

UDL in 15 Minutes with Jane Somanje  
Episode 134 - 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 Jane Somanje, an employee at the Ministry of Education and a teacher trainer in the Civita region of Malawi. Jane is going to talk about how she has seen teaching practices change in Malawi. Welcome, Jane!

JANE:

Thank you, Loui.

LOUI:

Oh, I'm so glad you're here. So can you describe your role with the Ministry of Education?

JANE:

I work with the Ministry of Education, but I'm basically in Mzuzu, a city located in northern Malawi. Actually, I'm based at the education, northern Education Division office. I work as a quality assurance officer, but apart from that, I'm also a national trainer for National Reading Program in Malawi. So of late, I've been working with NextGen as a national trainer. But apart from being a national trainer, I'm also involved in monitoring NRP activities. Briefly, this is what I can say.

LOUI:

Wonderful. And as you've described you, it seems you have the opportunity to see how teachers are taking up new ideas and applying them in their classrooms. What are some examples you've seen of teachers taking up UDL?

JANE:

Yeah, talking about the teacher's practices, maybe my role as a monitor. Yes, I've been interacting with teachers in different, for example, forums, apart from the actual visits that I make to their classrooms. Now, talking about my experience with teachers using UDL practices, yes, there are a number of success stories that I can share with you. Maybe a little bit of background when we were introducing UDL through the National Reading Program, I remember some two, three years ago when we were introducing this concept of UDL through NRP training, teachers were a bit like resistant, because they thought maybe it was like we were adding too much work to what they're already doing on the grounds. But then after taking them through the training, they began to appreciate why they needed to be inclusive, so to say, in their daily teaching practices in their classrooms. So to them, from what I've gathered, UDL seems to be like improving learning outcomes. For instance, whenever I have an opportunity, like to go visit them in their classes, I have seen a number of teaching practices related to UDL. For instance, I remember visiting one classroom in Chitipa. Chitipa is also is one of the district in the northern region of Malawi. One time I visited the classroom in standard one classroom in Chitipa district. I remember it was something very unique. The teacher had prepared lots of teaching and

learning resources for her lesson and interacting with the teacher, she actually told me to say she has realized that most of the time, that when she was preparing for her lesson, she was like targeting a certain group of individuals. In other words, she was not taking every learner on board. She wasn't creating that environment in which she would be like giving an opportunity to every learner in a class, an opportunity, equal opportunity to succeed. That was not the case before, but after, or after going through this anaerobic training that I'm talking about, this teacher realized that if we can give equal opportunities to every learner in a class, then every learner is bound to succeed. So it was quite interesting. This teacher had the prepared lots of materials. Then observing her class, I would see that instead of just using maybe one strategy to present whatever she was teaching at that particular time. She had a variety of strategies. I remember she was introducing, I think it was a lesson on the alphabetic principle. She was introducing a letter to the learners. Now, instead of just using a chart, this particular teacher had a chart. She had the letter cards. But also, she had a literacy song was embedded in the lesson. In other words, this teacher was saying, I realize that learners in my class learn differently. So I know that learners that will be motivated through songs, so that's why she had to incorporate a literacy song about that later that she introduced in that particular lesson. But apart from that, she also give her learners an opportunity. I understood that was multiple, like means of representing or presenting the concepts.

LOUI:

Yes, yes, wonderful, wonderful. Because I have listeners from all over the world, most of them are not from Malawi, I can pretty much guarantee you that. Can you share how these ideas that this teacher used are different from what you might see in other Malawi classrooms?

JANE:

Yes, of course. I specifically talked about this teacher, but I've had an opportunity to visit a number of schools. During our monitoring visits, but then, apart from the monitoring visits that we normally conduct after, after, as a follow up to the NRP trainings, I've also had an opportunity during our inspection visits to schools, to observe lessons. So apart from just maybe using a variety of strategies, when presenting concepts, so when teaching whatever they wanted to teach, a variety of methods. I have also observed, teachers like when it comes to, say, checking learners' understanding,

LOUI:

Mmmm-hmmm

JANE:

...they would be flexible as to allow the learners to demonstrate their knowledge in multiple ways. This is a common practice. Where the teachers, for example, they would say, maybe they were introducing a letter A. Towards the end of the lesson, where they want maybe to check understanding, they would ask the learners, for example, to say, "Can you look around in the class? And can you actually locate anywhere, whether it's on the chart, on the blackboard, where you can, where you can see this letter, A?" And from there, they would even say, "Can you show me how, maybe through a writing or drawing, letter A?" And sometimes they would

even demonstrate how to write that particular letter. This is unlike, maybe what was mostly happening in the past. A teacher would simply say, I would go to my class and you, how do I check the learner's understanding? I would simply say, can you oh, can you all draw letter A? And you would force each and every learner in that class to draw the letter A, but now they realize that some learners maybe are not even good at drawing. But you ask them, "Do you know the letter A?" Then the learner would say, "I know it." Now, how can you demonstrate? How can that particular learner demonstrate? The teachers are now becoming more and more flexible. Can you go and show me? Simply showing, simply pointing at that letter. That's enough. So in other words, they're trying to accommodate diversity in their classes.

