

UDL in 15 Minutes
With Martha Dobboh
Episode 125 - 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 Martha Dobboh, a lecturer at the University of Liberia in Monrovia, Liberia, and is part of the USAID-TESTS Activity. Martha is going to talk about how she has used UDL to turn her teacher training courses into vibrant learning environments where all of her learners thrive. Welcome, Martha!

MARTHA:

Thank you, Loui.

LOUI:

You're welcome. So how did you learn about UDL? Did the opportunity come to you or did you seek out UDL? Tell us that story.

MARTHA:

All right. I learned about UDL through the TESTS program. The University of Liberia is one of the universities that TESTS is working with. I learned about UDL the first time we attended the TESTS training and my name was sent in to lecture UDL. So we went through the training and the aspect of UDL was introduced. And that's how we started the process. We learned so much about it, and we got to know that it is basically teaching strategies that you use to include all learners in the classroom.

LOUI:

Wonderful. So I understand that you teach a three credit freshmen level course on UDL for pre-service teachers at two universities. And I also understand that it's one of the most popular courses. And then I also understand that these courses have a significant number of students. So with all of that complexity, what are some of your first steps that you took with UDL in your own design?

MARTHA:

Well, the first time that I taught with UDL in my own design is to include everybody in my classroom. And that is not only to include everybody in the classroom, but making sure that everybody participates and everyone benefits from the lesson. So there are a lot of strategies where you talk about UDL, but one of the strategies that I really use is the

small group discussion, and also the think-pair-share. Most especially if I have large students in the classrooms, if I have overcrowded classes, I use that method. So there are a lot of strategies, but I use those two very, very well.

LOUI:

When did you know that you were going to keep learning about and applying UDL? So were there differences that you saw in your learners?

MARTHA:

Well, when I started applying UDL strategies, I saw a lot of difference in my learners. Those learners that were sure, that could not express themselves because one of the UDL strategy is to do the group presentation after you have worked in the small groups. You come up as a group to present. It took away that shyness from people. So another thing that I noticed in my student is UDL promotes diversity because you have students working in group from different background, people with learning disability, people with visual impairment, people who are normal. They are all working together, and you found out that it promotes a diversity and they work together. So people who had issues with people who have some kind of disability because of UDL, they understand that everyone is important and when it comes to learning, everyone can learn. So they accept the others as they are and they work together in groups.

LOUI:

So did you have students who had never worked with a person who has a disability or were all of your students familiar with partnering with other learners who may or may not have a disability?

MARTHA:

I had a student who said it was her first time to work with somebody who has disability and it is because of the UDL strategy that I used, pairing people into groups, gave her that opportunity. All along, she said, she has seen people who have some kind of disability as abnormal people. So she didn't want to associate with them. But when she came to my class and she had the opportunity to work in group, she was in that group with a person who has visual impairment. And so from the interaction, she was like, "Oh, I judged these people differently, and my perception about people with disability was wrong." That they are normal people because of the interactions in the relationship she built with that student. So her perception changed and then she worked with that student and they became friends beyond just the classroom.

LOUI:

That's lovely. So as we've said, all of your learners are in teacher training, but not all of them have been teachers before. So how do you introduce UDL to your learners?

MARTHA:

So UDL has three principles. Three basic principles. You have the multiple means of engagement, you have the multiple means of representation, and you have the multiple means of action and expression. I introduce UDL to my students, beginning with the engagement where I motivate students to learn. And I create the opportunity that they participate in the lesson themselves. They take charge of the learning process. So even if you have not taught before, the way I teach my classes using the UDL strategy, engaging students, students driving their own learning activities, it gives them a broader picture of how a teacher should teach a class. So when it comes to multiple means of representation, which is the second principle of UDL, it helps them represent their knowledge in different ways. So, it also helps teachers represent their content in different ways because you take into consideration that there are different kinds of learners in your classroom. So you take into consideration the auditory learners. You take into consideration the visual learners where you come with flashcards, you come with pictures, and you come with videos. If possible, you come with audio and a lot of different things, and when it comes to the action and expression, students have choices to express their responses after they have interacted and worked in group, they have choices to express their responses. So by the time students pass through all of these things and the teachers who are preparing to go to the classroom, even if they have not taught before, it gives them that courage that they can do the same with other students.

LOUI:

Yeah. So in what ways do you think UDL can change the way teaching is done in Liberia, in basic education in the K to graduation classrooms? How do you think UDL can change the way that teaching is done?

