UDL in 15 Minutes
With Karen Winston-Carpenter
Episode 135 - 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 Karen Winston-Carpenter, a teacher on special assignment in East Cleveland schools. Karen is going to share how she helps resident educators learn about UDL. Welcome, Karen.

KAREN:
Thank you for having me on your podcast. I am truly honored to be here and deeply grateful for this opportunity.

LOUI:
Oh, you're so welcome, and thank you so much for being here. Can you share about your background in the East Cleveland schools?

KAREN:
Sure. I've spent my entire teaching career, that's 24 years, with the East Cleveland City Schools. Over the years, I've taught first grade, general ed, third and fourth grades, gifted and talented. I've also served on several curriculum and instruction committees, as well as hold the roles of vice president and president of our teachers' union. Currently, I serve as the instructional coach at the elementary level, as well as the district's resident educator coordinator.

LOUI:
Oh my gosh, you have so much wisdom to share. They are really lucky to have you. Oh my gosh. So you have this unique role where you get to focus on new educators and within that role, you get to introduce them to UDL. At the same time, these people are really overwhelmed. So any of us who recall our first years of teaching know that feeling. So how do you weave UDL into your coaching?

KAREN:
Oh, you're absolutely right. The first years of teaching. Oh, my goodness. Well, it can be very challenging and very overwhelming. That's why I intentionally talk about UDL and embed it and integrate it into my coaching. I start by modeling flexibility and empathy, realizing that this is something new and that is at the heart of UDL. I've worked with the teachers to co-create learning environments that offer multiple means of engagement, representation, and expression, not just for the students, but for the teachers

themselves. Educators need to feel safe when being vulnerable and supported, not criticized when they try to start something new that's outside of their comfort zone. Whether it's helping them with lesson planning or we are working together to come up with and research evidence-based strategies during classroom visits, my ultimate goal is to make sure that UDL feels accessible, sustainable, even in the busiest of seasons.

LOUI:
Yeah. And I love that you brought up empathy. You know we have that as a part of engagement. You know, we point back to like Mary Helen Immordino-Yang…

KAREN:
Yes.

LOUI:
…those years of, yeah, her wonderful research on empathy. And I was just in a board meeting yesterday and we cycle somebody doing kind of like a community building activity. And I asked people in this board, it's not an education board, and I asked them in the recent days how they had either shown empathy to someone else or how empathy had been shown to them recently. And it was just really great fun because these are all people from the business world, from the arts world, just all sorts of backgrounds, and the rich conversations because we all really want to experience empathy, or when we share it, it just feels so good to talk about. And I love that you focus on that for your educators. Do you guys talk about empathy?

KAREN:
We do talk about empathy. It's embedded in one of our pillars in our school district. Just making sure that we put ourselves in someone else's shoes, right? And extending that grace and giving that space as well. It just makes us better educators and better colleagues all around when we extend empathy to each other.

LOUI:
Yeah, absolutely. That grace and space. That’s what it is.

KAREN:
Yes, grace and space.

LOUI:
So have you had educators who were nervous about trying UDL aligned practices? And if they were, how did you help them move forward?

KAREN:
Yes, I have definitely worked with educators who felt hesitant about trying UDL-aligned practices. Change, we know, can be very intimidating, especially when you're a teacher and you already feel like you're stretched really thin, right? I have learned that when you definitely promote the principles of UDL without explicitly saying it, you get a better result. I always start by validating their feelings and meeting them where they are. Addressing each educator as an individual. We take small, manageable steps together, focusing on one principle or strategy at a time. I like to call it, we're going to chunk it. I say that to them all the time. We're going to chunk it. I always highlight the strengths and just be ready to bring those ideas back to the table so we can build on those experiences. By celebrating small wins and creating a space where experimentation is safe and encouraged, I help them build confidence and see UDL not as one more thing, but as a powerful tool to support all learners, including themselves.

LOUI:
Yeah. You know, there's a lot of conversation in the UDL community about whether or not it's good to show the guidelines and really talk explicitly or in you know, and like you're talking about how not necessarily pointing to the guidelines, but helping them learn aligned practices, and you know I really think it goes with the context. I really think it goes with, like you were saying, taking kind of the temperature, the emotional temperature of people. And then I love how you're saying that you're chunking it. You're helping them find manageable steps because then you loop around, right? You loop around and help them see that what they're doing aligns with the framework, right?

KAREN:
Yes. Absolutely.

LOUI:
Yeah.

KAREN:
Absolutely. But the chunking helps because people don't feel intimidated by it and they feel that they can be vulnerable, as I stated before, without feeling overwhelmed. You can still learn something new and still take care of those other tasks that we know that we are responsible for on a day-to-day basis.

LOUI:
Yeah. All right. So I'm curious, did your coaching change after you learned about UDL? Because you've been in the East Cleveland schools here for a while. And I don't know

that you knew about UDL in the beginning. So I know it's a leading question, but did it change?

