

UDL in 15 Minutes

Tracy Pendred and Kimberly Spears

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 Tracy Pendred and Kimberly Spears teach fourth and fifth grade in Baltimore, Maryland at City Neighbors Elementary School. They're going to share how their formal and informal planning conversations, which are infused with UDL, benefit all of their learners. Hello to you both. Could you go ahead and share with us your teaching background?

TRACY: Sure. I have been a teacher at City Neighbors for 11 years. I have taught third grade here, and also fourth and fifth, just recently.

LOUI: Wonderful, and that's Tracy talking, right?

TRACY: It is.

LOUI: Okay, thank you Tracy. And, Kimberly?

KIMBERLY: I taught as a teaching assistant at a school for kids with profound disabilities for three years, then I taught third grade at two different schools for four years and this is my fourth year here at City Neighbors and teaching the fourth and fifth.

LOUI: You guys have great experience, then! And can you give us an understanding of the students in your school and in your classrooms?

TRACY: Sure. Our students come from all over the city. So, as a charter they can apply to be here, just based on their address. They are a wide variety of children from socio-economic areas, they have a wide variety of reading levels and writing levels. We have about a 25% population with special education.

KIMBERLY: So, about half and half male and female and about a little less than half African American, less than half white, and then some students have multiple mixed-race heritage, a couple Asian students.

LOUI: So, you have some really nice variability in your school, that's what I'm hearing.

TRACY: Yes.

LOUI: Well, we always know what we have variability in our learners, no matter what, but you have some really nice variability around ethnicity and around socio economics, those kinds of areas right?

TRACY: Yes.

KIMBERLY: Definitely.

LOUI: Okay, so this is going to be so interesting to hear about. Teachers are always looking to one another for suggestions and inspiration and guidance and general support. And your relationship started off as a formal one, right? It blossomed into a partnership and you both consider the UDL framework as you design and reflect in your work, so can you give us the history of your partnership as well as some examples of how you take advantage of that partnership?

KIMBERLY: Absolutely. So, this is Kim talking.

LOUI: Yea.

KIMBERLY: When I first came to City Neighbors Tracy was assigned as my mentor. Every teacher that's hired at City Neighbors has a mentor that meets with them at least once a week for the first two years of being here. Because it's a progressive school, it's a project based school, we integrate arts and everything we do so, we have a lot of different ways that we're trying to reach different students and for a teacher like myself that was coming from a more traditional background, I could infuse what I knew about special education and I could infuse what I knew from my personal hobbies and art but it's a whole different thing, trying to balance the content that the students have to learn with the different skills that they have to learn and also give them the different representations. So Tracy met with me with me once a week and she would say, "Okay, what, what do you have? What ideas do you have?" And I'd say, "I'm thinking about conflict." And she would say, "Okay, maybe that can be a debate class." And we have lunch together and the lunches of the teachers in different grades are actually scheduled to be together so that teachers can, like bond unofficially, but also, we can just talk shop sometimes and say, "This kids giving me trouble. What do you think about this? What happens in your class?" Because I teach the fourth-grade students in the morning and Tracy teaches the fifth-grade students in the morning, then we switch. So, there might be a behavior that shows up because the student is more tired, that doesn't

show up with me or there might be a student who is more confident in reading and less confident in math or vice versa. So, it started out with her being my official mentor, but then we just kept eating lunch together liking each other becoming friends and respecting one another's practice.

LOUI: Oh, that's awesome. And I, I really liked the fact that the school has it set up that it's once a week for two years. I don't hear about that much. [You] usually hear about one year and maybe it's not as..., oh, maybe strongly supported so it sounds like this is a true system within the school.

