

Shannon Van Horn
Transcript – UDL in 15 Minutes

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 Shannon, who is a fifth-grade intervention specialist at Westbrooke Village Elementary School in Trotwood, Ohio. Today Shannon is going to share how she has brought the mindset of UDL to a building that utilizes a different framework. Hi Shannon, how are you?

SHANNON: I'm doing well! Thanks for having me.

LOUI: Oh, you're so welcome! It's so great to talk to you! Can you share a bit about Westbrooke Elementary School.

SHANNON: Yes. Westbrooke is a fourth and fifth grade building within the Trotwood-Madison City School District. Our district is roughly 2,000 to 2,500 kids. Our building houses just under 400 students. We're a very student centered building and staff. We utilize restorative practices. We have a strong PBIS system in place, and we are very intelligent about recognizing and celebrating all of our students' success.

LOUI: Nice. So that's interesting; a fourth and fifth grade building. So is there like a K through three building or how does that work?

SHANNON: So our district is structured. We have an Early Learning Center which is pre K through first grade. And then there's another elementary building that is second and third grade. And then our building and then our middle school is sixth through eighth grade. And then the high school, obviously.

LOUI: Wow! That really holds the students together in a really nice way, it seems.

SHANNON: Yeah, it's really cool because they can focus on just being fourth and fifth graders. You know, I feel like sometimes in a traditional Elementary, they have to be quote unquote more mature because they have to be role models for the younger kids or, you know, if you push fifth grade into a middle school setting, they're trying to live up to that, so it's really neat to watch them be just 10 and 11 year olds.

LOUI: Yeah that is nice. I taught eighth grade in a middle school that had six, seventh, and eighth and it just never, it never failed, like at the beginning of the year you see those sixth graders and you're thinking, "Oh my gosh! They're so little!"

SHANNON: Absolutely.

LOUI: And then we have our eighth graders and their towering and, and then the emotional differences. So, that's really cool to learn! So, I want to ask a question because I'm aware of this because we are only one state away, so Westbrooke is in an

area that was hit hard by a tornado last year, and I'm sure that impacted the community and the school. Just, can you share how that affected the learners at Westbrooke?

SHANNON: Yeah, so we actually the Miami Valley was hit very hard by multiple tornadoes. The neighborhood where my school is located was one of the harder hit areas in the region. So, if you drive through our neighborhood you do see damaged apartment buildings, damaged homes. Some of the apartment buildings were evacuated and then later condemned. But the community is rebuilding, which is really neat to see the Miami Valley has been extremely supportive in cleanup efforts, rebuilding efforts, sending resources. And we do have some displaced students. Some are still displaced. Some have relocated to other areas. Some are being transported from wherever they are back to Trotwood to attend school, but a large number of our students have already experienced some trauma in their life so the tornado has just, if anything, brought that back to the forefront. So, we are very intentional as a staff about supporting our kids all the time, and being a little more intentional this year knowing that they had this awful experience over the summer.

LOUI: Yeah and, like you mentioned earlier, the restorative practices that you already have that as a part of your building DNA, so I'm assuming that just really kicked in and that's part of what you're referencing.

SHANNON: Absolutely. And fortunately, we implemented restorative justice a few years ago so most of our staff has made that mindset shift.

LOUI: Nice.

SHANNON: So, I think just our approach was students and processing problems. I think having that piece in place has been instrumental.

LOUI: Yeah, yeah. Well, it adds to the conversation of why we bring these practices in because there are things that happen in our communities outside of school. That's why we need to have those practices and we know that, that this is just one more example of bringing that to the forefront.

SHANNON: Absolutely.

LOUI: So you are an intervention specialist. So, can you help us understand what that title means?

SHANNON: Yes, so in Ohio, that is our term for special ed teachers. So, I know that's a more common term across the country. So, an intervention specialist it's just a special ed teacher.

LOUI: Okay. And then what about you. Tell us about your teaching background.

