Dan Schmidt Transcript

UDL in 15 Minutes

LOUI: Hello and welcome to 15 minutes where educators discuss their experiences with UDL. I'm Loui Lord Nelson, UDL author and leader. Today I'm talking with Dan Schmidt who teaches at Pretty Boy Elementary in Baltimore County Public Schools in Baltimore, Maryland. Today, Dan is going to share how the phrase, "Why not?" shifted his instruction in a way that it now encourages the growth of expert learners. Hi Dan, how are you?

DAN: I'm really well, Loui. How are you?

LOUI: I'm great, thank you very much, and thanks for coming on to the podcast.

DAN: Oh, it's my pleasure.

LOUI: Well, will you please share with us your teaching background to get us started?

DAN: Sure. I've been teaching 26 years. And the first two years were in Baltimore County. I was lucky enough after that year to get a job teaching in Switzerland for a year, where I taught first and second grades. Then I went back to Baltimore County and ended up the Pretty Boy, where I taught first grade for four to five years, third grade for several years, fourth grade for a few years and now I'm in my second year of teaching fifth grade.

LOUI: So you've been all over elementary, and to teach in Switzerland for a year! That's really cool.

[Over-talking]

DAN: Um-hm. That was great!

LOUI: Wow! All right, and you're also in a state that UDL is in the educational policy, but how has that impacted what you've learned about UDL, and how you've been supported on that journey, and who has helped support that implementation?

DAN: Well actually, I will say that the implementation, or not the implementation, but the thought or the idea for it started a long time ago and I'll get to that in a minute, but what really gave me the green light to go ahead with some of the UDL type ideas that I was thinking was a course that I took it Pretty Boy, led by my principal Nicki Norris and the STAT teacher Kathy Kelbaugh. Taking the course was really sort of a revelation and a green light to go ahead and implement some UDL type of ideas that I had in place or had been thinking about for a while.

LOUI: Okay. And can you help people understand what a stat teacher is?

DAN: They are a person who goes around the school. They don't have a classroom, but they support us with, for example, our STAT teacher handles Advanced Placement of students. She is a technology person. She, any sort of issues…

LOUI: Okay

DAN:… that we have technology wise, she will address it or if we have a need or have an idea, she'll help us to implement it.

LOUI: Okay, so really an all-round talent.

DAN: Yeah, she really very talented, too.

LOUI: That's wonderful! And then, since then she helps with people understanding Universal Design for Learning there at Pretty Boy.

DAN: Right, right.

LOUI: Fabulous! All right, let's just jump into your story because that, that whole point of you heard the phrase, "Why not?" and you heard it in such a way that made you kind of have your own little..

DAN: Mm-hm

LOUI:… "A-ha" moment so, share that!

DAN: Well actually, the first "why not" was my mother in a completely different context, but it got me thinking, you know that's kind of a good question to ask yourself because a lot of times adults will...if we're asked a question, and I asked my students about this yesterday, do parents say no right away to when you ask a question? And they're like, "yeah!" I said, "Well, I sort of retrained myself into thinking, rather than saying "no," that knee jerk reaction, "Why not?" So, what really happened with me is after teaching first grade for a while, and moving, as I said, to third grade. And I think part of the thinking was that as a first-grade teacher you can really break things down for students, and I had enough practice with that so when I went to third grade I, I was often given students who struggled to learn. So, as a result of that, a lot of times they would have me work with a resource teacher who went around to the school and was picking up best practices and the instructional assistants were doing the same thing. And there was this one particularly talented teacher who would come into my math class. And she would implement or use all these strategies and I would stand back and watch her and I think, wow, if this is working for students who are struggling, why not try it with the students who may not be struggling, but you never really know because they're not going to freely admit it so why not let everybody have access to the strategies? And so, at that

point, really the "Why not?" became my, my mantra for new ideas. I try to use it as sort of a growth mindset. Even student suggestions, you know, why not try it? And so, that's really where that, "Why not" sort of developed.

LOUI: It just opens this huge door of permissions, not just for you but for your learners, and I'm sure it effects your entire environment. It just changes that, that mindset.

DAN: I appreciate that. In fact, I have a couple girls who are coming to my class to decorate a door because I thought, "I'm a math teacher. Why does my classroom door not reflect that?" So, they… they'll ask me, they come during lunch, and they'll me if they can do something and I'm like, "Sure, why not! So, give it a try!" In fact, there's a poster sitting on the table in the back, in the back of my room, which hasn't been put up and I'm looking at it this morning thinking, "I wonder what that's going to turn out to look like?" But I'm gonna let them give it a try. And, and it really, it's their, you know, it's their classroom. I want them to make it look the way they, they think it should look.

LOUI: Yeah, absolutely. Well, if you're willing…

DAN: Sure!

LOUI: to take a picture of that.

DAN: The phrase is going to be "Math rocks!" So… [Laughter] And they know that I play the drums, not very well, but I do play the drums. So…

LOUI: Oh, I love that [over-talking]

DAN: …so, it's fun!