MARTHA:

UDL can change the way that teaching is done in many different ways. For example, UDL can change the traditional way that people use where teachers come to the classroom and he or she alone, they do the presentation of the lesson, they explain the lesson, and the students are there memorizing the lesson. It's like a good learning count of teaching. But UDL is going to change that way because UDL does not limit the teacher to the classroom as being the boss of the class. But it provides the opportunity that the students themselves take charge of the learning process, they participate in the learning process. So UDL is going to take away that traditional method of teaching where the teacher sticks to the blackboard, the teacher does not use instructional materials or local materials to teach, The teachers do not give students opportunity to

express themselves, but UDL is going to provide that avenue. UDL is going to help the teacher plan the lesson well, that will include the students. UDL is also going to help the teacher use different strategies in class that will incorporate the students and help the student to lead their own learning process. UDL is going to remind the teacher that you cannot teach the lesson without teaching it, so you need instructional materials that will help the students understand the lesson. UDL is also going to remind the teacher that there are different kinds of learners in your class, so you have to take into consideration different methods of teaching to include the people who learn by sight, the visual learners, the auditory learners, the kinesthetic learners, those who learn by just reading and writing, so you have to use different strategies. Another way that UDL is going to change the education system in Liberia is the aspect of putting students in rows, like row one, row two. Most especially if you have large classroom, you notice that the people at the back, most often they are left behind. But what UDL does, it includes everybody. So for instance, if you have a larger classroom, you want to put the student in circle and then the teacher will see everyone. You also want to put the student in groups, smaller groups, that everyone will participate and the teacher will have the opportunity to interact with everyone. So that's another way UDL can change the way we teach in Liberia. Another way UDL can change the way we teach in Liberia is it promotes inclusivity. So you are not only focusing on students who you think do not have special needs or do not need help, but you are focusing on everybody. So you are focusing on students with disabilities, students without disabilities. You also focusing on planning individualized lesson that we give extra help to students who need it. UDL also promotes that. So UDL is going to help greatly in the teaching field when it comes to the way teachers teach in Liberia because that's one of the challenges we have, involving students within the lesson most often the teacher takes the lead and it is way better if the student gets involved, they better understand, they do not memorize but they are part of the process and they understand the lessons very well.

LOUI:

I have a lot of listeners from around the world. I'm sure that many of my listeners, but they don't even know what a classroom could look like in Liberia. Now, I know all classrooms are very, very different. So, I can't say what one classroom looks like in the US because they're all so, so very, very different. But you were just describing what we see around the world, which is some classrooms have just the teacher leading and talking, talking, talking, and the students are taking notes. What is one technique or one type of strategy that you tend to see that teachers start to use though, in Liberia? Is there one that seems to catch the attention of teachers so now they feel safer trying something else and then something else? Is there a starting strategy or a set of starting strategies that teachers like to try?

MARTHA:

Yes, what I do see quite recently, most teachers are trying the small group strategy and they are also trying the think-pair-share strategy.

LOUI:

Yeah, that makes sense. Because classrooms can be so large, I think, I mean it's possible for a classroom of kindergartners or first graders to maybe have 100 children. Is that true?

MARTHA:

Yes, yes. Even in some schools, it's more than that.

LOUI:

Yeah.

MARTHA:

It's more than 100. Even though the Minister of Education will say 30, at most 40, at most 30 students in the class, at most 25, but sometimes it goes up to 100 and even more. That's how the strategy of using UDL, using UDL in large classroom comes in. And with that huge number, the teacher alone cannot be speaking out to the students. There will be a lot of students who will miss out what the teacher is saying. So that's where the teacher can create a smaller groups that he or she can give their task and then while the teacher pass around to be the facilitator in guarding the process that way each and every student will fit in and participate in the lesson. But if the teacher is teaching one hundred students or more and they are alone it's really going to be difficult and the stress is going to be too much on the teachers. So they are trying to practice and try the idea of smaller groups, which is working. Like one of my teacher aspirant says he tried it because he's already teaching. He tried it in one of his classes and it worked very well. So he was really, really grateful that he had the opportunity to learn UDL in large classrooms. One of the strategy is using the small group method, which reduced stress on him, as he said.

LOUI:

Oh, that's so powerful. What I really appreciate about this conversation, Martha, is even at the beginning when you talked about UDL and a set of strategies, and the way I talk about UDL is it's, you know, it's a collection of practices, but also it's this framework that helps shift our attitudes. It helps shift our our behaviors as teachers so that we do include all of our learners, and we appreciate all of our learners, and we want to hear from all of our learners. And that's exactly what I hear you saying as you talk about your teaching the aspirate teachers and those who are already in the classroom. While they

are using these strategies, and that's true, they're also shifting their mindset and saying, "Oh wow, my students can do more. My students can actually have more voice. My students can actually show me more of what they know," and that's just so very, very exciting. And I want to thank you so much for sharing this story. And I want to wish you the best of luck with all you continue to do as a teacher leader and professor and wish you well. So thank you very much for being a guest on the podcast.

MARTHA:

Thank you, Loui. I really appreciate it. Thank you so much.

LOUI:

Ah, you're welcome. Thank you. 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 the 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 build learner agency.