UDL in 15 Minutes
With Maddy Gentry
Episode 138 - 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 Maddy Gentry, an International Baccalaureate Diploma Program and Middle Years Program Learning Support Teacher at Dresden International School. Maddy is going to share how she and her colleague use UDL during their co-planning and co-teaching. Hi, Maddy. Welcome!

MADDY:
Hi, Loui. Thank you for having me.

LOUI:
Oh, you're so welcome. So right off the bat, just tell us a bit about yourself and your role at Dresden International School.

MADDY:
I am a teacher originally from South Carolina in the US, but I have been living in Germany for almost six years. I actually started out as an elementary teacher. I taught fifth grade math and science for two years before moving to third grade at a PYP school and then eventually moved down to first grade for a year before I began my current position, which is a learning support teacher within the MYP and DP programs at DIS.

LOUI:
Yeah. So when did you first learn about UDL?

MADDY:
I really think I was first exposed in university. I went to a really fabulous education program that was very forward thinking, and wanted us to be exposed to what was the latest in education research. But at the time, no one really knew what UDL looked like in practice. So it just kind of became this acronym that was floating around in the back of my head that then got a little confused with accommodations and differentiation, and it wasn't really until I began my current role as a learning support teacher where I got to dive more deeply into UDL. And what I discovered about it is it's the perfect alignment with my own approach to what teaching and learning should be and is in many classrooms, which is that all students need to be supported. All students need to be able to showcase their strengths and showcase who they are as learners, but they also

need to be able to be given opportunities to take risks and step outside what's comfortable for them within a very safe environment. And so because of this influx of knowledge about UDL and because of the role that I'm in, I was given the opportunity to begin co-teaching in a math class last school year, and that has continued this school year. And we've been working on implementing the UDL guidelines.

LOUI:
Great. So I'm looking forward to your story because I think it offers how so many people grow with UDL. But first we're focusing on a specific lesson, right?

MADDY:
Yes, so I have had the pleasure of this year working with my colleague, Nadia Evtushenko. We've worked together for three years within a learning support context, but this year she is a sixth grade math teacher as well. And so I jumped at the chance to be able to co-teach with her. And at the beginning of the year, we really wanted to look at how we can begin to implement the considerations. And I think our biggest collective aha moment was it all came back down to planning, and really looking at the barriers that are present within the math classroom. And to be able to give you a little bit of context about our group of kids this year is a very, very diverse class. That because of their backgrounds, there is a fair number of barriers present within the design of a traditional math class. And so at the beginning of the year, it was just about identifying those barriers and then maybe pulling from the considerations, pulling from the guidelines, pulling from our experience, and really thinking about how we can begin to systematically go through and remove those barriers and reduce them for students.

LOUI:
Got it. So let's back up to when you were teaching the lesson. And I understand there were things that you were doing that were in alignment with UDL, but then later on, you kind of had your aha with the planning.

MADDY:
Yes. So this particular lesson was one of the lessons near the beginning of our unit on graphs and reading and interpreting the data within a graph specifically. And so we had considered giving students a variety of different types of graphs. We've looked at giving them different levels of difficulty with graphs so that the students that maybe need a little bit more time and support can have that. But the ones that are ready to move on can also have an option to be but continue to be pushed forward with their learning. And as we were going, we thought about the vocabulary that's very specific to graphs. We talked about access. We talked about the labels on it. All the very specific graph vocabulary, but what we didn't think about in our planning process was that some of our

students were getting at least or at most or equal to or no more than that type of vocabulary, a little confused and they were having a hard time with it. And one of the things that I really appreciate about working with Nadia is that she understands the progression of how math and science build on top of each other. And so she recognized in the moment, students have to be able to understand these terms in order to be successful moving forward with their math and their sciences when they're asked to analyze graphs. So we actually stopped our lesson and we said, okay, we're going to define these terms. And anytime I'm defining terms with students, I try to co-construct definitions with them because it puts it in their vernacular. So it makes it that much easier for them to really understand the definition. And then we think of an example together, and then we also try to attach a visual to it as well. By going through this process, it was abundantly clear how the students were able to then go, oh yeah, now I get it. And I don't think they made the same mistakes again, moving forward.

LOUI:
Yeah. So then what you two showed in that situation was this incredible flexibility and mindset of understanding that not everybody was on the same boat. Not everybody was together and moving forward. And you and Nadia said, whoops, we need to pause. We need to go back and do this lovely action of co-constructing the definitions so that everyone could get back on the same boat and move forward together. But then go back to your aha when it came to specifically thinking about UDL.

MADDY:
I think this reminded me that the biggest aha I've ever had when it comes to UDL is that it's all in the planning process. It's about really taking the time to look at a lesson plan fairly critically and going, okay, what barriers could my students possibly encounter with this? And what can I do as an educator to remove those barriers so that they don't feel frustrated in the moment. And so in this specific example, it was a really good reminder for me that what I might have perceived as, oh, they've had graphs before in PYP, I've taught them before as a PYP teacher. So I know they've probably been exposed to at most, at least. They'll probably get that vocabulary. It was a good reminder for me not to take those things for granted. For me, it was a very good reminder that sometimes we have to go back and reactivate that prior knowledge or go back and maybe teach that prior knowledge that they didn't quite get the first time they were exposed to it.

LOUI:
Yeah. And I love the term you used for that critical look, that critical investigation of the lesson plan. And tying that critical look, in this instance, you were looking at this major component of the lesson, which was heavy amounts of vocabulary so they could move forward with analysis. So by analyzing the lesson plan and coming at it from that point

of view, possibly that would have removed that barrier during the lesson. And the other part I love about this conversation is it's very clearly articulating that the barrier is not within the learner. The barrier was activating prior knowledge. The barrier was the vocabulary. And this sounds so awkward to folks who are either new to UDL or maybe they came into it with some different assumptions and they keep talking about the barrier in a way that identifies the learner's need. And that's not it. It's not it. We are looking at and critically analyzing, like you said, our lessons, our unit planners and saying, what's in here that could possibly trip up the learners during the process of learning? And that's just one example, of course, looking at the lesson example in the unit planner. We also know that the physical environment is part of it. We also know that our relationships are part of it. But for this podcast, I love this focus of the planning. So this has been wonderful. So now you've said that since then, you've taken this and applied it to other lessons and unit planners. And then has this been a constant conversation with you and Nadia? How do you approach this?

MADDY:
Yeah, so it's definitely something that we've focused on very heavily, is what vocabulary do we need to make sure that students understand and how can we possibly give it to them to support their understanding? And give them visuals, give them text, give them whatever mode works best for them to be able to fully engage with the lesson that's being taught and the assessments that are also being given to them.

LOUI:
Absolutely. Maddy, this has been fabulous. I've loved hearing this great encapsulation of an example of how anyone can get started with Universal Design for Learning. This had nothing to do with knowing the guidelines and the considerations or even actually the principles, but this was knowing the goal of the lesson, identifying what barriers are there, and could trip up any learner, and then addressing those during the planning stage so that when you're actually teaching, you may not have to do as much of that revision in the moment. So I really appreciate this. Thank you so much.

MADDY:
Of course. And I think one of my biggest messages to anyone that's looking at UDL and thinking, ah, this is so much and there's so much here, and I can't figure out where to start, is you have to just start with one barrier. Start with one thing that you've identified within your classroom as a challenge for your students, and then you can slowly begin to build on it. And it takes time, but know that just one step at a time is all it takes.

LOUI:
That's so true. Words of wisdom. Thank you very much. That's great. So thank you. 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.