LOUI:

Yeah. Now I know that when you were introduced to UDL, you have shared with me that there were parts that were familiar to you, but then there were other parts that were new. So can you talk briefly about what was familiar that you that made sense, especially in the Malawian context, and then what was new? What was introduced to you, that you would think was different from what was in the Malawian context?

JANE:

Okay, maybe multiple like means of representation, like maybe using various strategies when teaching a concept. That wasn't really new. Teachers had been doing that. They would try to employ or to use a variety of resources, a variety of methods, just to accommodate diversity maybe at that particular level. But I think most of our teachers were not familiar with the multiple ways. Maybe they were not very familiar that they would also employ a variety, or demonstrating knowledge. So in other words, they would use the various strategies. But when it comes to checking, maybe for learners' understanding, they would do, maybe to stick to one method with one strategy. So that maybe wasn't very popular in Malawi. There were, there were a few teachers that were maybe trying to implement that. But that wasn't emphasized. It wasn't so common. Because maybe to the teachers, maybe when we say accommodating diversity to them, they say, okay, then I can use various teaching strategies. Maybe they thought, I've been engaging learners in groups or group discussions. They would also engage learners, maybe in pairs. Can you discuss this? That our teachers were doing it. But the concept of multiple ways of allowing learners to demonstrate, to demonstrate knowledge that one was popular, so to say.

LOUI:

So it sounds like what was there, was the teacher doing. So they were providing the multiple ways of presenting information,

JANE:

Yes,

LOUI:

but they weren't at the point where they were allowing the students to use multiple ways of showing their own knowledge.

JANE:

And that one wasn't very popular, or that it wasn't emphasized. So a teacher would speak to one method or to one way to them that was okay.

LOUI:

I see. And you've also reflected on the challenges that exist when sharing UDL with teachers over time, and how to keep UDL in the front of their mind. So what are some of the things you're doing to help teachers keep UDL in the front?

JANE:

Okay. For one, a common problem in our country is large classes. Now for our teachers, they thought by incorporating UDL practices in a large class, they thought that was quite challenging. But in actual sense, during, like our visits, or my visit to schools, or even during monitoring, actually I was telling them, one biggest problem with a large class is, as a teacher, you are not able to meet individual needs. But through UDL, if you plan your lesson properly, incorporating aspects or using the principles of UDL, then they will know they will not even be a need for you to support learners individually, because these will be cared for, will be addressed through these concepts of UDL. The teachers began to understand to say, okay, because my class is large, then to support each and every learner based on their individual learning needs might not be easy. It might be challenging to them. It has always been challenging. But then we taught them, look at UDL. UDL it's about giving each and every learner equal opportunity to succeed. How? It's about the way you design your lessons. For example, if you have that understanding in my class, how do I address or accommodate diversity? How do I support these learners, or all learners? For example, various ways of presenting information. Then I need to create those visual whatevers. And maybe you, you, you incorporate a literacy song in your lesson and so on and so forth. So, with that understanding, the teachers began to appreciate that, actually, UDL is even supporting them to support the large classes better.

LOUI:

Yes, and for people outside of Malawi, understanding what a large class is, how many students would you say are in a large class?

JAN:

100 plus.

LOUI:

Yes, yes. I think that's going to startle a lot of listeners when they hear that.

JANE:

It's 100 plus one against one teacher.

LOUI:

Yes. Yes. So many children. So many children. Oh, Jane, this has been wonderful. I really appreciate you taking your time, and you've been so flexible. We have worked to coordinate this recording so many times and you continue to return. So thank you so much.

JANE:

Most welcome, Loui.

LOUI:

Yeah, excellent, excellent. 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 [www.theudlapproach.com/podcasts](http://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](http://www.theudlapproach.com) and thanks to everyone for your work in revolutionizing education through UDL ,and making it our goal to build learner agency.