

UDL in 15 Minutes with Justin Freedman

Transcript

LOUI: Hello and welcome to UDL and 15 minutes, where educators discuss their experiences with UDL. I'm Loui Lord Nelson, UDL author and leader. Today I'm talking with Justin Freedman who is an assistant professor of interdisciplinary and inclusive education at Rowan University in Glassboro, New Jersey. Today, Justin is going to share how he Designs his college courses to go beyond compliance to truly create successful learning environment for all learners. Hi Justin. How are you?

JUSTIN: I'm doing great, thanks so much for having me on.

LOUI: Oh, you're very welcome. Thanks for coming on. We really appreciate it. So, would you share with us the journey you took to get to higher ed settings?

JUSTIN: Sure, yeah. So, becoming a university professor wasn't necessarily something I planned on doing. I got my teaching certification in secondary education and then in social studies, and then a masters and teaching certification in special education, and became a high school special education teacher. But special education wasn't really exactly what I thought it would be. Honestly, I thought the focus would be on altering the environment to support students' individual learning differences but a lot of what I saw as a teacher, and learned in my master's courses, was really a focus on these broad disability labels and the idea that students with disabilities have these deficits that we should try to kind of get rid of or minimize to make them more like non-disabled students. And I also saw students with disabilities, including those in my high school class, who are really not encouraged to be in the general education classroom unless they performed or behaved in certain ways. And that was really hard emotionally for me as a person who myself, I was diagnosed with a learning disability and with ADHD, and I received special education services. So I was kind of struggling with that identity and what I was seeing as a teacher. Then I heard about the PhD program in special education up at Syracuse University and the focus of the research and teaching there is in a field called Disability Studies and the emphasis is on this social model of disability. And that's an approach where we can think about disability in a way that we sort of shift the focus away from just changing the individual and more to modifying the environment, to make it more accessible. And up at Syracuse's is where I learned about the idea of Universal Design for Learning as a way to kind of put that social model of disability into action. And I was hoping that I'd be able to influence the way pre-service teachers think about teaching students with disabilities through my teaching and research and I'm fortunate to have that opportunity now as a professor at Rowan University.

LOUI: Yeah, and then you recently did some research that informed your teaching. So, can you talk a little bit about that and what outcomes have come from that research?

JUSTIN: Sure, so my dissertation study was about how students with disabilities talk to their professors in college about accommodations. So, for anybody who's not familiar, typically a college student will register as having a disability at their college and university, and then they'll be provided with a letter outlining their individual accommodations, which then they're typically expected to present this letter to individual professors, for each of their courses. I did this many times when I was an undergraduate student. In this study we use the simulation model that's been used in medical education and teacher education, where we basically trained an actor to portray a professor, and each of the participating students met with that professor in a room that looked like a professor's office, and the conversations about the accommodations were all recorded and students got to watch how they talked about their accommodations. So much really interesting stuff came out of those videos and out of the students' reflections. For example, the way students start that conversation about their accommodations by minimizing or apologizing, sort of, you know, "These are just my accommodations, but I'm going to try not to use them, you know, if I can avoid it." And also, these kind of power dynamics. Students who didn't want to challenge the professor or assert themselves student who said, you know, "I don't want to fight with the professor." So, a lot of times students kind of backed off using their accommodations, especially the female students back down from asserting themselves when there was a male professor. But what stuck out to me the most about those results, was this repeating theme that students felt they were put in this stigmatizing position when they have to go every semester to talk to professors about their accommodations, give them a letter, and they feel like they're starting their relationship with the professor in a way that they're asking for this special treatment. And that's not really how they want to start their relationship. And so that got me thinking about, can we build these accommodations that are in these letters of accommodations into the course using a Universal Design approach in order to kind of build a more inclusive and accessible environment in the first place?

LOUI: Nice. And that's exactly what you've done.

JUSTIN: That's right. So, a couple of examples I've been doing for the last couple of years now at Syracuse University and now down here at Rowan University is looking at that letter of accommodations and saying, okay, can I build flexible course policies that will support these needs? So, for example, an accommodation you might commonly see for college student would be having a peer note taker. So, the university might hire a student in the class to be the note taker designated for that student. What I do now in my class is to make it a participation grade assignment for all students to sign up to be a

note taker at least once in a semester. So, every single class I've got usually two students who are taking the class notes. And then those notes get posted online for all students to access. And it still leaves the opportunity for that student who has a disability to say, "Well, I still want to have a dedicated note taker," but from my experience, no one has done that yet. All students have been fine with this idea that we have class notes that are every single class. Another thing I do is to provide extended deadlines to all students as needed. So you might typically see on a syllabus for a college course something like, "There will be no assignments accepted after the deadline." Or "It'll be 10 points off every day." In my syllabus you'd see something that says, "All students are expected to need extensions on deadlines at least once throughout the semester. As long as they communicate with me, as the professor, there'll be no questions asked." And so, students are able to ask for extensions anytime they need it. And from my experience, typically only a few students, if I've got a class of 20, maybe only three or four students actually seek extended deadlines, but it just gives them that opportunity to do that. And then another one is extended time on testing and separate testing environment. So that's a really common testing modification for students with disabilities, but in my class when I have done a midterm exam, all students can have access to extra time. And then I set up a small conference room with another colleague who's familiar with the course content, and all students can request if they would like the smaller testing environment and usually a few students will select that. So regardless of whether or not you identify with a disability or not, whether you have accommodations, these accommodations are built in to the course environment.

