

UDL in 15 Minutes
With Tom Tobin
Episode 130 - 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 Tom Tobin, a founding member of the University of Wisconsin Madison Center for Teaching, Learning and Mentoring, CTLM. He is also an internationally recognized scholar, author, and speaker on quality and technology-mediated education, especially copyright, teaching evaluation, academic integrity, and accessibility/Universal Design for Learning. Tom and I are going to discuss four knowledge gaps in the 3.0 guidelines that higher ed research has actually addressed. Welcome Tom.

TOM:

Thank you, Loui, for inviting me on the show. I'm glad to be talking with you and your listeners today.

LOUI:

Oh, you're so welcome. You've had such an illustrious career and I encourage everyone to go to your website, which is www.thomasjtobin.com, to get to know all of your wonderful dimensions. But what I'd like to know is when you first heard about UDL and how did it click for you? What was your aha that told you that this framework was something you'd like to work with?

TOM:

It's an excellent question. The origin story here. I have to go back to 1996. Listeners, you can't see me, but I'm a white man with gray hair and glasses and a huge black mustache. All that gray hair is earned. So when I was a young practitioner, I was working at a two-year college in Pennsylvania and they hired me to help them put together their very first online courses. So I helped them adopt Blackboard version 1.

LOUI:

Wow.

TOM:

Yes I am. Yes, I go back that far. But the reason I got involved with UDL at that point, UDL was very much a K12 thing and wasn't very common in higher education. I had a colleague named Marty and many of you have heard the story about Marty. He taught business courses, wanted to teach online, and he had gone blind in his 40s due to undiagnosed diabetes. I had a really hard time supporting Marty. We eventually hired some graduate students from a local university to be his eyes and ears and then we had to shut that down because as my vice president told me, we're violating FERPA privacy laws, seven different ways. As I was looking around to see who could help me in supporting Marty, I got connected to Norm Coombs at RIT [Rochester Institute of Technology], and Norm was blind since birth, an advocate for the rights of people with

disabilities. He told me about Universal Design for Learning. And once I found that framework, I thought, ooh, this could actually work. So that's where I first had that aha moment. Oh, this is how we can lower barriers, not just for people with disability barriers in their environments, but for lots of folks with work responsibilities, family and caregiving needs, people who just live far away from campus. So, you know, getting to the clock as the barrier in people's lives.

LOUI:

Yeah. I feel like everyone has their origin story about UDL, and we have that moment where we see the world open up in front of us and you say, oh my gosh, there's this possibility, there's this possibility, there's this possibility. And then we're, in a sense, infected, and we just really want to spread this around to everybody. Infected with UDL. That's a great origin story. And I've known the work of Norm Coombs, but I didn't know you had that connection. So that's fabulous. So, again, your work is over-the-top impressive. And so everybody who hasn't been to Tom's website yet, he is a Fulbright Scholar. And you've brought that background and knowledge to the guidelines. It seems that when you read through the updates, you identified some areas specific to higher education that are in the higher-ed research but didn't make it into the updates. And I'd like to go through those one at a time, but you choose where to start.

TOM:

Yeah. The thing that I want to share with everybody today, first, I want to give a lot of credit to the team of people who created the UDL 3.0 updates. They have moved Universal Design for Learning into a space where we're recognizing the intersectional identities that people bring into learning spaces. And we're starting to think about barriers in terms of not only the environment but also people's backgrounds, their level of preparation, their level of comfort or safety in learning spaces. So that's all been excellent, excellent work. And the gaps that I want to talk about, they have to do more with the fact that most of the folks on the 3.0 committee worked in either industry or in K12 education. So there's not a lot of higher education research in the new 3.0 guidelines or the considerations in there. So I want to talk about four things today. One is command environments. Also, talk about grassroots assumptions, talk about the difference between pedagogy and andragogy, and also talk about power dynamics and how they're different in K12 and higher ed. So where would you like to start?

LOUI:

Wow. I have the feeling the grassroots assumptions might be a nice place for people to start.