TRACY: It is. The first year, the mentor and the mentee meet twice a week. It's for a variety of reasons. It's, you know, comfortability in what you're doing. It's a lot of the curriculum building because we build our own curriculum every day. We also abide by emergent learning so that in and of itself is difficult if you're first coming into it, but it's also to build a safety net for you, and to build a community. Because, you know, even though I was Kim's official mentor, she has mentors all over the building and I have mentors all in the building. So, in some ways Kim became my mentor in social emotional learning. She was much more versed in it she had way more experience. So, it was easy to turn the conversation around and say, "I need help with this." Or, "I'm seeing this, you know how can you help me there." So it plays on everybody's strengths, but it also opens up that community and that space to say I need help, or I don't know, or I'm confused, or we're giving each other the same thing that we give the kids, which is space to grow.

LOUI: That's fabulous. You used a term that I'm not sure everybody's going to be familiar with, you said 'emergent learning'. Could you just share a little bit about that?

TRACY: Sure, emergent learning is putting the child's interest at the heart of what you're doing. So for example, fourth grade found a monarch caterpillar. And were fascinated by it. So that became a project. Like, what happens to a monarch Caterpillar what happens to a butterfly? Why do they migrate? So, it is easy to slide in standards and curriculum that is based in fourth grade into a topic. Wherever the kids interests lie, they will let you take them there. So, if you follow that, then you are building the curriculum with the students.

LOUI: Oh that's fabulous. That really exciting. So, we've heard about a definite

relationship because it's gone from that great formal example to the way fun informal and you keep sharing ideas. So, can you talk about how UDL has woven in here. I don't know if it's how you learned about it, I don't know if it's been continued conversations, it's just whatever you want to share.

KIMBERLY: Sure. So, the school is about 15 years old and from the very beginning, there was this idea that we enter into the classroom with the deepest respect for every student and with the deepest belief in what they're capable of doing. So, you know, when we talk about UDL and like the official framework and idea of engagement, like emergent learning is all about engagement, the student choice, what is the student interested in. And then representation is saying like the arts integration piece, you know, are we going to present it with a video? Present it with a song? Are we going to present it multiple ways. Are we going to have an expert come in that is an engineer while we're doing our bridge building unit? And then action and expression, when I think about Tracy and her , when she's giving me examples of the types of products that she expects from the students, that was giving me an understanding that one student might turn in a poem, one student might turn in an essay, one student might turn in a sculpture depending on what the project is. So, we weren't always using the official terminology. I remember a couple years ago while I was working here, we were introduced to the official framework and we were like, "Oh yeah!" Some things in here seem very familiar and we've been doing it for years, some things in here are very new and some things it's great to have a word for and have a shared language around the building and around the City.

LOUI: Wonderful. So that's great because you just, just led me right in there. It's like I'll, I'll send you a check in the mail because my next question is, what parts of the UDL framework were maybe either new or, like you said, gave you a language to something that you are already doing. So, either one of those.

TRACY: I think it depends on which teacher you're speaking with, because there were things that, like, Kim was already doing that she gained a word for. So, for example, like the idea that we were talking about ways of representation. I just want the student to prove that they learned the thing that we were after. It doesn't matter to me if you feel better writing a song or if you feel better, creating play. What matters to me is at the end

of the day, can I see that you understood it. Can you prove it? So, Kim and I had been deep in conversation about that but we didn't have like words for you know multiple means of representation. So we gain words for that. Engagement I feel like is a big piece of what our school is built on, and the idea that students exhibit really engaged behavior when it's worth being engaged in. So, does the material matter why should they care? Like, does it affect them? Is it developmentally appropriate? Things like that that we had already kind of been built on. So, it really does depend on which teacher you're talking to and where they are in their development of the way that we teach.

