

UDL in 15 Minutes
With Katy McBain
Episode 132 - 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 Katy McBain, the head of the secondary school learning support at the Dresden International School. Katy is going to share how she and her colleagues are shifting ownership of learning to their secondary learners. Welcome, Katy!

KATY:

Thank you, Loui. Thank you for having me. It's an honor.

LOUI:

Oh, you're so welcome. So I'd love to hear a bit about your background and how you learned about UDL.

KATY:

Sure, so this is my 13th year now as a learning support teacher at an international IB school. My 18th in education overall. So I support students in the secondary school. Primarily in grades 6 through 10, and we have a few students in the diploma program who I check in regularly with. And I learned about UDL actually through our former head of learning support and mutual and esteemed colleague Beth Stark...

LOUI:

Yeah.

KATY:

who is now pursuing her dream and passion of the UDL consultant so I really owe it to her for laying the groundwork for so many of the great shifts that have occurred recently in our department and school. And I feel very, very fortunate to be part of an amazing team of four dedicated learning support specialists, and we all really draw strengths from each other. So it's a really great team.

LOUI:

Wonderful. And because this podcast is literally listened to around the world, I like for people to explain a few things. So like you use the term DP. So could you describe that really quickly?

KATY:

Sure, so that is the diploma program.

LOUI:

Okay. And that's a particular track within international baccalaureate schools, correct?

KATY:

Exactly. So it's the curriculum that's made of six subject groups, So they have theory of knowledge. They have to complete community and service requirements and extended essays. So it's all part of the international baccalaureate.

LOUI:

Okay, wonderful. And then learning support, are there students that specifically receive learning support?

KATY:

So we typically support students who do have a diagnosis. We have a few students who may not need a fourth or a fifth language. There might be some language confusion, so they have come to learning supports as well. But typically we have students who have diagnosed learning disability.

LOUI:

Okay, wonderful. So thank you so much for that. Okay, so for the past however many years you've been transforming learning support. So where did that start? When did that start? How did you begin to weave in the elements of UDL?

KATY:

Sure, so it was interesting to reflect on this whole process because, you know, you kind of end up somewhere and you don't realize how many layers you just keep adding to this sort of transformation process. So it has really felt transformative and there's definitely been a long process of unlearning as well. When I look back at my early years as a learning support teacher, I often approached programming in what felt like a more prescriptive manner. So I would be the one who created the IEP goals for the students. I decided what the students needed to work on that day. And then we decided to shift that focus and really start concentrating on student agency. And that I think is really when we started to weave in those elements of UDL, and it just kind of happened layer by layer. So we would take that concept of student agency and focus on those elements such as self-regulation, providing students with more voice and choice, and then going from there. So we then started co-creating the IEP goals with the students and really focused on, instead of just jumping into the programming right away, but really work on that relationship building. The trust building from the outset, and getting to know their interests and their lives outside of school. And programming just became much more

personalized and the goals felt more meaningful because the students were part of the process.

LOUI:

Yeah, and I love how you emphasize the kind of the I. I would create the IEP goals. And I decided what the students needed to see, decided to, you know, work on that day. And it sounds like you really had a goal here of maybe advocacy?

KATY:

Yeah, we came to the conclusion that advocacy really is that ultimate goal. So, if you have the students who are going to be thrown into the thrust of education, where they're going to 10 different classes, 10 different teachers, with 10 very different teaching styles, they were going to need the self-advocacy skills to voice their needs, seek support for the accommodations that they might need, and really take ownership of their learning journeys. This is definitely apparent for our neurodiverse populations. So an essential aspect of this journey is self-discovery and learning about how their brain is uniquely wired. So for example, for the dyslexic students, we really see that they have strong visual spatial skills, that they are very creative, out of the box thinkers.

Communication tends to be a strong suit. They're comfortable doing presentations. So we really try to use a strengths-based approach and emphasize those strengths rather than deficits. And also take time exploring all the different self-management tools out there. So some students might be more comfortable with the traditional paper planners, but we also make sure that they explore Google Keep or Trello or just other forms of self-management and self-regulation strategies. And then also for our older students, we really hone in on those learning strategies as well, like space practice, and retrieval practice, and those study habits that they really need for the DP.

LOUI:

Hmm, those are such valuable skills. I know a lot of adults need to have some work on those skills, too!

KATY:

Yeah, they're skills for life, really.

LOUI:

They really are. And then to be able to recognize that they're going to use those tools differently in those different courses and in different contexts around their lives. And so I know, for example, I use different calendaring skills based on the thing that I'm working on. You know, when I'm doing house stuff and I have a house activity, I keep track of that very differently than how I keep track of what I need to do for work. It's just very

different. And it's not because there's no one watching me, per se, it's just how I keep track of what I want to accomplish and remember the different things. I keep track of it differently. So I love that they're learning all about these different tools and different strategies in different ways.

