pivotal point for them to recognize that they were doing things well, and it had been unintentional and organic, but now was the time to step in and announce to the world that they were going to pursue UDL model within those schools, and PD changed because of it. The approach to learning, the attendance at conferences, the interface with people like yourself, and Google educators doing wonderful things with UDL. And it changed quite dramatically when they literally put a label on it. You know, you and I Loui, we don't like labels on a lot of things. This was the one thing where there was a formal approach to making this even better, and building on the good practice.

LOUI

Yeah, I absolutely agree. And yes, you and I don't want to put the labels on but this is the good label. Yeah, one of the phrases that you used, their work was revolving around inclusion and I think that when that is the heart, when that's the center, that we can grow UDL organically. So I love that they shifted. They were working with the one-to-one, which we know can be really valuable for our learners. We know that those can be helpful tools, and partnering that up with the right software. But then of course, we have to partner that up with the right pedagogy, and we have to partner that up with the right mindset, and revolving around inclusion was just a beautiful partnership or triangulation of those three things and then I can see how that created that pathway to UDL.

PATRICK;

Yeah, I think the important milestone for them, and i've seen it with many others as I'm sure you have too Loui, in your great work. Is that when you kind of try and help people redefine what inclusion is, too often in workshops and events, I talk about inclusion, and it's seen as inclusion is somebody else's role. That is for a subset of children that I work with, and all of us that practice UDL, that we balk against that, and push back against it, but I think one of the most important things we can do is try and redefine, for those schools that may be on the cusp of UDL, or in the middle of UDL, or I can unintentionally rolling out UDL organically, is redefining what inclusion actually is. It's not about just that subset of learners that you particularly focused on. In the past, let's face it, providing accommodations to. It's about removing barriers for everybody, and I understand I'm preaching to the converted, for want of a better phrase, Loui. But I think it's really important that in our work, you talked about evangelizing, I'm very, very passionate about UDL, but inclusion is what underpins that passion about UDL. And I

think you need, we all need to be talking about inclusion in the widest possible sense because it does have to be everyone's responsibility, and not fall into the trap of it's only a subset of people have to embrace UDL, or embrace inclusion, or embrace special educational needs and diversity in our classrooms. And that's a real driver. And I think that's what happened, certainly in this Trust, is eventually they came to the conclusion that inclusion was genuinely about all, and not simply including the marginalized or those who are struggling with a specific need.

LOUI:

Absolutely. That's a beautiful shift. And it's the shift that we want more and more people to make. Patrick, thank you so much. Our 15 minutes have absolutely flown by. We knew they would. And I think this has been such a rich conversation and big takeaways for people, but here at the end landing here, and as you said, redefining inclusion. Helping people understand that inclusion is including all learners, and that's because we're all variable. It's because all learners are variable learners, and everybody needs those opportunities for that flexibility so they can grow. Patrick, thank you so so very much. You've been so kind throughout the entire podcast. Thank you for sharing your wisdom and your experiences, and I can't wait to talk to you again sometime.

PATRICK:

Thanks, Loui. Appreciate the opportunity.

LOUI:

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.udlapproach.com/podcasts And finally, if you have a story to share about UDL implementation for UDL in 15 Minutes, you can contact me through the www.udlapproach.com And thanks to everyone for your work in revolutionizing education through UDL, and making it our goal to develop expert learners.