LOUI: Nice. Now I'm sure that some of our listeners may be wondering if you have received any pushback from your administration from other professors or even students in this work. In the UDL community this is awesome, of course. We're loving this, but I bet people are asking that other question, too.

JUSTIN: Yeah, and I was kind of anticipating that feedback, and what I kind of did, and what I've been doing to address questions that come up sort of proactively is we created a video, me and some colleagues, of students' reactions to participating in this course. And we use this video to show faculty members, to show administrators, students speaking up about their experience. And some of the things that we asked the students in the video was what, what was it like to be in a class of these policies? Do you think it affected the rigor of the class because that's a common concern with these types of policies? What was so interesting about the students' responses in the videos were students without disabilities who didn't receive accommodations said things like, being in this course allowed them to express their work. And really to the best of their abilities. When I think about the idea of Universal Design and minimizing threats and distractions, one student in particular said, "I was able to show what I really knew over the course of the semester, not, could I meet the deadline, and show whatever I knew at that time.

Could I finish the test in 60 minutes? It was more about what could I show over the course of the semester with the flexibility built in, so that idea of Universal Design of, it's not really decreasing the rigor, it's just creating the optimal circumstances for students to express what they know. And then for students with disabilities, a couple who took part in reflecting on the course talked about how this kind of took the target off of their back, because yeah they had that letter of accommodations, but the reality of it is, if those accommodations were already built into the course, then that letter of accommodations come becomes just more symbolic. It's something that guarantees their protection but in reality, in practice, it's not special treatment anymore, because those accommodations are already built. And so, I think letting students' voices come through and share those experience has put people's concerns at ease in terms of, you know, changing some of these really entrenched practices around how we run college courses.

LOUI: Yeah, and I can already plan on people asking, "Is that video available?" Would other people be able to see that video?

JUSTIN: I can share some transcripts with you. I'd be happy to do that.

LOUI: That would be awesome. And then I had one other question that came to mind which was: there's a difference between, of course, Universal Design and Universal Design for Learning and often, what we see at the higher end level is Universal Design. It's more focused on, of course the physical accommodations, and you really have brought Universal Design for Learning to life because you've gone into the framework and actually used not only the principles, guidelines, checkpoints, but this holistic thinking about variability and then accessibility, flexibility, choices, and etc. How have you helped your other colleagues understand either the difference between the two or help them move toward Universal Design for Learning.

JUSTIN: Yeah, I think it's starting with examples is the best way to do it. You know, the idea of building in accommodations into courses is something that's, you know, going to be somewhat individualized to the courses of people in different fields. Not everyone is going to have the same structures. And so, really kind of presenting this in a way... I like to introduce it to faculty around this idea of beyond compliance and so for that, what that means to me is you know we're very focused on compliance in terms of accommodations, students have protections. It's kind of this political model, identity-based model, and that's very important, but oftentimes, delivering accommodations in a way that focuses on compliance doesn't always create the meaningful or dignifying participation that's the spirit of the law. And to give an example of that, I've a student from my study telling me that she uses a laptop in class but a professor has a rule for no laptops and so the professor says, "Nobody except one student should be using a laptop!" And of course, that outs heard front of the whole class. And so the idea that I try

to convey to my colleagues, is that what we're trying to do here is to work within the legal frameworks that we have to use Universal Design [sic for Learning] to create more meaningful and dignifying participation, where students have choice, where students are able to... even if they don't have a disability to access some flexibility. And I think that there's a lot of research out there that backs up the idea that, even students who don't have disabilities experience periods of stress that can have similar effects on their learning. And so, we want to create circumstances that allow for students to have a bad day, to allow for students to need some kind of support regardless of whether they identify with a disability or not. And the Universal Design [sic for Learning] is a way to do that.

LOUI: Yeah, this is fabulous. So, one last quick question. How did you come to know about UDL? You said you came to it through your work at Syracuse? Did you mostly focus on CAST tools? Were there other supports that you used?

JUSTIN: Yeah, so I came to it, actually the first day up at Syracuse. We had a presentation on Universal Design for all graduate students coming in, by Wendy Harbour. Wendy Harbour was at Syracuse University as a professor and she's now with AHEAD, the Association on Higher Education and Disability, and she did this amazing presentation about Universal Design for Learning, and that's how I really got into it. And I really, since you know the CAST has, you know, put such great resources out there in the last couple years, I really go to the guidelines as I'm planning my teaching. And, really, I think mostly about accommodations, of course, as I talked about, but I go to the guidelines for thinking about all aspects of my teaching, providing ongoing support for students, minimizing threats and distractions, providing multiple options for how they express themselves. So I really go to those guidelines and I also teach my pre-service teachers to use those guidelines as they're observing lessons in the field. How would they then implement those guidelines, or how would they change that lesson by implementing those guidelines of Universal Design for Learning?

LOUI: Well, Justin I'm going to bet that everybody wishes that all pre-teachers were in your courses, because you're giving them fabulous experiences as learners. So, they're learning about Universal Design for Learning from the learner perspective and then you're also helping them understand it from that educator's perspective so thank you so, so much for helping create a cadre of students who are going to take this on into the future.

JUSTIN: Thanks so much.

LOUI: Oh, you're welcome and thanks again for being on UDL in 15 minutes this was a great interview. I really appreciate it.

JUSTIN: Me too. Thanks again for having me.

LOUI: Oh yes. For those of you 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, www.theUDLApproach.com/media. 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 develop expert learners.