KATY:

Yeah and so advocacy of course is such a huge component. So every year, at the start of the year, the students write an advocacy letters to all of their teachers...

LOUI:

Oh, I love that.

KATY:

and they can choose how to do this. So some create a creative poster, some write the traditional email, some feel more comfortable voicing their advocacy letters in the recording. And so these letters provide insights to their specific neurotype. They also talk about their interests and they really outline the accommodations that work best for them so that they can be successful in the classroom. So if a student feels more comfortable sitting closer to the front, they will put that on their advocacy letter or that they need visuals, to let the teachers know that, hey, I might need these check-ins for this long-term assessment that I'm having trouble breaking down into smaller steps. Can you support me with that? And they write that all out, and it's really cool the feedback that they get from the teachers as well, I think that's encouraging for them and motivating for them for that beginning of the year push.

LOUI:

Absolutely. And so I'm betting that there are listeners that are going to say, oh I'd love to see an example of a letter. Is there any way to de-identify and maybe share one or two?

KATY:

Sure.

LOUI:

Oh, that would be great because I know people would love to see that. And hearing the student voice. And then what I love about it also is that it's requiring our colleagues to take part in a bit of a shift because we've all come through education where the teacher is the leader. And so it is that kind of self-centered. I do this, I create this, and then to receive a letter from a student saying, these are things that work really well for me. That's going to require the adult to also open up and say, oh, okay, I'm willing to hear feedback from a learner and I'm willing to make some shifts. And it's just really valuable

for all of us to have those moments when we're the instructional leader to receive some messages within our leadership role, I should say, that make us say, oh, you know what, this person knows themselves really well. And probably going to benefit anybody else.

KATY:

And it really opens the door for that conversation.

LOUI:

Yeah. Okay, so was there any part that was more challenging for the learners to take on when it came to this advocacy?

KATY:

I think it depends on student readiness. We really have to meet students where they are. For example, we might have some families who choose to not disclose their child's diagnosis with them, or they don't want their child to learn about their diagnosis right away. It could be cultural-based. It could be that they're just not ready yet, and we have to respect that. We also have other students who are able to start the self-discovery process right away, even to the point where they are comfortable presenting in front of their teachers, in front of their peers. We have a student who graduated in 2022 who is currently studying aerospace engineering and he returns to the school and he checks in with his former teachers, and he has presented to a couple of the grade 9 and 10 classes about his experience with autism and navigating in the neurotypical world. And that's been really powerful. So we've kind of seen all ends, and yeah just the importance of meeting students where they are.

LOUI:

Absolutely. And helping the students really start to think about how they're going to, yeah work in the world, but meet up with the challenges. We all face challenges, but when we know ourselves as learners, when we know how we come into different environments in different ways, we are better prepared to have that flexibility. So I think there's some other ways that you are helping your learners with that flexible piece, isn't there?

KATY:

Definitely. Well, another challenge is also building habits. We have students who can set some pretty big goals and sometimes that might be too much, and then we just have to emphasize that consistency is most important. And those small improvements over time are most important. So it's really kind of developing that growth mindset. One aspect that we started integrating more recently is cognitive coaching sessions with our

students. All the members of our team we're all trained in cognitive coaching. And what that does is that really helps guide the students to become more self-directed with their thinking. It really empowers students to mediate their own thinking. Their identifying steps towards meaningful goals. So not just the IEP goals that we set at the beginning of the year, but learning goals or a self-management goal or just something that they want to improve. We are not there to give them any advice. We are not there to judge them whatsoever. We are there just to listen deeply, to paraphrase what they are saying, to pose those thoughtful mediative questions that they normally wouldn't ask themselves. It's been a really empowering experience. So we've seen it through the cognitive coaching, that the process of setting goals and really reflecting on them has become more meaningful. So I don't know if that's because they're more connected to their interests, or because of that ownership piece, or perhaps they have a good foundation of self-awareness already. But it's great. I mean, we use it as a team as well. So if we feel stuck as a team, we'll ask each other for a coaching conversation. And then we just begin the cycle of ongoing reflection.

LOUI:

Yeah, I love how you're using that tool as adults within the planning and helping students look through, like you just said, ways that are going to empower them to mediate, really think about their own thinking. That's the reflective process that we all need to go through. And we have to practice those things before we get into those highly stressful situations.

KATY:

It is. Yeah.

LOUI:

Yeah, we know that that practice really benefits us.

KATY:

It's a skill. It really is.

LOUI:

Absolutely. Oh my gosh. It's so valuable. Katy, I thank you so much for this. You've given so many good ideas and people are going to be enthralled with them, I'm positive. So we look forward to seeing some of those examples of the learner advocacy letters, and those will be available with the YouTube portion of this podcast. But thank you, thank you, thank you for coming on and sharing this.

KATY:

Thank you so much. It was such a pleasure.

LOUI:

You're very, very 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.