UDL in 15 Minutes

Melanie Acevedo – Transcript with Audio Descriptions

[Podcast host Loui Lord Nelson, followed by Melanie Acevedo, followed by a sign reading "welcome to Melrose"]

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 Melanie Acevedo who is a digital literacy teacher and a personalized learning coach for the Melrose Public Schools in Melrose, Massachusetts. Today, Melanie is going to share how they use UDL to develop their digital literacy lessons. Hi Melanie, how are you?

MELANIE: I'm doing great! Thank you so much for having me today!

LOUI: Oh, you're so welcome! You're so welcome! So, you know, I lived in Melrose for a year, I loved it other than the, like, the 80 plus inches of snow they got the year I was there, but that's okay! And so, I run, and I ran all over Melrose and I'm pretty sure I ran by every one of the Melrose schools but can you tell us about the schools, like how many, and how many students, that kind of thing?

[The Melrose Public Schools logo]

MELANIE: Sure. So, we're a suburban school about seven miles north of Boston. We have eight schools. We have one early childhood center which houses two of our kindergarten classrooms. We have five elementary K to five schools, a middle school and high school. So, we have about 4000 students this year, so we've had an increase in our enrollment over the past several years. So we're about 4000 right now pre-K to 12. And then about a quarter of our students are considered high needs. And so that subgroup is ESL students, English language learners, students with disabilities, and students are economically disadvantaged. So as a district we're working towards personalized learning and competency based learning. And for all of our students in K to 12 to best meet the needs of the variety of learners in our classrooms.

LOUI: Nice. Okay, so like I said in the intro you have two roles and can you describe the different ones? And you… start with whichever one you want. The digital literacy or the personalized learning, whichever one.

[Melanie pictured with two of her other colleagues]

MELANIE: So I've been a digital literacy teacher, this is my fourth…third year now. Fourth year now. One of those. And we are a team of, we're currently four teachers who work with all of the students in the district. We're specialists like art, music, and gym. We have kids in K to five. [A pile of books and videos to teach about technology use] So our K to two kind of programming, we think about digital citizenship, and we think about kind of the parts of the computer, and then we do some coding stuff with them. And then in three to five, we're really teaching kids how to be more of creators of knowledge rather than just consumers of knowledge and consumers of what's on the internet. So that's part of my role is working directly with students. And then the other part of my role is, this year I'm also a part time personalized learning coach. So the days that I'm not teaching digital literacy I'm working directly with teachers and in classrooms, helping them push our personalized learning. And so I'm really working a lot with strengthening UDL practices and strengthening SEL practices, and really thinking about how do we get students to take ownership of their learning. So I've kind of wear both hats, but the two jobs really blend into each other.

[Students sitting in floor chairs and working collaboratively.]

LOUI: Yeah, they really do that sounds awesome and like you just said, that the blend is beautiful because I think we still have, unfortunately, some pockets where people think about digital literacy and maybe they're not hitting as hard on, like for example, that social emotional side, or even just the depth of understanding, how to use technology for learning and so I see how, oh my gosh, that's wonderful how they interrelate.

MELANIE: Yeah, no. It's a better really nice pairing. I've done a lot of roles in the district and so this is kind of like my perfect marriage. So part time working directly with the kids and part time working with the teachers and helping them strengthen their practices, more of a coaching lens or a, or a mentoring lens. It has been really a great experience for me this year.

LOUI: That's great! Now, how did you step into this? Were you a classroom teacher before this?

MELANIE: So I have been in Melrose for about 15 years. I was a classroom teacher in fourth grade for 10 years. And then I transitioned in some district wide positions so I was instructional coach for a couple of years, which transitioned into the digital literacy

teacher position, which is now this hybrid of kind of both positions and part digital literacy part personalized learning.

[A student activity where they color in feet to learn about their digital footprint]

LOUI: Okay, totally makes sense. Absolutely. It does! It really does! So, we chatted about that importance of digital literacy, and then how UDL really helps those lessons be more impactful so you have some examples to share and I'd love to hear them.

[The Melrose Public Schools Habits of Learning described]

MELANIE: Sure. So, we have something in Melrose called the Habits of Learning. So there are these big four overarching standards that cross all content areas, all grades. And so we have problem solving, self-directed learning, communication, and responsible citizenship. And so our lens of digital literacy is really through those habits of learning. And we use a UDL approach in all of our lesson planning. We have kids in our classrooms of, of a variety of interests and passions and so we try really hard to kind of designed these lessons that are able to be meeting the needs of all of the kids in our room. Some of our buildings we have a high EL population, and some of our buildings we have what's called the TLC program, so it's a program for students on the autism spectrum, and we really want our kids to all be able to access what we're trying to teach them because digital citizenship and, and those kinds of skills are really important. [Students practicing their coding skills] So what we've been doing is we've been using playlists and hyper docs to allow kids to kind of move through at their own pace. So we present it almost like a badge that they can earn. So we kind of gamify it a little bit where they're, they're trying to earn, earn a badge. And so we just finished one right now for goal setting with third, fourth and fifth graders, where they started with kind of setting a goal and looking at their self-assessment and then they worked on setting a goal and they were able to choose how they wanted to express that goals. Soy they were able to make a Google drawing or Google Doc, or do us a FlipGrid, which, if you're not familiar is probably one of the best tools out there. The kids can make videos of themselves but it's housed in a private portal, so that it's not accessible to, you know, the world. So we've been using kind of those hyper docs and playlist to allow kids to move at their own pace. It increases their engagement because they're able to kind of be at a just right level for them. And we use a variety of methods to kind of put across

content so we use videos, we use songs, we use kind of this traditional, you know, mini lessons where we're standing in the front of the room and everybody's having these shared experiences, but we try to provide as much choice as we can particularly with action and expression and engagement, so that students are really becoming expert learners, especially as they get to the older grades.