TOM:

Absolutely. If you can sort of imagine the white roots of a grass lawn shown in cross-section as they thread down through the dark soil. That's what we're talking about. The 3.0 version of the UDL guidelines continues to aim at what individual designers and practitioners should do. That's grassroots efforts. Now this aligns really well with K12 teachers who are most often expected to create their own lesson plans and to have end-to-end control over their teaching approaches, their methods, their interactions with

learners. In colleges and universities, though, and to a lesser extent even in some K12 settings, a number of the UDL considerations, they're either not achievable at individual scale or they're much more easily accomplished through collective effort led by top-down expectations and normings. For example, one of the newest considerations, 2.4 is address biases in the language use of language and symbols. That requires nearly perfect adherence in order to be meaningful. So rather than trust that people will design materials according to inclusive principles to address biases, this is more of an opportunity to find, adopt, and adapt standards for the use of language and symbols such as already exist in most of our college and university web content style guides and identity manuals. So listeners, the thing to do here in this knowledge gap is watch for the UDL considerations that talk about always situations and work to get your campus leaders to set those as collective expectations alongside your faculty senate or your employee union. There's a splendid educause review series on UDL campus mindset, and I'm working on a new book called UDL at Scale with examples of colleges and universities who've actually adopted UDL principles across their service, teaching, and administrative areas.

LOUI:

Nice. I have the feeling that the ideas around this, the grassroots assumptions, and getting those collective expectations set up would take some real careful conversations in the beginning and then helping people lead into those. Is that what you've seen?

TOM:

Yeah, absolutely. In fact, one of the things that drives that is one of the other knowledge gaps. So if we talk now about power dynamics of learning itself, right? They're different when the learners are children versus when they're adults. In K12 settings, teachers, staff, and administrators, they act in loco parentis, in place of parents, and they have care responsibilities toward learners that college and university instructors don't. That's another sort of power imbalance, right? The people who teach in higher education, we are not ourselves a homogeneous group and we experience and express privilege and power in varying ways. The same inclusive practices that white male instructors like me might use in order to lower barriers and smooth the way for learners that might result in pushback and mistrust if it's implemented by women instructors or people of color at the front of the classroom. We should acknowledge the privilege and standing that are needed in order to implement many of the UDL considerations, and we should design for variability among our instructors as well as among our learners. For example, consideration 9.4 is cultivate empathy and restorative practices. It asks us to use a protocol such as circle practice to make communal decisions. Far easier in K12 settings where the instructor has implied or legal power to compel such actions. But I've seen over and over that my colleagues who are newer to the field, women, people of color, they're at a disadvantage when they engage in barrier-lowering non-traditional teaching approaches, UDL included, simply because they're not afforded the same automatic deference and assumption of authority that I get as an older white male instructor. Listeners, if you want to address this knowledge gap, watch for places in the UDL framework where the language moves away from design processes into teaching or facilitation actions. Reframe those suggested actions by adding design space for or

design the option to at the front of the advice and then clearly denote who has the power, the authority, or the privilege to compel compliance if you need compulsion at all. Also, you can check out the research on intersectional identity in higher ed2 to address this one.

LOUI:

Lovely, lovely. So I will say that I have experienced some of what you're talking about as an observer. So I was in a course where it was shared instruction between a female instructor and a male instructor. And this is back when I was doing my Master's. So this is pre- me knowing anything about Universal Design for Learning. But being in that course directly impacted the way I approached my instructional design during higher ed experiences that I've had because I watched how the female instructor was trying to adopt what the male instructor was doing to lead the course and it fell flat. And then as she attempted to do some other course design strategies and this was all face to face, it fell flat until actually she could just be true to who she was as an instructor. And then it started to move forward. But fortunately, I was in with a bunch of other students who were wanting her to succeed. So there wasn't anybody challenging her in that sense. But I could see in my head I was thinking, oh, this could go very badly very quickly. Thinking about what you were just talking about and then knowing what's in the guidelines, I can see how those could empower her. And I loved your phrases. So design the space for and then what was the other one?

TOM:

So it's design space for or design options that allow.

LOUI:

Yeah, yeah, that makes sense. That absolutely makes sense.

TOM:

And your example too, that's one of the challenges in higher education is we don't necessarily say, okay, everybody who's coming in as an instructor, we're still assuming that everybody has the same amount of power and authority to share with the students. And that's absolutely not true. So the challenge there is that third of the fourth knowledge gaps that we talked about earlier, the UDL guidelines. Even in 3.0, they still assume that the classroom or the learning space is a command environment. Think of a single instructor standing in front of dozens of college students, sitting in a tiered seating lecture hall. Even when the focus of the learning engagement is where the learners themselves take inclusive actions, there remains an assumption that the instructor is in charge and the students are in the learner role. This is where a lot of our colleagues end up not being safe or comfortable sharing that authority because they don't have it to share. That's most appropriate in K12 environments, that command environment. The learners are children, they have developing brains and the teacher's job contains a significant element of discipline, instruction, and social development alongside just content acquisition. In colleges and universities, though, our learners are already adults, some of them with lots of experience under their belts. So there's much less of a need for or an expectation to establish command environments. Now this actually lets us

