

UDL in 15 Minutes
With Kisa Laursen
Episode 131 - 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 Kisa Laursen, a grade 2 teacher at Gladsaxe School in Denmark. Kisa is going to share how UDL has energized co-teaching for her. Welcome, Kisa!

KISA:

Thank you very much, Loui. I am very excited for our conversation and for being part of this wonderful podcast.

LOUI:

Oh, thank you so much. Thank you. So, you know, I like to begin each podcast by asking my guests to share a bit about their background and education, like how long you've taught and the roles you've had, and also I know you've done co-teaching. So how long have you had that role?

KISA:

Yes. I have been a teacher for about 18 years now. Initially, I taught Danish, religion, PE and English. Now I also teach a couple of other subjects. All of my teaching years, I have taught K12, both primary and secondary school. Then about eight years into teaching, I had extra education as an inclusion consultant, and after that, I spent half of my work time in class teaching, and half as a consultant, doing observation in different classes, and talking with the students, and for the most part, their teachers about group dynamics, student voice, different needs, and ways to plan and teach with data in mind.

LOUI:

Wonderful.

KISA:

Then in 2020, I applied for the job as co-teacher at Gladsaxe school where I work now. I applied for the job because I thought it to be a perfect way to combine working with the professionals around the students, and at the same time spending more time in class teaching. For the past almost five years now, I have co-taught full time, which means I get to continuously discuss, plan, teach, and evaluate best practices, you could say, with a partner. While spending all my lessons with the ones that my job is all about the students.

LOUI:

That's great. Well, you've had a very full career so far. So in the midst of that, you learned about Universal Design for Learning. So how and when did you learn about UDL?

KISA:

At the beginning of my co-teaching at Gladsaxe School, I took an online course with actually an American speaker on co-teaching. And during that course, she mentioned UDL, and together with the group attending, I had a small and very short introduction to UDL, and I remember feeling like she mentioned it, like it was a familiar and very well known approach, but I believe most of us were new to it. At least I was. And, you know, I would very much like to see myself as someone who seeks out different methods and is always curious about different ways to work with and develop inclusive learning environments and practices in school. But I never heard about UDL before that day.

LOUI:

Wow.

KISA:

Yeah, but however, you know, I was so intrigued, and then I went on to search for more information. I stumbled across a couple of podcasts with Katie Novak, and then I was just all in. I thought UDL was like an umbrella that included all of the things I had ever learned and experienced to be good, inclusive practice. And at the same time, the UDL framework offered a very direct way to qualify all of that knowledge and skill. It just made sense for me.

LOUI:

Wonderful. Okay, so you have about five years of investigating and working with UDL, not just on your own, but in your co-teaching practice, and that means you now have somebody to talk with about UDL. So can you share how that's affected your own understanding and use of UDL

KISA:

Yes. Being a co-teacher and part of that constellation really contributed to nourishing a natural use of and implementation of the principles of the UDL because, you know, from the same lessons, me and my partner collect different data. We see and experience different things. Sometimes we experience the same things, but through evaluating together, we continuously get to have a complex, yet at the same time more clear picture of what is required from us as teachers. And I have to say that, of course, becoming aware of the sometimes very different needs of learners, and the barriers embedded in our initial design of the lesson can be overwhelming. But at the same time, being two, we have the possibility of sitting down together, bringing in different data, asking each other questions and challenging each other's both different and common thinking, beliefs and ideas together, and that makes it easier, I would say, to sort of turn the barriers into possibilities and then adjust the design.-I want to say that sometimes co-teaching can be reduced to a method, for some, you know, a way to organize the teaching when you're more than one professional in a class. Divide students into smaller groups, and that's it. I understand teaching as being much more data informed teaching with the purpose of seeking to create more ways for students to participate and contribute. And for me, it makes a lot of sense to elevate co-teaching through UDL,

because the framework, with its principles and guidelines, offers inspiration for different questions to bring into our conversations, like, for example, who might need an alternative way of presenting than writing? What is the reason for this and which action does that call for? Or it could also be, how can we better scaffold this task, knowing that three of our students might have challenges remembering the instructions that we give? So us identifying these barriers in the design, and talking about how we can reduce or hopefully remove them together, is quite empowering and uplifting, I think, because it makes me feel that there's always something we can do or at least try out.

LOUI:

Yeah, exactly. Absolutely. So I am really curious to hear about how your conversations about UDL even started with your co-teacher. So was there a certain day when you said, do you know about UDL, or was it a school training or a request from your school leadership?