SHANNON: So, I currently service students in an inclusive setting. We utilize a co-teaching model at Westbrooke. This is my seventh year of teaching. So, I taught two years in a different school district before coming to Trotwood. I have made Trotwood home for the last, this is year number five. Like I said, we're a fourth and fifth grade building so our fifth-grade teams are departmentalized, so our students traveled to four different classrooms throughout the day for their core subjects. So, my co-teacher and I teach just reading, then they traveled a science, math, and then we have a combined social studies and writing class.

LOUI: Okay, so you're in a school that hasn't necessarily adopted the UDL framework as we said the introduction, but is obviously interested in providing the strong academic and social emotional setting for its learners, so that's really clear. And you figured out how to bring the framework into the lives of the students you support in a way that it's welcomed by your co teacher and by your principal. I think it's really important, a really important conversation to have because there are so many educators who have learned about UDL and know its use can lead to strong learner outcomes, but they aren't necessarily in a setting where everyone has learned about the framework or where everyone, maybe they're not ready to embrace it yet. We talked earlier about the curriculum your school is using and how you've brought that UDL mindset into your use of it so first, can you describe that curriculum?

SHANNON: We are currently using Raz-plus as a primary curricular piece. So Raz-plus is an online reading platform. So, it has a lot of different features that we've been exploring this year. It has, like, a level up feature where students are reading books on their own reading level and taking quizzes. And then as they read those books and pass those quizzes, when they hit a certain number they increase their reading level by one, Raz uses letters so they go up to the next letter, and the next reading level. It also has interactive activities that our kids who have really enjoyed doing those activities give them instant feedback. For example, we've been working with identifying multiple main ideas. One of the interactive activities has them dragging main ideas in supporting details from a passage. And so, when they hit submit, it gives them immediate feedback. It'll either say you got them all right, or some of them aren't quite right, you need to go make some changes, and it'll reject the answers that weren't right. So then they just have to work from what they got wrong. They really like that immediate feedback and then as teachers we like it because it gives us immediate feedback because it produces then a score, obviously tied to that. So that's a piece that we've really tried to run with. We've also implemented the daily five framework, so we are also navigating that. So, we have a lot of new things this year, but I think it's really increased our student engagement, and also just their reading, which when we reflected on our past years of teaching, in reading class kids don't actually read a whole lot. We spent so much time pushing the comprehension skills that the reading for pleasure or the just practicing your reading kind of goes away or gets lost.

LOUI: Yeah. So, we know that any kind of curricular tool or curriculum, just by itself, doesn't bring UDL to life. That's all in the implementation of it, but we can adopt tools and resources that can help us in doing that, and sounds like it's helping you. And so

you have a specific story about how you shifted your use of the Raz materials based on your knowledge of variability and goals, so can you share that?

SHANNON: We had a training earlier this school year, with one of the Raz-plus representatives, and we dug into our students' data like I have never dug into data before. We looked at their NWEA benchmark assessments that we took in August, and also the things they had already done in Raz up to that point. And we really looked at where students had gaps in their learning. And so, we were able to from that kind of create a path for us as teachers to start designing lessons and interventions, and what each individual student and groups of students needed to focus on. So, within that training, the trainer said something that really kind of stuck with me and really, I think, brings the UDL framework out of everything we're doing. He said that we need to stop looking at the grade level of the texts that we're giving kids, and look more at where the students are at in terms of their literacy level. So that in my UDL trained brain, if you will, kind of shifted to, instead of providing students audio support for grade level text, and then also asking them to work with a grade level standard, if we give them a text that they're able to access more independently that's on their literacy level, then they're going to be more successful accessing that grade level standard. So, rather than throwing everything at them at once we can put them at a reading level that they can really work independently at but give them a more complex skill, so that then they can build up to get there.

LOUI: So, it really sounds like knowing the goal, knowing the point of the lesson. So, working on comprehension then providing them with a text that they can read independently,

SHANNON: Yes...

LOUI: ...and then work on those comprehension skills, right?

SHANNON: Right, right. And then, when we're looking at sustaining effort and persistence within that engagement guideline, I think when everything is too challenging, students start to tap out, but when they're working with a text that they can navigate, then they're willing to push themselves a little more and maybe persevere a little bit more than they were before.

