UDL in 15 Minutes
With Gordon Eldridge
Episode 141 - 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 Gordon Eldridge, Director of Curriculum and Professional Development at the International School of Brussels. Gordon is going to share how he is looking at his school's assessment policy through the lens of UDL. Welcome, Gordon.

GORDON:
Hi, Loui, nice to speak to you again.

LOUI:
Thank you. Thank you for being on the podcast. So can you share a bit about your background in education?

GORDON:
Sure, I started my educational life as a classroom teacher in German language and history. I ended up moving to a very small startup school in Japan at some point, and then kind of dropped into the role of school head, not deliberately. I was approached to do it and originally said no, but ended up taking the job, and I realized very quickly as the head of school that one of my big deficits in leadership was a lack of curriculum knowledge. And so, I was actually really terrified of curriculum at that point in my life, and so I went out, I did a bunch of reading, I went out and I did courses. I kind of tried to make myself as expert as I could, and it ended up becoming the part of school leadership that I enjoy the most. And so following on from that, I've ended up being a trainer for the curriculum course in international school leadership for the Principal's Training Centre. And when I left the job of head of school, I took a job as curriculum director at the International School of Brussels. So now my job is only curriculum. And that's where I've stayed ever since. I've been here for 18 years now.

LOUI:
Wow. Oh, my gosh. So the thing that scared you the most is where you ended up. That's lovely.

GORDON:
Yeah, indeed.

LOUI:
That's a true growth story right there. So when did you become interested in UDL and what compelled you to apply it?

GORDON:
UDL is one of those things you kind of always hear about. Like if you're in the world of schools,

people talk about it. People talk about how good it is. I kind of did a little bit of investigation and looked at it. And inherently it's very appealing, of course, right? Because you plan up front; you still do differentiation later, but you've built in so many things up front that allow for students to access the learning. But every time I kind of looked at that page and saw all those bullets, I was like, I kind of just shelved it to another time. Even though many of the bullets made lots of sense to me, I couldn't immediately see how they held together. I did a workshop at some stage that wasn't really helpful. It was too vague, had no real practical application. And so when I saw your course at ECIS, I thought this is my chance to look at it more in depth and consider how I actually start to apply this work.

LOUI:
Ah, okay. So you really took the deep dive into the pool. Because as you said, that we met during that ECIS UDL certification course. And we ask each participant to compile a culminating portfolio, which really demonstrates, not only your depth of understanding, but more importantly, how you're going to be using it within your context so that it actually is a useful framework. So it was within that process that you had the idea to think about your school's assessment policy. But how did you get there? Because I know we didn't even touch on that during the course. So this is a journey that you took on your own.

GORDON:
Yeah, well, I guess I was trying to approach the course from my own current needs as a director of curriculum. And so like, as you mentioned, the portfolio, and I certainly did some portfolio artifacts that were based around my own classroom teaching and that applied it within the classroom. But I wanted to try and do something that would also work in my role as a leader. And I think as I was trying to, like I said, look through all those daunting bullets and make sense of them, I kind of in my own head, wrapping my own head around them, I saw the UDL guidelines as a set of deep principles with some goals attached to them. So, for example, one that's particularly dear to my own heart as a curriculum person, the whole guideline around building knowledge, I see that the underlying principle behind that is that deep understanding requires students to make powerful connections, powerful for connections between their prior knowledge, between their prior knowledge and important concepts, between the important concepts themselves, and also connections to the contexts in which they occur and the situations in which they're learning them. So I see that as like a principle that underlines that whole knowledge, building knowledge piece. And then I see all the bullets underneath it as a set of goals to sort of put that principle into practice. And so, for example, one goal is to connect prior knowledge to new learning. That's one of the goals that will help you put that deep understanding into practice. And then it started to help me see that I don't necessarily need all of the goals all of the time. And sometimes I might need more goals that are actually listed under the bullets, but it helped me kind of see each of those boxes on the UDL framework a little more holistically. And then when I drilled down to the next level, I started to see the considerations as a set of strategies that would help you meet each of those goals. So the goal that I just mentioned to connect prior knowledge to new learning, one strategy, is to use advanced organizers, but there are many, many strategies that could do that. So I think once I, sort of reconstruct my thinking at the time, once I started to think about them as principles and

as in general, actually learning principles, then I started to be able to see their relevance beyond the classroom to all kinds of places where you would apply learning principles, one of those being an assessment policy.

LOUI:
Yeah. And I'm going to take a little bit of a turn here because in your description, what I appreciated is the use that you were saying of goal, and talking about seeing the, what in the UDL world, we talk about the guidelines,you saw those as, “Oh, this is the direction I'm heading.” And what I also appreciate about the conversation. So any educational framework, any educational paradigm has a language associated with it, but there are times when we have to make that language our own. And so in your exploration of the three principles of engagement, representation, action and expression, and the nine guidelines, and then those considerations, you needed to find a way that made sense to you. And I just want to point that out here within the podcast. This is where I encourage people to be a little bit looser. And so we can think about UDL in ways that help us within our realm. So I think it's perfect. So shifting back to the assessment policy, a lot of educators and non-educators see UDL as a classroom only framework, but you see that UDL is something more powerful. So I'd love for you to talk about that.