KISA:

That's a very good question. I don't really remember me saying, okay, this is the day I bring this into the conversation. I believe I started out by just naturally bringing the ideas and questions inspired by UDL into the conversation that we were already having about lessons that we planned, taught and evaluated together. I didn't really use the words Universal Design for Learning, or introduced my co-teaching partner to the framework or thoughts and research behind it. I think I tried it on precise, you could say. But at the same time, it didn't really feel that way, because me and my colleagues were already very familiar with working with clear learning goals or learning intentions, as we call it, together with data, student voice and choice. We had already taken steps which align with UDL, just maybe less conscious about it, in using a different language. At my school, I was a part of a team named Didactics and Learning for four years. At the beginning of each year, the team, which consisted of about eight teachers and one of our school department leaders, had additional education in various topics, supporting teaching and learning development. And after the additional education, we were each connected to other teachers at the school to help spread the word and train together for

a limited period of time. Sometimes observing, then evaluating and planning together with our colleagues. Sometimes planning, teaching and evaluating altogether. Prior to last year, we had one external consultant come in and show us how to construct clear learning intentions. One who presented different ways to collect and use data in our planning, and one to talk about behavioral design. And last year, my department leader asked and encouraged me to create a course for my peers and the team, sharing my experiences with working with UDL, and I was so thrilled. It really seemed to be such a natural next step in accordance with the other topics we had worked with before. And in a way, it brought it all together, which I believe is the main reason why it resonated with a lot of my colleagues. And during the time, working with the team, exploring and co-creating ways of getting UDL out there, we decided on five main questions to ask during the planning of each lesson, to help identify barriers and develop more inclusive practices. And those questions were very, I guess, simple, but turned out to be a very big success. The questions were, who might be bored? Who might have difficulties with the task? Who might be done with the task real fast? Who might have the need for social emotional support from a peer, teacher or pedagogue? And who might need support to challenge themselves? And of course, these questions can and are also used looking back on the lessons, asking who was bored? Who had difficulties? etc, And every time we talk about why and how, so, you know, sharing our observations and bringing in data, and using those five questions as we call them, turned out to be this huge success. I think because it is so specific and hands on, which is why we had the five questions actually turned into small stickers that fit right next to our keyboard on our computers, and in that way, we all remember them when planning our lessons.

LOUI:

That's wonderful. I love that those questions really help people focus on the context that they're creating for their learners, the environment and then the lesson experiences, and they are really a broad swath that go across a lot of the barriers that students experience. And so by asking those five questions, it's a really nice, fairly comprehensive way to think about the kind of options that you would provide via UDL.

So I love those, and I'm sure people will be writing them down. We'll list them with the podcast. We'll make sure to specifically list those out. But...

KISA:

Yes.

LOUI:

I have one last question for you. So teaching, it's, you know, historically been so solitary, and co-teaching has been around for a while. I mean, I co-taught, but it's still a unique design for so many people. So what structures or processes do you and your colleague use to create a quality co-teaching environment?

KISA:

Yeah. So at the moment, I have three different co-teaching partners to plan, teach and evaluate with. And we have scheduled and very sacred planning time together each week, I would say. It's about two hours with each partner, which means six in total for me. And when I say sacred, I mean that it is very much respected in the sense that we are not called, nor do we plan to engage in other meetings or activities at that time. And that is really essential to make it work. And for the most part, my partners bring the why and the what of the learning to our planning sessions, here meaning the learning intentions and the idea of content of the teaching unit. And then we plan the how together. Using the five questions, exploring why and how, bringing in the data, like I said, and then we decide which of the six co-teaching approaches would better support the learning intention and that specific activity. And also how our joint competences and forces can be best put into use, which, of course, affects the way that we decide on which roles to take on. Then we also are very then we also focus a lot on grouping and regrouping the students, and every time, aiming to assure that no one feels marginalized. Sometimes it calls for station teaching. Other times parallel teaching, or one teach, one observes. It all depends on the why, the what, and the how of the learning and lesson.

LOUI:

Yeah, those are wonderful examples. And I love how you just ended that. That you all are determining what strategies you're using based on the intention of the lesson, based on the goal of the lesson. And so you're understanding, oh, we know our learners need to gain this knowledge or gain these skills, and so then we will use these strategies or these groupings, or whatever other processes you're going to use. And that's a beautiful way to think about all of that. That's just wonderful.

KISA:

Yes, thank you. And can I just add that it is very much about what we can do to sparkle positive change by making small adjustments. We don't spend as much time now as before on identifying the barriers and going deep into the difficulties of reducing them as we do focusing on exploring new ways, and ideas of applying those to our design. In that way, I feel the conversations have become less overwhelming and more exciting. And that is also true for the conversation that you know I have with myself when still, once in a while, being the only teacher in the classroom, or when I plan and do presentations of my own as an independent consultant, you know, with working with and implementing UDL, I feel less overwhelmed and more excited about teaching.

LOUI:

That's so wonderful. And the last thing I'll point out is so clear that your colleagues and you value one another greatly. You value your time, but you value one another and the work that you're doing so it comes out so clearly, and I want to appreciate you for that, and appreciate your colleagues for that, and appreciate you for coming onto this podcast and sharing your insights about co-teaching. So thank you so much for being here.

KISA:

Thank you so much for having me. I am so happy about it.

LOUI:

Oh you're welcome. 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 design for learner agency.