

UDL in 15 Minutes
With Juan Jo Miller and Michelle Ring-Hanson
Episode 140 - 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 Jo Miller and Michelle Ring-Hanson. Formerly, they were both UDL system coaches for the state of Wisconsin and the authors of The UDL Implementation Trials Mentor Toolkit. They were the winners of the CAST 2025 UDL Innovative Practice Award. Jo and Michelle are going to share how powerful the UDL implementation trials process has been for Wisconsin. Welcome, Jo and Michelle!

MICHELLE:

Thank you so much, Loui. Jo and I are really excited to be here and to have the chance to share this work. We've seen firsthand how the implementation trials process has supported educators across Wisconsin, and we're looking forward to taking others on this journey and talking about the journey with you today.

JO:

I echo Michelle's thoughts. We're grateful for the chance to highlight how this systematic, really teacher-driven approach is helping students experience the benefits of Universal Design for Learning in classrooms, where it matters. Thanks for having us Loui.

LOUI:

Oh, absolutely. Absolutely. Thank you both for being here. I want to start with a question that lets you share a little bit about yourself and your connection with UDL. So what made you fall in love with UDL?

JO:

Well, I fell in love with UDL when I saw firsthand the impact that designing for all learners had on individual students. What I didn't anticipate was the effect it had on teachers. They were energized by the new possibilities UDL opened up - ways to reach students who hadn't been thriving in their traditional teaching approaches. Watching teachers rediscover their influence and creativity was really powerful. That experience convinced me to dedicate my career to expanding UDL in Wisconsin. Although I'm now retired from my role as a UDL systems coach for the state of Wisconsin, my work hasn't stopped. I continue to mentor and consult with agencies, districts, and schools that are exploring or deepening their commitment to Universal Design for Learning. I see my current role as both a guide and a connector, helping leaders and educators translate the framework into sustainable systems that support every learner. Retirement has simply shifted my vantage point. My commitment to UDL remains as strong as ever.

LOUI:

Nice, nice, and Michelle?

MICHELLE:

Well, even though I'm officially retired from public education in Wisconsin, I don't see myself stepping away from UDL. The framework has been such an important part of my professional journey, and I still feel a really strong pull to support educators and systems as they grow in this work. Retirement has given me a new lens. So I'm really excited that I get to choose different ways to contribute, whether it's mentoring, sharing resources, or as Jo mentioned, being that connector and connecting with others who are passionate about UDL. It feels less like closing a door and more like shifting into a new role where I can continue to advocate for the kind of learning environments that all students deserve. One thing that stuck out to me when you asked the question of, you know, when did I fall in love with UDL? For me, I fell in love with UDL when I realized it wasn't just another initiative. It was a framework that truly centered students, and in Wisconsin, so many of our state priorities were focused on equity and access and continuous improvement. And UDL really brought all of those threads together and gave us a common language for designing learning, removing barriers, honoring student variability, and aligning with the broader vision of our state, which is to ensure every learner is prepared for success. So that's really what clicked for me. UDL wasn't something extra. It was the way to make those priorities come alive in classrooms.

LOUI:

Wonderful. Well, thank you both. And your passion rings through. So it's really nice for everyone else to hear that. We decided that today we were going to talk about the UDL Implementation Trials Mentor Toolkit, but I need to tell listeners up front that this toolkit has a ton of information and guidance in it. So we only have time for just this overview, but toward the end of this podcast, everyone will hear about how you also can access this toolkit. So I just want to give that little caveat up front. The work started in 2014 and 2015 through a partnership with CAST to support the implementation of UDL statewide in Wisconsin. And then together, you created this toolkit around the stages of implementation science, and then you put those supports in place. So with all that, will you give listeners an overview of, I think it's a six parts is a nice way to start to help people understand this toolkit, and then why you chose that organization.

MICHELLE:

Absolutely. The trials are modeled after Plan, Do, Study, Act Cycles of Improvement. So what we wanted to do was give the readers an overview of the implementation trials and then the toolkit. So the first two parts are really dedicated to creating that awareness of what are implementation trials? And how do I use this toolkit? Parts three and five are really the guidebook for mentors to prepare and lead those school-based teams through the trial cycles. So these parts will help with planning, with practicing, the data collection, and the data analysis in order to reflect on the impact that UDL practices are having in the classroom. One of the things that we really wanted to stress was mentors. The toolkit is for mentors who are facilitating and guiding teams through this process. So each part has a common cadence. Each stage includes a learn, grow, lead, and know section. And that provides mentors flexibility to choose the level of support they need. A more experienced mentor who's done this may not need to go

through that learn stage each time, but the tools, and the knowledge base, and adjustments that can be made along the way are all included in the toolkit. And the end of the toolkit, our part six, focuses on next steps, really thinking about sustainability and scalability. So we wanted to make sure that the trials weren't just a short term project, but something that can take root and grow within a school, district and an organization.

