

UDL in 15 Minutes Transcript

Kate Stanley

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 Kate Stanley who is a multi-age, third and fourth grade teacher at Madison Elementary School in Madison New Hampshire. Today, Kate is going to share how she puts agency in the hands of her learners. Hi Kate, how are you?

KATE: I'm great. I'm really happy to be here.

LOUI: Oh, awesome. It's great to talk to you. So, can you share a bit about your teaching background and your school?

KATE: Sure! I've been actually teaching for, I think this is my 21st year. Prior to coming to public school I taught in private childcare centers, teaching anywhere from 13 months to age six. So, I had a vast range of experience before I came to public school. The school I teach at now is a rural New Hampshire school. We have about 140 kids. And we are completely multi age with the exception of kindergarten. That stands alone.

LOUI: Okay, so like first and second or together. Third and fourth are together. Is that how it goes?

KATE: Correct. Yep, and we have at least two in each grade level, so it helps with numbers and it helps us... the a philosophy behind it is just amazing that kids learn from each other. So it fits really well is with UDL practices.

LOUI: Absolutely.

KATE: We have ten classrooms total, so we're a fairly small school.

LOUI: Yeah, and now your big thing is student agency, like we talked about in the introduction, it's a huge thing. So, when you say agency what do you mean?

KATE: So, agency for me is that give the kids the lessons that they need, teach them the curriculum, but then really let them take it and run with it in the way they need to explore it. My students are allowed to go at their own pace and again I'm working with third and fourth graders, but they can do it. They can work at their own pace and move through things with independence, and with drive on their own. What I've noticed in the last couple years of doing this is that they really do want it in their hands and they really

like to move through the curriculum on their own and not be held back by, you know, oh we have to get through one lesson a day. Or the, you know in math in particular is where my brain is right now, so in math in particular, you can only get through one lesson a day, but that's really not the way it is. If I have a student who can move quickly through lessons and their understanding it and why hold them back and only do one lesson a day? And then on the flip side of that, if I am a student who needs a little bit more time then we can give them that, and that's okay. It's okay to give them that little bit of extra time to master those skills.

LOUI: Yeah, so I can imagine that there are teachers listening to this and they're like, how does she even start this? So like what were your first steps in and then where did you go with it to get to this point where you're comfortable providing these different types of lessons to learners within this same environment?

KATE: So, I think, one of my biggest ways I start, is that I start each year with letting the students set our environment up, because every student is different every group of students is different. The dynamics are different. Even though I keep a portion of my kids every year, the dynamics change.

LOUI: Right.

KATE: So, I don't start the year with my room completely setup. My furniture is in the middle of the room kind of in a pile, and we walk in and we talk about what we need, what they need. A really great example of changes, so this year, one of my students who was with me last year said, "We need a science area. We need a place where we have the tools we need to really explore and observe things." And so, that area has now been created this year. So it takes us about three days. I start the first day of school just brainstorming what we need and then they get to work. This year they got to work in teams. They decided that that's what they wanted to do. They didn't want to do it individually, so again, that's putting that control into their hands that, you know, a young third grader walking into this classroom might be nervous about the fact that they have to draw the space. I paired him up with a fourth grader who has done this before. And it was really beautiful [overtalking]. It was at the groupings were my decision this year, right at the beginning because I kind of know being in a school of 140 kids you kind of know all of the kids even before they come to you, and so, I knew who they were and

who they might work well with. I also know my fourth graders incredibly well. And I knew where I wanted to see their skills blossom.

LOUI: Now when it comes to them trying out their ideas, do they know what's available to them? Like do you give them a list of resources or just say, "Okay we have desks, we have chairs," and blah blah blah blah, or are they kind of going with this with a blue sky method?

KATE: Not really a blue sky method. All the furniture that we have available to us is in the classroom at the time. I'm also a 100% flexible seating classroom. I don't assign seats. Students are allowed to sit wherever they want to to work with some guidance from me as to, you know, talking through, you know, "Is this a good place for you?" if I'm seeing that it may not be, and maybe brainstorming with them why it might not be a good space for them. There's a lot of control in the hands of my students.

LOUI: Yeah, yeah. So, this talks about the furniture. So then how did you shift to the lesson planning part of this and like the delivery of instruction?

KATE: Yeah, so we were a competency-based school this year for the first time, but I've been working with competencies for the last, probably, actually for as long as I've been here. And I really feel like kids should be able to move through as they need to.