GORDON:
As I said, I started to see it as like the underpinning piece behind each one of the guidelines as being sort of a principle that described important sort of facets of learning and with those goals and strategies attached. And as you said, like I really needed to make that language my own because that's the way I describe other pieces of my work. I talk about the difference between principles and rules and those kinds of things. So that was a really helpful sort of move for me. But I guess yeah, once you start to see them as learning principles, you can apply them in all kinds of different places. So, if you look at the strategy development guideline, if I think about the principle that underlines that, it's something along the lines that student agency is built through recurrent cycles of goal setting, monitoring progress, and reflecting. And the foundations of those cycles is a flexible repertoire of strategies. So if I want to, as a goal, enhance the capacity of students to monitor progress, then I can create a recording checklist as a strategy, all kinds of things to do that. But I can also use that beyond the classroom to think about, “Well, you know, when students are building their skills, student leaders also build their skills. How can I apply that to our student leadership program? And how can I think about the kind of the particular goals that the student leaders might have and how can I help them build strategies to meet those goals and help them to really use that idea of strategy development to set goals, monitor their progress towards those goals and adjust their strategies to meet them?” And I started to see sort of all kinds of different places where these UDL guidelines could kind of morph out of the classroom into other areas of the school.

LOUI:
Yeah. Yeah. I also want to ask a question about as a curriculum director, and as you're looking at the curriculum and helping other classroom educators, because you are also teaching courses, but to see the inherent flexibility in the curriculum. Because sometimes educators can

look at a curriculum, think, “Oh, I have to teach this.” And then possibly in their mind, they think, “Oh, I have to teach it in this way.” And then of course, a tenant of UDL is flexibility. So what kind of conversations, or what kind of guidance do you offer to other teachers to help them see the flexibility within the curriculum?

GORDON:
Well, that's a really interesting question, Loui, and I think it depends a little bit on the way schools define curriculum as such and the level to which their teachers are given that flexibility. So at ISB, we sort of think of curriculum as the top level stuff, the set of standards and benchmarks that every student is expected to achieve. And we see the next level down, whether those are put into unit plans, as being very much a teacher responsibility and teams will do that or sometimes individual teachers will do that. But we really understand that if you're going to get your class of students to meet those standards and benchmarks, you're doing it in the context of you as a teacher, in the context of a different class of students every year that all have different needs. And so we realized that at that level of curriculum, the unit plan and and very particularly the lesson plan, it has to be how you're going to best work towards achieving those learning targets with your students in that moment, given the context you're in.

LOUI:
Lovely. So then if we go back up to that top part, the standards and the benchmarks, this is where you're stopping and pausing and saying, “Hmm, as our standards and benchmarks are currently written, how do they allow for the inherent flexibility of UDL? Am I correct?

GORDON:
Yes, indeed, that's true. Yeah. So one of the things that's not necessarily easy to do, but that I think is really important is that we make it a very strong distinction in curriculum learning targets between what is meant to be understanding, what's meant to be knowledge, what's meant to be skills and what's meant to be dispositions. Because if we go back to the example I mentioned earlier, the knowledge building idea, and we understand that deep understanding is built from the smaller pieces of knowledge and the concepts, then we need to identify the bigger pieces of understanding as the major targets that we'll take our students towards. And once we've done that, it's possible to get there with all different kinds of knowledge that might be relevant in different contexts with different classes at different times. And so we might decide as our, sort of, overall learning targets, not to be as prescriptive about the particular knowledge, not to say that knowledge is and not important, it's hugely important, but you can meet those understanding targets with different bodies of knowledge.

LOUI:
Yeah, exactly. I think what I'm hearing and where I'm nodding my head is that when, for example, when we get stuck on a piece of knowledge that we want our learners to have, sometimes when benchmarks or standards are written, the method or the materials sneak in there. And when we push ourselves to leave that out, then we allow for that flexibility that UDL is helping us apply. So now we know, “Oh, this is the piece of knowledge that we want to assert within our unit plans and our lesson plans”, but guess what? You get to look for the methods

and the materials that you want to use to help your learners achieve that piece of knowledge.

GORDON:
Indeed.

LOUI:
Excellent. Gordon, this has been wonderful. I really appreciate this. This has been a deeper dive into a conversation about curriculum and I think it's going to really benefit so many people. So I deeply appreciate the conversation.

Gordon
You're very welcome. Pleasure talking to you.

LOUI:
You're welcome. So for those listening to this podcast, you can find supplemental materials like an image montage with closed captioning, a transcript, and an associated blog at my website, which is the www.udlapproach.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.udlapproach.com And thanks to everyone for your work in revolutionizing education through UDL and making it our goal to support learner agency.