LOUI:

Wonderful. And I want to emphasize to people who are going to go look at this toolkit that, as you said, Michelle, the first two parts, that overview of UDL implementation trials and then the mentor toolkit.... I'll take a sidestep here and say, I'm the person who, when I unbox the thing, I just start fiddling with it. I just start doing it. And then my husband will tease me sometimes and say, "You know, there's an instruction manual." And I'm like, "I know, but I want to figure it out on my own. I just want to work through the thing." And that's fine for a mechanical object. But when we're thinking about something like implementation and getting your brain wrapped around what this really means, I would just encourage everyone really to take the time. You guys have authored something that's so clear and really plainly stated. It's not a lot of reading, and those first two parts are just so valuable to set everyone up to understand how to use this toolkit. So I just, I'm adding in my extra little emphasis there before I go to my next question.

MICHELLE:

Well, Loui, one thing that I do want to mention, you know, a lot of people when they enter the toolkit, reading for the first time and going through information for the first time is usually their first approach. But what Jo and I wanted to do was really design a toolkit that had UDL as its foundation. So throughout the toolkit, you'll see some vignettes, some audio recordings that really walk folks through the different information. We have some visuals. So along with the reading, folks can get a sense of the information with various modes and means of access.

LOUI:

It's really lovely. You really did design for accessibility and you designed for variability. And it's just, it's a beautiful example that people can kind of do that reflection as they go along through that too. So moving into the really key part of the design and that mentoring aspect, can one of you talk about why that is so important? How you support mentors, and how you know mentoring is so key to the success of UDL implementation?

JO:

Well, Loui, our philosophy has always been that we want whoever picks up this toolkit to become self-sufficient with it. Schools and districts know what's best for the students that they serve, and they have to own the impact that they have. They can't bring in an outside expert or consultant and think that that person is the key to successes that they see in their classroom. We've seen time and time again reinvigoration or development of collective efficacy in schools and districts using implementation trials. That was a side benefit that we didn't plan into the toolkit, but it definitely comes out in everybody who picks up the process. So the key to that is that the leaders of the process in the school are colleagues, not outside consultants. Our job is to coach those beginning mentors of the trial and and the job of the toolkit is to enable those

mentors of the trials, whether they're principals, teacher leaders, or curriculum professionals within a district, to effectively use the toolkit to lead collective learning about UDL planning and practicing new teaching approaches to serve the variability of students in all of their classrooms. And then, as Michelle said, analyzing that data for impact in a common way, in a common language, and then planning next system-wide implementation steps. Although we envision districts having internal mentors, sometimes the capacity of the district, especially in Wisconsin, we have a lot of rural districts that don't have just the people hours to be able to mentor teams through these trials, that requires them to have external mentors. And that's been our experience that it works either with the internal or external mentors.

LOUI:

Mm-hmm.

MICHELLE:

So one of the things that we really wanted to do with the toolkit was help the mentors understand their roles and responsibilities in this process. So we see the mentor wearing five different hats. The planner, being able to take into consideration what that short-term planning for the trials and the team meetings are, but also looking at long-range planning with school leaders, and connecting the trials to district priorities so it doesn't become a project or initiative. We also see the mentor wearing the facilitator hats, the advisor hat. They are a key data guide, to really make sense of the data once it's collected. But even before that, to be a partner in supporting the collection and the gathering of classroom and student level data in this process. And then to be that learning leader where they're not only building their own knowledge and skills in the trials process, but also providing opportunities to create learning amongst their teams, and even with the bigger system and staff that can be involved in the future with UDL trials.

LOUI:

Great. Great. All right. So I'm going to take the prerogative as the podcast host and tell listeners this one's longer than 15 minutes because Jo and Michelle, I'd love for you to walk through an example of a mentoring relationship, and then how that mentoring relationship created actual change in a school. And I think it's key to tag this on here and not create another podcast because I think people will really want to see this circle closed, they would love to have this story.