LOUI: Yeah. And so, for our colleagues out there who struggle with this concept of maybe not doing grade level reading for this, and then maybe they haven't made that connection with the goal and the fact that we're talking about comprehension, can you talk a little bit about how you support those learners when you're actually working on decoding, and they need to be working toward grade level, how do you handle that?

SHANNON: We have put a lot of interventions and supports in place. We do have students who are reading significantly below grade level so we've had to dig into some of our earlier literacy resources. So, we still do some phonemic awareness when it's appropriate for an individual student. We have them rereading texts and practicing that

fluency to hopefully build that. We also do part of the daily five framework is reading to themselves and developing a reading stamina. So, we do stamina checks every few weeks so that they can see that they really are progressing and they are able to read for longer periods of time.

LOUI: Yeah, so that's so important because you've already talked about how you had this aha moment with data, and understanding how to look at it and what you were just referencing. So you're looking at the sustainability, so how long they're able to stick with that, and then, obviously, if they're improving in their skills and their decoding skills, so you're placing them in opportunities where they're going to have success and move toward that great little reading, but still also working toward those great little standards right?

SHANON: Yes.

LOUI: Awesome, awesome, awesome, awesome. Okay, so the one last question. It actually goes back to the data so what data do you collect and how do you use it to inform what you're doing in the classroom? We've talked kinda of around that maybe you can just hit that one singular.

SHANNON: So, we started broad and then narrow down. So, I mentioned earlier, we started with our benchmark assessment that we took in the fall when students first came back to school. And then, so that kind of was our launching point. And then from there we got overwhelmed, to be totally honest with you. And then decided that we needed to just pick a starting point, we knew informational texts was a weaker area for a lot of our students, so we started there. We felt like main idea was a pretty basic place to start, in terms of informational text, and then we've also paired that with a literature standard, so that they're seeing both informational texts and literature every day. And we access our literature standard right now through a whole class novel. And then we work in small groups on both of those standards. And then we honest with my co-teacher and I try to go day by day or every other day and just pull the work that the students are producing and then that drives our small group instruction. So, we've been working on our last enter that we hit was citing evidence which obviously is something that's going to carry through all of fifth grade for our students and even beyond. So, we identified that students were really struggling with, pulling out relevant evidence, but we had some students who were doing it on their own just fine and just needed some cleanup on their writing. So, we pulled small groups to reinforce how to pull relevant textual evidence that actually answers your question, while other students were working more independently, and then we started to put it all together with their writing.

LOUI: Nice. That was a perfect example. All right, I know we have gone over but I'm just going to ask this one last question. We touched on it a little bit before but how do you feel like, UDL has influenced the way you teach, especially because you're, you're doing this kind of on your own. You're bringing that information on your own in there and into a collaborative teaching setting.

SHANNON: I think learning about the UDL framework early, as I, when I was an undergrad and then just continuing to build a professional network of solid, strong UDL leaders, think it's just kind of trained my brain. My co-teacher and I are definitely not afraid to throw things out that aren't working. But before we do that, we try to examine it from every angle to see what barriers might be in place to prevent an idea or an activity or whatever it is we're looking at from working. So, one thing we talk about in the UDL world is that it's not the kids we need to fix it's the curriculum or it's the environment. So, we really try to look at those pieces and say like, "Why isn't this working? Why isn't this catching?" and remove every barrier that we can. And then if it's still not working, then it's time to move on to the new idea. So, I think just that mindset of removing barriers is what I've carried with me into a building that doesn't necessarily utilize the framework because I think that's something all teachers can get on board with is we have to remove barriers we have to allow our students to be successful.

LOUI: Okay, that's perfect. That was absolutely perfect. So, thank you so much for taking this time to the interview for UDL 15 minutes. Thank you!

SHANNON: Thank you! This is fun!

LOUI: You're welcome, you're welcome. For those listening to this podcast, you can find supplemental materials like an image montage with closed captioning, that montage of the 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 and 15 minutes, contact me through www.theUDLapproach.com. And thanks to everyone for your work and revolutionizing education here UDL and making it our goal to develop expert learners.