design better for the goal of creating agentic learners in UDL, in higher education. We're in the business of preparing our learners to join us as professionals in our fields. Listeners watch for language in the 3.0 guidelines that talk about co-creating and then apply that more broadly where it doesn't yet appear. For instance, consideration 8.3 is foster collaboration, interdependence, and collective learning. That one explicitly talks about learner creation of learning conditions. But consideration 2.1, clarify vocabulary, symbols, and language structures doesn't yet do that. And if you want to find the higher ed research, look for research on social construction of learning in colleges and universities and you can help address that knowledge gap.

LOUI:

Thank you. Okay, and let's talk about the last one.

TOM:

Yeah, the last one is interesting. It's the difference between a pedagogical focus and an andragogical focus. That's the assumption that learners are still developing and addressing those developmental needs from a primarily neurological perspective. This one takes me farthest away from where CAST started.

LOUI:

Yeah.

TOM:

If you imagine a mother and her grade school-age son, each working on their homework at the kitchen table. Mom's on her laptop for her college study and the son has a pencil and paper and is working through a worksheet, right? In K12 environments, the need to support developing executive and emotional aspects of learners, that's well documented. For college-level learners, we have to switch our focus away from developing brains and toward social-emotional elements. For example, the research that's cited for consideration 3.2, that's highlight and explore patterns, critical features, big ideas, relationships. The research contains no examples of college, university, adult, or professional learning articles, studies, or theory listeners. To address this one, we can move beyond the simple neurobiological argument of UDL. We take the three brain networks or the three brain diagrams and put them to the side. And we move toward a more social constructivist model of practice where we're designing options specifically to reduce cognitive load, dissonance, and environmentally interfering conditions. So watch for language in the guidelines that refer to emotions, self-regulation, learners who are still developing core capacities, and then review the research page for those considerations to see what sources were used to develop them. You can supplement your search with keywords from those UDL considerations. Plus put college, university, or adult into your research databases and you'll find 15 years worth of big studies.

LOUI:

Yeah, I was just thinking about my sister. She is a college-level professor and two years ago I came in digitally and provided a workshop for her learners. And these are all Master's level and PhD level learners.

TOM:

Paraprofessional folks.

LOUI:

Yeah. But on just what executive functioning was and how that was being impacted by where we were currently within our society and then the impacts of just being in a higher ed setting. And it was amazing the number of learners who really had no connection with this, whatsoever, and were learning some of these things for the first time. So even though we are talking about people who have well-developed brains, they didn't have a knowledge set to help them with understanding how their brain was working.

TOM:

Fantastic. Yeah. That chimes really well with some of the research that people have been doing over the last 10 or 15 years.

LOUI:

Yeah, yeah. And so I guess I speak that to say there are a number of people walking around who don't have that knowledge and it's okay for us to share that knowledge in the higher ed settings and make a corner for that with it. Yeah. Within the optional readings or optional experiences within your syllabus or just providing that. So actually that's something that my sister does now. She has a quote-unquote, a corner in her digital syllabus that is a corner specifically about the brain and learning and we cultivate resources, and she just has those available for her learners. And she's like, this has nothing to do with the content of this course in the sense that it's not specific to the title of the course or the outcomes of this course. But for you as a learner and the outcomes that you would like to experience as a learner and even beyond this course, I suggest that you spend some time over in these resources. So she gets really positive feedback about that.

TOM:

Oh, fantastic. What a splendid example.

LOUI:

Yeah, yeah, I think so. But she's my sister, so. Oh my gosh, Tom, this was so wonderful. Thank you so much. And I know that you really condensed that information a lot for our conversation, and I hope people take advantage of your website so they can learn more about your work and contact you. So I will also have a link to that on the website page. So thank you for spending some of your really valuable time with me.

TOM:

Oh, Loui, this has been an absolute pleasure to talk with you and with your listeners. And listeners, I'd love to hear your story. So head to my website, get ahold of me. I've got 20 minutes for anybody. I'd love to hear how you are identifying barriers and using UDL to help lower them.

LOUI:

Absolutely. So for those listening to this podcast, you can find supplemental materials like images, 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 advance learner agency.