LOUI: That is! You had also shared a story about a student who had been reluctant at the beginning of the year and how this kind of "Why not?" touched into that bad experience. [over-talking]

DAN: Yea, this was sort of a, an extension of the UDL course, really making sure that all students have access to the curriculum, and there was a girl in my class last year. Last year was the first teacher I taught fifth grade. So, I'd had her the year before because I moved from fourth to fifth grade, and I knew that she was a student who struggled. And so, I made it my goal to get her to raise her hand every day, not by calling on her and surprising her just to set up the situation so she felt confident enough to raise her hand. And I always start the year and I did it last year and almost every year with, I kind of outlaw and discourage students, and I know they want to express how confident they are about something but they'll shout out, "Oh I get it!" or "That's easy!", or something like that, and I always ask the question, and this is of students who are struggling, all the way up to the advanced students who are working a grade level or two ahead of fifth grade, to raise their hand if they've ever been in a situation where they're sitting next to someone who says, "Oh, I get it!", or the person next one next to them, hand shoots up

in the air and they think to themselves, "Ooo. I don't get it." And I share with them that I was that student.

LOUI: Um-hm

DAN: I would sit there thinking… sometimes I'd raised my hand, just to make it look like I got it, but I really didn't. And it's really surprising because every hand in the room…

LOUI: Right!

DAN:… except for maybe a few go up in and say, "Yeah, I've been in that situation." So, a lot of times, I will preface a question with, "Don't raise your hand. Don't say I've got it. Don't say, express in any way, whether you get it or don't get it. What I want you to do is just think about the problem that's on the board or think about the question or your response to the question." And, and sometimes I'll just be quiet for a while, almost an awkward moment, but I want them to really have time to think. And then I'll say, "Don't raise your hand now. Turn and tell someone in the room sitting next to you, closely, preferably, what you think the answer is or how you would explain this." And then I give them time and usually when the talking starts to diminish it's my clue that it's time to move on. And that allows that student, and this particular student that I was talking about last year, giving her time to really think it through. And when she turned and talked to her partner, did her answer reflect what the other person was thinking? Did someone, the other person, have a completely different thought? And it really gives them reflection time. And then I'll say, "Okay. Raise your hand if you think you know the answer," and it was really neat because in the very beginning of the year her hand was very, very slowly go up, but toward the middle of the year it was going up with everybody else. And I would call on her, and it was really rewarding. But I think that, and I do that with the advanced students as well, because they admitted, you know, they're that student who doesn't get it sometimes. And so what I'm really trying to do is give everybody that, that full access to the curriculum and to me that full access is really what UDL is all about.

LOUI: Absolutely! And, that example just right in there. You've touched on in big, big ways, at least three of the guidelines. So, recruiting interests, so helping minimize those threats and distractions. So not only thinking about that one student but helping the other students recognize and realize, "Ah! You know what? I've been in this position, too!" which automatically was hooking in self-regulation in that sense, so the self-assessment and that reflection. And then this, this act of bringing in the think time and the wait time. Helping the students build in those executive functioning skills where they're really thinking about their strategizing. "What do I want to say?" instead of, "Oh! I've got the answer!" It just shows this fabulous, beautiful tight connection between those three!

DAN: I'm seeing it happen this year, too, with students who I didn't know as well this year because I didn't move up from fourth to fifth. But I did see in the beginning that they

were having a hard time. And I think they're becoming more comfortable. And the first class I have in the day, and I only teach math, I think that's kind of important to mention, that the first class of the day are my struggling students, but, and I've said it many times. In fact, recently I'm starting to think, boy, I really wish I could teach you guys all day long because they are such eager learners now. And I can't take full credit for that. I know that they have some wonderful teachers that they see throughout the day, but I just really love watching them thrive. And it's just, I'm going to miss them next year that is for sure.

LOUI: That's wonderful. And so, what you've also just talked about is the fact that you recognize they're eager learners. You recognize that there's other things that are impacting them, and that they're also, they exist within this entire environment of Pretty Boy.

DAN: It really is.

LOUI: And that's, and UDL is a big deal at Pretty Boy! And so you all have been encouraged and supported to learn about that framework. And to think about how it works within not just your lessons, but again, environment…

[over-talking]

DAN: Yeah, yeah.

LOUI: it's just such a huge and beautiful impact [overtalking]

DAN: Great environment to work in…

LOUI: Wonderful to see. So, is most of the training right now, it just kind of occurs naturally?

DAN: They're not always about UDL. But we also, in fact today, Wednesday, I am meeting with my grade level. And so, we have opportunities to see where it fits, maybe specifically with fifth grade. But when there are general professional development meetings, it is talked about and one of the things that I really like about Nikki's style is, she will mention, and I guess teachers do this too, you know you can point to a student who's doing what you really want the rest of the class to do. And so, she will bring up things that she's seeing around the school and mention them and in a way subtly encouraging people to adopt, or consider a UDL type activity. And so, she gets around to the classrooms, a lot.

LOUI: Ah, well that's, and again, it's a wonderful example of great leadership, and how she as a leader is helping to move forward the framework. Well, we've reached our 15 Minutes…

DAN: Alright, that was fast!

LOUI:… and I really appreciate this. Thank you so, so very much. For those of you who are listening to this podcast, you can find supplemental materials like an image montage with closed captioning, that montage with audio descriptions, a transcript, and associated blog at my website, www.theUDLapproach.com/media. 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.