LOUI: Yeah, we had talked about that concept of engagement and I think there are still a healthy number of people who think that oh students who are in front of something that is digital they're automatically engaged, but then of course we think about engagement with UDL we know it's different. And so talk a little bit more about that. So you were talking about that, that hooking in with recruiting interest and through choice, but I know you also do some really deep work around that relevance, and then the minimizing the threats of distractions and so, just talk about that.

[A typical class agenda]

MELANIE: Yeah, so we try to set up an environment, right from the start, that it's okay to make mistakes, and it's okay to ask questions, and it's okay not to know, because the digital world changes so fast that there are some times kids ask me questions and I'm like, I don't know, let's go figure it out, you know together. So we start right from the beginning really starting to set that stage. And then we work through a lot of making sure that it's really relevant to them by all of our products are real-world type products. So for example, we're starting our digital citizenship unit with our third, fourth and fifth graders and their end product is to create something that will be used to teach the younger kids and then we actually take them with us to go teach the younger kids one aspect of digital citizenship. So they might create a play or they might, you know, do a commercial or they might make a poster or some sort of website, but it's a really a real-world example of what they need to be using and doing in order to create that knowledge piece, right? So we're not trying to just get them to look on the internet and find information and just kind of consume it, we really want them to be taking that information and taking it to the next step and really pushing them a little bit to have them be creators. So as much as we can, we try to make those real-world products, so that they can see that oh there's a connection to what I'm doing in school, and what happens in real life.

[The digital literacy and computer science standards]

LOUI: Yeah. Obviously that connection that real world peace and that really just ties that into relevance and something else that just popped to mind that anybody who might be listening to this might be thinking, okay… time. This this takes time! So how are you guys aligning this either with standards or thinking about that that bigger picture, because I really do think things like this get squeezed out because everyone is so panicked about time.

MELANIE: Yeah, absolutely. So it does take time and we're very lucky that our boss has been very open and, and willing to allow us to try things. And I think that's part of it, right? You need to have an environment where it's okay to take risks, and a lot of administrators that I've talked to are kind of moving that way of traditional methods aren't working so let's see what else we can try, but it does take time, and it takes time in a different way. When it's, it's a lot of time upfront, but it's a lot of time and kind of like pre planning and making sure that we're providing the right pathways for students. And then once we're in the classrooms we're guides on the side, we're really kind of going around and helping kids, kind of push them to that next level or if there's a group of students who are struggling with understanding the concept, maybe they've done part of the hyper doc and we looked at a formative assessment, were like those friends aren't quite getting it, we pulled them to a small group, much like you would do in reading and writing. We have digital literacy and computer science standards that we are following so our lessons are all tied to one or more of those standards and we're thinking more about the digital literacy in computer science practices. So there are eight practices of what they say a good computer scientist will do or will be. And so we, we look at things like communication and research skills and so as much as we can, we tie it to the curriculum that classroom teachers are using so there's a lot of reading and writing and math and those pieces tied in but we're, our driving forces, our habits and learning, first and foremost, and then our digital literacy in computer science standards next.

[Students using the learning strategy of Bee Bots to learn about coding]

LOUI: Okay, and then you just touched on that other key piece that assessment piece.

MELANIE: Yeah.

LOUI: Because you mentioned formative assessment. So how are you all gauging the student growth as they move through these lessons?

MELANIE: So we've done a couple of things. Common Sense Media has put together a fantastic digital citizenship curriculum. And we've used their assessments and made some of our own pre and post assessments for that unit, in particular. And then we do a lot of self-assessing. The kids really are starting to get quite good at identifying where their strengths and where their needs still are able to set goals for themselves based on those strengths and needs. And then we have some quick-check type assessments like you would see, and you know any class with some quick quizzes and those kinds of things so that we can see if kids are getting the content, right? So like it's great that they're creating these products but are they understanding that, "Oh, to be a good digital citizen I need to do x,y, and z, rather than just create a cool poster." And then we do some similar things when we get to our coding unit is we have some, we use code.org as kind of our driving force, and then they have some built in assessments, but we also have some, like, quick quizzes and those kinds of things that we use to help, help students choose some of their pathways.

[A screenshot of a weekly goal tracker]

LOUI: Yeah so then you've got a mixture there and it does sound like that students, they're attentive to how they're growing. They're able to see their own growth which we know that's necessary for our students to become expert learners. They need that kind of practice.

MELANIE: Absolutely.

LOUI: And I was also thinking about how these students are gaining practice in that, especially, well, all of the areas, all six of them, but I was really thinking about the strategic and goal directed piece, as they're learning how to build and create and move up Blooms, but they're doing that within this digital environment, which is so valuable!

MELANIE: And it's the way of the future right we're preparing kids for jobs that we don't even know exist yet. So our job as teachers and especially as digital literacy teachers is to really help students hone those skills that will be transferable no matter what career path they choose, so that they're, they're fully prepared for college or career.

[Melanie Acevedo]

LOUI: Absolutely! Well, I really appreciate your time, Melanie. Thank you so much for giving all this great information and helping everyone understand better about how UDL is used outside of, I think what we usually think of as the core subject areas, and giving some great examples outside of those. Thank you!

MELANIE: Thank you so much. It was great to be here and I love talking with you!

[A video capture of theudlapproach.com followed by podcast host Loui Lord Nelson]

LOUI: You're welcome! So for those 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 and 15 minutes, 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.