

UDL in 15 Minutes

Amanda Hughes - Transcript

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 Amanda Hughes, who is the English department chair at Loch Raven High School in Baltimore County Public Schools. Today, Amanda is going to share how she uses the guideline of executive functions throughout her learning environment. Hi Amanda How are you?

AMANDA: I'm doing well. How are you?

LOUI: I'm fabulous, thank you! So, it's great to talk to you! Can you tell me about Loch Raven High School?

AMANDA: Sure. So, Loch Raven is a fairly small High School in the central part of Baltimore County. And it's a school that has seen a lot of changes recently in terms of population. It's become increasingly more diverse in terms of race and socio-economic status and academic achievement. And Loch Raven also has a regional program for social communication learning support for students who are on the autism spectrum, who are included in classes throughout the building.

LOUI: [overtalking] Oh!

AMANDA: So, Loch Raven also has an interesting thing with their tracking classes. So, most schools in my district, they offer a standard plus, an honors level class, and then an advanced level class, whereas lock Raven offers honors as the initial level. So that means that the classes have a lot more variability within them than in a school with the traditional tracking system.

LOUI: Oh wow, that is unusual and I bet UDL comes into play really well.

AMANDA: It absolutely does.

LOUI: Yeah! And so I shared that you are the English department chair, but you're also in the classroom. So can you talk about your classroom makeup?

AMANDA: Sure, so I teach honors English 12 and also SAT prep. I have a lot of variability within my classes. I've taught students with IEPs and 504s that cover a wide range of disabilities, including students with dyslexia, students on the autism spectrum.

So, a wide range of needs in, in all of my classes so even though it's coded Honors, it's not that all the students are necessarily one level which I think makes for a lot more fun of a class to teach. Prior to coming to Loch Raven I taught 10th and 11th grade English and then I have taught seventh and eighth grade language arts, standard GT and reading intervention for seventh and eighth grade, so I have worked a lot of different levels.

LOUI: I guess you have a lot of experience! That's awesome! So, we talked earlier and you shared that you love to focus on that guideline of executive functions.

AMANDA: I do.

LOUI: So, we'd love to hear some examples of what you're doing.

AMANDA: So, I love focusing on that guideline, especially in high school as I moved from middle to high school, I found that there's this myth that high schoolers don't need support in that area anymore because they're older, but we know that's not true and their brains still developing. So, what I do is I start the year by sharing some basic information with my students about their brain and their executive functioning and why it's so important to focus on those skills in addition to the content. So, by sharing that information, explicitly with them, I can then explain the supports that are going to be in place for them throughout the year and it makes a lot more sense to them. A couple things I always have available are fidgets and wiggle cushions for my students to help them, you know, get out some of that energy that helps with sustaining their attention, sustaining their effort. Those are available to students at all times. And, it's funny, at the beginning of the year they think they're kind of silly they think they're for little kids but they end up really growing to love them and use them consistently.

LOUI: So, so you were talking, really quickly, that at the beginning of your classes that you help them understand about the learning brain.

AMANDA: Um-hm.

LOUI: Are you open to sharing maybe some of the resources that you use to help inform yourself and that then you share with your students?

AMANDA: Sure. So, there are some really interesting videos about neuro plasticity and how pathways are formed in the brain that I use. There's an article about growth mindset that I share with students, and then there's also a really great interactive slider

on the New York Times that shows which parts of the, the brains are fully developed at which ages, so I can use that to show my students that the part of their brain responsible for executive functioning is still developing. So, we still need to practice these skills and work on them.

LOUI: That's awesome. So if you're willing, then, when we're done I can maybe get links to those and I can place those with this podcast because I'm sure people would love to see those.

AMANDA: Sure, I'm happy to share!

LOUI: Awesome! So, I interrupted you. You had just talked about the wiggle cushions and the fidgets and so keep going.

AMANDA: Sure. So another thing I think is really important, is reducing demands on working memory, so that students are able to focus more on the content, and they have more of their brain available, rather than trying to remember exactly what steps they're supposed to follow or where they get their resources. So I use checklists a lot with my class which seems like something really simple, it's actually really helpful in that we work through, kind of, what is the goal of this, what are the steps you need to complete, and then make those checklists from there. And I start the year by giving checklists to my students four major projects and assignments. But as we move throughout the year, I really work with them so that they can create their own checklist - the goal of them becoming expert learning is right they don't need me to do it for them, they're able to break down an assignment on their own and figure out what they need to do. So for example I recently had students. They had to do an essay that was required to be in MLA format which is tricky for a lot of students. And they struggle then with task initiation because they're staring at a blank document and they don't even know where to start with how to set it up, so we work to create a checklist on what they need to do, where they need to click to set up the document, and then I went and added visuals to it with arrows, using screenshots from Word so that they were able to have that in front of them, but also provide an multiple representation of the words and the digital visuals, but the main goal is to reduce that working memory demand and help them kind of get over that fear of, you know, how do I do this heading so that they were able to really show what they knew in the essay and not be held up by the format.