And it took a lot of letting go of control for me of the curriculum in general, just saying, you know, "Here are the materials. Here's what we need to get accomplished." So I do share standards with students and competencies with students. So they do understand what they're working towards not just that I'm their teacher and this is what I say you have to do. And providing a lot of choice in that. Just last week I had a student who was working on some back to school math review and he can add and subtract with regrouping in his head. And typically, I'm one who says, "Oh, you have to show me your work." So I walked over to him and I saw he had just written the answer down on the paper and I was like, "Are you going to show your work?" And he said, "Well, no, I did it in my head," and I said, "Well can you just tell me how you did it?" He said, "Sure!" and he explained, walked me through what he did. It was exactly what he needed to do. And there's no reason for me to have it in writing. So it's really just putting that into their hands and it kind of, for those kids who have a hard time writing it frees them up to be able to just talk through it with me.

LOUI: And so for those educators who struggle with that, what would you say to them? They struggle with that, if the students aren't writing it down, then they really can't assess it. So how would you help your colleague move through that?

KATE: So, for me, it was a, it was a shift for sure. And I think for me it's trusting in our students. Putting that trust into them that they do know what they're doing and having a conversation with them. Really, it's about building relationships, I think for me, that's what it comes down to, for me, is building relationships with the kids and really knowing them. And knowing that, which ones can. So I know which ones can talk me through it and I know which ones can't, you know, which ones can...who feel more comfortable writing it down and not talking to me about it. And I think just knowing your students is really the place to start really building those relationships at the beginning, which is hard when you only have them for a year, but really putting that time in and that first six weeks of school building those relationships.

LOUI: Absolutely. And then, can you paint for us when your students walk in to your classroom today, tomorrow, how does that work? What does that look like? Because it sounds like maybe they don't start off in any kind of group instruction. Do they already move to these spaces on their own or how do you manage that? And I'm sure it changes day to day but maybe give an example! [overtalking] [laughter]

KATE: It absolutely does change day to day! So, we're actually in my classroom and in our grade level, we actually have specials like within the first 15 minutes of the school day so they go off to art or music or, or library. But I do start my day, once they come back from those, in a morning meeting. Sitting down and chatting with them about their night, talking about what our day is going to look like so they're clear as to what our day is going to look like. But I don't, like you said, teach, really, whole group instruction. I do a lot of small group, a lot of individual, I am moving all of the time in my classroom from student to student, but the students, again, because we're multi-age, my students actually take on that role of a teacher as well sometimes. So some of my fourth graders will help my third graders, some of my third graders will help my fourth graders if they're at different places. So they understand the concept and maybe the fourth grader doesn't. There's a buzz about my room that is very just focused and learners just working and learning all the time.

LOUI: Yeah. And then to your students know that they're gaining agency? How do you talk to them? What language do you use with your third and fourth graders to help them understand what skill they're gaining?

KATE: We do talk a lot about the fact that they have a lot of choice in our classroom.

LOUI: Um-Hm.

KATE: We do talk about the fact that the learning is theirs. It's their job to be learning it's my job to, to share information with them, but it's their job to take it in, mull it around, throw it around in their head and come back with what they've gained. So we do talk a lot about that, that the learning is theirs, so that's my job is to be here and facilitate their learning but my job is not to make them learn.

LOUI: Yea.

KATE: 'Cause you can't really make anybody learn anything, so...

LOUI: Right, right.

KATE:...if they really don't want to, so it's my job to provide options that spark the interest in them. Sometimes they'll come to me with an idea that they want to explore or learn about. And if I can fit it into our competencies somehow, we make it work. You know there might be a topic that they want to explore more, well I can make that fit into every time period, really.

LOUI: Yeah, yeah, yeah. And then one last question...

KATE: Sure

LOUI:... because we haven't really even talked about it, the whole UDL thing, and we've just got about a minute or a minute and half left here, how did UDL advance this for you because I know you were already working in this way and a lot of ways, but how did UDL advance this for you?

KATE: So I think it just really changed my lens and really changed the way I look at our curriculums and how we present them to students, and how we present, maybe even just projects to students. So when I'm planning a unit out, I really take a look at those UDL principles and think about how I'm engaging students. You know, is there enough engagement for them? Are they going to be interested? And how can they show us what they know? That is a term that I do use a lot with my students is that, "Show me what you know." It's really look at it through that UDL lens. I mean, obviously our

curriculum hasn't changed what we have to teach hasn't changed, but it's just spinning it to really look at it differently, look at it with that, that UDL eye.

LOUI: Right. Well you've given us some great examples of how you help build that agency and your learners thank you for being so patient with all of my questions, [overtalking] I just kept digging and digging.

KATE: No, it was good! I'm happy to be here. I'm happy to talk about it!

LOUI: Oh, thank you so much. Thank you. And so for those who are listening to this podcast, you can find supplemental materials like an image montage with closed captioning. That montage with audio descriptions, a transcript and 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 make it our goal to develop expert learners.