KIMBERLY: Absolutely. So, in project-based learning the two things that we say are required are a compelling question, and an authentic audience. So, the question that goes to what Tracy was saying like that it's relevant to their lives. Are they studying water? Are they studying the election? Are they studying the plumbing system? Are they studying how water is shipped to our school? Are they studying the cost of the supplies in our school? So that might be a compelling question and then the authentic audience is, who are you presenting it to and what difference is it going to make to those people? One of my favorite new ideas or new wording that I've gotten from the framework is the idea of the expert learners because we spend a lot of time writing about the students, taking video of them, talking to them, conferencing with them and trying to figure out, do they know what they know and how do we prove it? So, the idea of saying, are they purposeful are they motivated, are they resourceful? That's a big one. Like, can they find what they need to solve their problems,? When we throw back a question to them, they'll say, "Where is this?" And I'll say, "Where do you think it is?" "How do you spell that?" "How do you think you spell it?" And then are they strategic and goal oriented so like having those really specific words that I can look for in a student I can even make a checklist. I could explain it to a student. "Were you resourceful today?" Talk about someone who showed resourcefulness today. So, it's really been helpful to, kind of, align us and have us all, having the same goals, and knowing what we're talking about when we're talking about it.

LOUI: That's brilliant! So, I'll send you another check [laughter] because that was gonna be my next question that's awesome. So, one last question. If you could give other people any tips on how to go about building the collegial side of your relationship?

Because a friendship, that naturally emerges, but you all were placed in, you know, what we would call a command relationship right you were put into a mentor mentee relationship, so maybe one or two things that you would share with other people that know that they're either going to be a mentor, or they're going to be a mentee and just how to start building something like what you have.

TRACY: I think it is based in, one, checking your ego. Just because you've been doing it longer doesn't necessarily mean you have all the answers. So you can offer a lot of tips and tricks and things to make people's lives easier, but you're also going to learn a lot in the process. And showing that equality in that relationship, and giving as much as you're getting is really helpful. It also puts you on equal footing so that when questions come up, they're not come up with, you know, an evaluation stance. And I also think it's take the same stance that you take with students. So, if you want students to be open and honest and trust each other, then you have to model that relationship and you have to model with every person in your building. So the person across the hall is chances are your best resource, as well as the kids' best resource, too. So opening it up and making sure that they can see that, that they can prove that they can mirror what you're doing as well.

KIMBERLY: Also, Tracy would ask me, like, if she had something that she saw in my room that she thought I needed to change, she wouldn't just assume that I was something I was, quote, "doing wrong," she would assume that I had some type of thinking behind it. So she would say, "What made you do this?" And the tone. The tone was very important as well. And then she would say, "Have you tried this? Have you tried this?" Or, she would say, "I saw this in someone else's room. I have done this in the past when I saw that." So it was always a sense of, just by design, that we are equals and with our language and with her examples, it was just that I just could tell that she respected me and that she would assume that I was knowledgeable about something whether I was or not and let me ask questions and encouraged me to ask questions. And I think also, there's a lot about the design of the school like saying, "If you are coming to the school we need to mentor you." Or, "If you are doing project at this school, there needs to be multiple ways for students to show what they know. Here are examples." It's not a teacher by themselves. It would be very challenging for them to

buck the system and to start this whole revolution through a school that was not supportive, so for teachers to talk to administration to talk to decision making people and think about, just like you do for the classroom, right? Like, they have to think of the design of the school. It has to be designed to be successful for different types of teachers. And the last thing I'll say is, Tracy is very detail oriented. I am very big picture oriented. And so, Tracy never tried to change who I was as a teacher. In fact she would encourage me and say, "I know this isn't your strong suit I can support you in this. Tell me about your idea, and I'll help you make it work." So instead of trying to change the one into this cookie cutter of a teacher, the same respect we give to the students, it was respect for the educator in the room. You're your own person. You're going to do it the way you do it.

LOUI: Okay, I'm betting that people are going to want to contact both of you because you just gave great advice! Oh my gosh, it was so good! This has been awesome.

Thank you so much. It's been so wonderful! Thank you to you both.

TRACY & KIMBELRY: Thank you. [laughter]

LOUI: And finally, if you have a story to share about UDL implementation for UDL and 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.