LOUI: That's fabulous I'm thinking about, students who have those struggles in those areas and you're going across a broad swath. So whether it's students who aren't using English as their first language now they're not searching around and looking for things, you're giving them really explicit instruction on how to move forward, your students with any type of a disability that has to do with reading or that kind of processing and even the use of time. That's fabulous! And then are just any student is going to want that assistance just like you said, "How do I get started, where do I go from here?" That's a beautiful example.

AMANDA: Thank you. I also think it hits that that minimizing threats guidelines, because it can be very threatening to stare at a blank document and not know where to start, so it helps with that.

LOUI: Absolutely beautiful.

AMANDA: Thank you. Also on the reducing working memory demands topic, so in addition to the checklist, whenever I give directions, I give them verbally and also visually, but I try not to just kind of put them up on the board for a second and then move on. I use Classflow as a tool to deliver those directions. So Classflow is a great tool for multiple means of representation and action and expression, but it's also great just for those directions because I can send out specific expectations to students' devices so they can look at them right on their own screen. And I can send out different directions to different students. So, that's great if you're offering choice you can display a class wide set of expectations then based on what students choose to do, or the support they need, you can send out different things to different people. And then they have whatever tips they need, the directions, the list of resources right on their screen for the entire period or the entire length of time that they're working on it for, so again they don't need to remember those steps.

LOUI: Right. And so what I'm hearing is this beautiful ability to have that flexibility inherent within your classroom in that those specific examples that you can give to students or specific guidance and saying that, "I know that you're probably going to want this. Here's this," to that student and, "You're probably going to want this and here's this."

AMANDA: Mmm-hmm

LOUI: It's a great, boy, it's a great overlap of UDL and then utilizing that digital environment in such a smart way and then also giving those students the choice of how they're going to move forward into an assignment within an assignment. And I'm sure how they're expressing their knowledge, too.

AMANDA: Right. And on that topic, I think, you know, I offer a lot of choice but then we, we have a lot of conversations about how to make choices that are going to support your learning, you know, "The shortest text isn't necessarily the best text for you, just because it's short." But I think, you know, along with the executive functions, it's teaching students to really become expert learners and to make those choices that are really going to help them succeed.

LOUI: Yeah, and I loved how at the beginning you talked about your checklists and how the goal is at the top, and your goal is that they'll be able to create their own checklist at the end, and so that marries so well with what you just said because, "Is the short text going to help you meet your goal?" And so not only are they building that checklist over time, but they're also looking at that goal at the top and knowing, oh this is what I should be able to do. And then like you just said that extra step or inherent step within the UDL framework of helping them move towards becoming the expert learners, that's just fabulous! So in your experiences and working with the expert learning traits, how have you seen students moving toward those higher quality executive functioning skills? Have you seen that exemplified?

AMANDA: I have. So I think now if I give them an assignment, they're able to get started more quickly, because they don't necessarily have that fear of "How am I going to do this?" You know, "What what steps do I need to go through?" So they're able to kind of direct themselves, to meet that goal. They can kind of come up with their own strategy, and then the supports allow them to sustain their efforts throughout the class period and over multiple class periods to really achieve at a higher level, so that everyone can meet the grade level standards regardless of, kind of, where they've started. So, I guess a more specific example of what I've seen them kind of taking ownership is that I also offer a break in the middle of my class because it's a really long class period and, you know, some of them need a break to either check phones or do whatever they need to do to get themselves focused and one tool I love for that is a Pomodoro timer, which

sets an interval for working and an interval for a break and then it switches back and forth automatically. And so I found that students, when they're working independently on assignments that are extended over a class period on multiple class periods, I find them pulling out pomodoro timers on their own to kind of pace themselves, give themselves breaks, and make sure that they are staying focused when it's not their break time.

LOUI: Well that sounds fabulous! It's just so exciting to hear when students adopt a tool that you've introduced to them because they understand the purpose of it so they're using it in a really purposeful way to move their learning forward and it's just another great example of expert learning. That's fabulous.

AMANDA: Yes.

LOUI: So, we are getting close to the end of time but do you have just like one more example you want to share?

AMANDA: Sure. So, one other thing that I think is really important is, allowing students to redo assignments based on feedback, because I don't think a student is learning anything from an assignment they turn in, fail and then they just move on. So I really work with them, if they have an assignment with the grade that's not so great, to figure out where they went wrong and then help them to create a plan for how they're going to learn the material, maybe access different resources this time, and what are they going to do now to show me that they have met this standard.

LOUI: Absolutely! So between that example, and then one earlier that you were giving about the students when you're helping them take ownership of their work, so whether that's the timer, but these are skill sets that our students need in the workplace.

AMANDA: Yes.

LOUI: I don't care where you work and you are preparing them so well for these outside environments, so it's a transfer of skills. It's just so exciting! I'm so excited that I got to talk to you, Amanda. Thank you so much for taking time out of your really busy day.

AMANDA: Thank you for the opportunity!

LOUI: Oh, you're so 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 in 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.