JO:

Yeah, I'm going to bring up a Northern Wisconsin district, the school district of Niagara. And they approached using the toolkit and the implementation trials process as a multi-year implementation, as all implementations should be planned for. And the first year being an exploration year where they had an external person come in and coach teacher leaders through the trials. And that first team of teachers was called cohort one. And they explored learning about UDL. They explored how to lead other teams through the trials, and they experienced the trials themselves so that they could be the next year's experts to mentor a scaled implementation with teams from the entire staff in the district. So in that year two then, teacher

leaders became the mentors for the remaining staff and teams. And I want to just go back that in year one, there was a lot of problem solving. So where things didn't work out, they adjusted that trial process so that it worked within their district with their teachers. They adjusted schedules. They made sure the next year's professional development schedule supported teachers and collaboration time so that it wouldn't, as Michelle was explaining, feel like an additional thing, that it was designed in and it became the focus of their professional development to have a positive impact on students. So in that year two, then teachers were prepared. The teacher leaders had experienced some of those problems. Had already worked out those frustrations and were able to listen to the new frustrations that the scaled up teachers experienced and assure them or problem solve with them, so that as they scaled up the trials process, that it wasn't brick wall, that those teachers that maybe weren't the first adopters, the ones that, you know, sometimes have a bit of resistance. Resistance to doing something that they are less comfortable with or don't want to, they saw that their voice mattered...

LOUI:

Mm-hmm.

JO:

...and that they had some control in how this was going to roll out. The impact was that the whole staff implementation was met with much less resistance than previous innovations because the voice of change were their colleagues. Student engagement increased for them, and the teacher collective efficacy was reported by not just the teachers that were there, but by the administration. And they all stated that the culture of the district had changed in ways that they were focused on how their practices, their teaching moves, really impacted students and not about bus schedules or what textbook to use. It got to the art of teaching and how those design choices we make in the classroom really impact the experience students have.

LOUI:

Mm-hmm.

JO:

And broadly across Wisconsin in 24-25, the people that participated in the trials for the state of Wisconsin, we had over 17,000 classroom observations of over 1,700 students. And we saw student engagement increase a lot, especially for students who were underserved.

LOUI:

That's beautiful. That's beautiful. There were so many things to talk about here. So the first thing that just made my heart sing was that in this process, and you had talked about this earlier, both of you, that this was designed. It was designed through the UDL lens and using UDL. And so the expectation of the variability that all the teachers were going to bring. And so you developed a context that said all are welcome. All voices are heard. We recognize that everyone's gonna come with their own skillsets, and their own knowledge background, and we're all going to be working on this together. However, there is a goal. There is a goal. And that goal is what we are

moving toward. And we are going to appreciate you and support you with all the variability you bring. There's a goal. And I think this is where a lot of efforts get hung up because there isn't that clearly stated goal and also kind of an overarching goal, and then also these smaller goals. And so because you have this mentoring tool set up to have these smaller goals along the way, people can see and sense their own growth and can see, "Oh, we're in the problem solving stage. This is where we're going to start designing so that we will create a successful platform for everyone within the year-two." That's just one example that stuck out to me. And then your comments about that teacher's collective efficacy. Then everyone sensing that they're part of this collective and they see themselves as effective. And they see these results because of your data collection. And they can understand that student engagement just isn't one column of Universal Design for Learning. Because unfortunately, people get stuck there. And so when we talk about an increase in student engagement, yes, it's because we've provided better representations for all of them, and we've provided them a lot of different ways to demonstrate their knowledge and to do all the goal setting and to create a life for themselves as learners where they are being effective learners. But that engagement doesn't just, again, sit in the one column. It infuses all of those areas. And so when you talk about the increase in student engagement, and I know this is what you also meant, is that that's such a key for everything else for the outcomes of our learners. Oh, I could go on forever with this, but this is just incredible. I love that you talked about at the beginning that both of you are passionate about this. Just because you've retired from your work with the state does not mean you're stepping away. You are still eager to help people understand Universal Design for Learning. You're still eager to help them understand this toolkit. And so we're going to provide people with access to how they get to the toolkit and how they get to the two of you. And you can get started with this toolkit yourself.

So thank you, Jo and Michelle. Thank you so much for being guests today.

MICHELLE:

Thank you, Loui. We really appreciate having this conversation with you and keeping the toolkit and the UDL work alive across the states and not just in Wisconsin, but we hope this can benefit a lot of different students in a lot of classrooms nationwide.

LOUI:

Yeah, I think it will.

JO:

Thank you, Loui. It was so nice to talk to you today.

LOUI:

You're welcome. 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. 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 build learner agency.