KAREN:
Absolutely. Just first, myself as an educator, when we began to study it a few years ago in a district. And then I pivoted to supporting my colleagues on my grade level, and then in our teacher based teams, which are known as our professional learning communities in Ohio. But my coaching definitely changed after learning more about UDL. Before I would focus on best practices. Just trying to help the teachers to meet the standards, but as I shifted my lenses to looking more at UDL and being more intentional, and honoring the teacher's voice and choice, we were encouraged to see what we can do best for our students. I began to ask more reflective questions, offer multiple ways for teachers to engage with new strategies, and provided flexible support based off of their individual needs. UDL helped me to move from a one-size-fit-all coaching model to a more personalized and collaborative approach, knowing that we both bring something to the table and we're here to co-create and grow together.

LOUI:
Yeah, yeah. I know the idea of being intentional, that's been such a key cornerstone of UDL from the beginning. And then we've had more conversations I think recently, and especially with 3.0 coming out about just the concept of honoring. And how you take that concept of honoring and bringing it to the teachers is just so key. And I can hear it in how you introduce UDL, but then how you're engaging them and how you're not only becoming reflective on their practices, but helping them become reflective. And I'm wondering what kind of steps you take to help some of your educators who may not have come out of their teacher prep programs understanding the quality of reflection. How have you brought that to them?

KAREN:
So when it comes to reflection, I just explained to them, it's designed for us to, as individuals and as teachers, to just hone in on our craft as educators, right?

LOUI:
Yeah.

KAREN:
And then from there, pivot and make the appropriate changes that we need to the adult implementation to ensure our students receive what they need in order to be successful. So I might guide them through the process and ask them probing questions. Allow for wait time, because for some of them, it is a new process. But I must say, with the

resident educator program in Ohio, that's a huge part of the post-college program that they have to participate in and in every district. They have to go through the resident educator program in Ohio. And being a reflective is like one of the key concepts that they really encourage new teachers to do, and I believe that they take that opportunity to see what can I do to make sure that my curriculum, and the way that I'm doing things in the classroom help me to be more of a facilitator, ask my students to see more of what they notice, what they wonder, and just try to remove some of those barriers so that the lessons can be accessible to all learners.

LOUI:
You know, this is the part where, when we're in the age of AI and I am a complete user of AI. Absolutely. In so, so many ways. But it's this piece, the humanistic side of reflecting that just it can't be replicated. So I think about when we're teaching, when we're actually, you know, instructing learners of any age, but you're in the midst of teaching, you've got your lesson planned, but then you realize in that moment, something isn't hooking, right? It's just not going the way you thought it was going to go, and the human side is to take the breath. And the human side, I think, is to calm things down. And I think about how when I was a new teacher, you know, I was very anxious to get through the lesson and to do it right, and I don't know that I was so good at taking the temperature of the room. You know, it's a skill that comes. And so I think about also like mentoring that. So are there tips or tricks or things that you do to help people just take that pause, that humanistic pause?

KAREN:
Well, one thing I do encourage my resident educators to do, to videotape themselves teaching.

LOUI:
Yeah.

KAREN:
And then they will sit down with their mentor and they may have the mentor, have a set of questions to support them or I may even work with them as the coordinator to support them. So we'll watch the tape, pause, and have some thoughts about what we've seen. And I think it's better to see the visual so that you can learn how to pivot, and make those changes. And then moving forward, teachers can often see that, oh, I remember when I recorded myself and I made this up. These are some ideas I can do moving forward. So that we can just have a conversation about, what do we see? What went well? What are some things you would like to refine? And grow from there. But the videotaping is number one. That's key. You have to see yourself. And sometimes

they're so funny. Like, I don't want to watch it. I don't want to watch it. Like, you have to watch it.

LOUI:
Right. Oh, yeah. I know.

KAREN:
We all were there, right? I don't want to watch it. I don't want to watch it. Like, you have to see it so that you can see yourself. What you're doing well, and what are some things we want to refine as educators in the classroom? But I also encourage them to have conversations with their colleagues. Not just necessarily lean on the mentor or myself as the coordinator, because these are the people that they work with on a day-to-day basis. Maybe in their PLCs, bring up something that is a problem that you're seeing that is going on when you're having your lessons or a lesson that you had earlier that day, or maybe perhaps the week before. Take notes about things that you would like to change. And then have an opportunity to have a collaboration with one of your colleagues, either in your grade level or someone that you are developing a relationship with so that you can have those conversations about, how do I move to the next level to ensure when I am in the classroom, and you're right those are things that come with time. But they are able to pivot and make those changes. Because we make so many decisions in the middle of a lesson, just in a day as educators…

LOUI:
Oh yeah.

KAREN:
… and so that is a craft and a skill that you learn over time. But when they are cognizant that they need to make those changes, that's what makes me elated. That they know that this didn't go as well as I thought it should have based off of the feedback from the students or the engagement from the students. So these are some things that I would like to work on or do you have some suggestions? So just having the opportunity to collaborate with others, and videotaping yourself so that you can see those things you may need to refine.

LOUI:
Absolutely. Oh, well, Karen, it's obvious that East Cleveland Schools is incredibly lucky to have you, and especially as a teacher on special assignment. And those new educators are so fortunate to have you. Gosh, spreading all of this wonderful, not only knowledge, but giving them that empathy, giving them that space and grace so that they

can grow as educators and believing in them. So thank you so much for that work. And thank you for being on UDL in 15 minutes.

KAREN:
And thank you so much for having me. I appreciate it. Thank you.

LOUI:
You're so welcome. So for those listening to this podcast, you can find supplemental materials like images, a transcript, and an associated blog at my website, 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.