UDL in 15 Minutes

Transcript with audio descriptions – Ian Wilkins

[Podcast host, Loui Lord Nelson, followed by podcast guest, Ian Wilkins]

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 Ian Wilkins who is an 9th and 10th grade English Language Arts Teacher at the Groton-Dunstable Regional High School in Groton, Massachusetts. Today, Ian is going to share how UDL has totally shifted how grades are assigned. Hi Ian, how are you?

IAN: I'm great. How are you?

LOUI: I'm wonderful, thank you so much. It's really great to talk with you. [The Groton-Dunstable homepage] Can you share a little bit about the Groton-Dunstable student body and the community?

IAN: Sure, yeah. Groton and Dunstable are both pretty small suburban towns in Massachusetts, kind of the outer edges of the Boston metropolitan area. They're both pretty middle to upper middle-class socio economically. My student body is probably about 90% White, so not a lot of ethnic diversity, but they come from all different kinds of backgrounds. Obviously, the demographics don't, don't tell you everything.

LOUI: Right. Are you guys in an inclusive setting?

IAN: We are in some cases an inclusive setting. We're actually, like for example, right now I'm in the process of piloting an open honors program with the freshman English class. So, kids of all levels are in the same room, and kids who want to take the class for honors credit can opt into that. But there also are plenty of subject matters where the leveling is more traditional so I think we're moving in the direction of more inclusivity.

LOUI: Okay, all right. And then what about your students? I was just asking about students with disabilities but you also have English learners there?

IAN: We do have a couple in the school, I will say. I have yet to have a student in any of my classes who's, who's an English language learner. [The UDL Guidelines graphic organizer]

LOUI: All right, so I was really picky about writing that introductory phrase of how UDL has totally shifted how grades are assigned. I think that's closer to the concept of

promoting expert learning. Whereas, you know, we usually we talk about giving grades, and that's really that top down, and I base that on our conversation. So, how would you talk about this when you're assigning grades? And then also just start talking about your process.

IAN: Well, when I think about UDL, I think what worked about the framework. In the first bit of time when I started to learn about it was that it fosters an active approach to learning where I think so much of traditional ways of education, including grading and assessment are passive, where students can tend to get in the habit of kind of checking the boxes or becoming good at the game of school, as I call it. [Student-made classroom murals of poets] And they, they kind of take a backseat in their own learning. They're always waiting to, just as you said, this top down thing where they're, they're waiting to receive the grade from on high, right? As opposed to what I want is students that submit a piece of work to me and they already have a pretty good idea of how they did.

LOUI: Yeah, and they have a pretty good idea that because you've been given them formative assessment along the way?

IAN: Sure I give them formative assessments. So the whole process, it really starts like on the first couple days of class where I do some class discussion and some collaborative activities with them where basically what we do is figure out how we are going to assess ourselves. [The course rubric] Now, I've dialed that in a bit with each successive attempt at it with each class I've had. And so, the way that it works now is we have a class rubric that is very, very simple and broken up into two major categories, one which is mindset. And that has to do with where they can look at this and they can monitor, "How engaged am I staying in class? "Am I showing up prepared? Do I embrace the struggle that comes with learning new concepts?" Those are some examples of indicators that are in that category. And then in the lower part of the rubric, it has habits that have to do with work ethic. So basically, like turning things in on time, like the basic things that you need to be doing in order to succeed. So we have that one course rubric. And then I also, you know, I started out with that and then realized that it would be nice for us to be able to focus our attention on specific English language Arts standards. [The first three power standards] So, the first couple times I went through

that I actually had my students look at every single Massachusetts English Language Arts standard and kind of talk to me about what they understood, what they felt they were already good at, what they were confused about. And after I did that a couple of times, I came up with this set of nine standards that, in my opinion, have the most bang for your buck. There's a whole list of standards that come with, like, teacher evaluation, things like that, but we have our power standards that we choose. [Two of the power standards] Because, you know, in the case of my students, what I tell them is that if we focus our attention on these nine which is doable, as opposed to saying, "You must focus your attention on all 50 of them," or however many it is, I can't remember. If they focus their attention on those nine power standards, and they really do a good job at those, there's a lot of overlap into the other standards. Now, when I deliver instruction, I'm still using the full set of standards but when it comes to having my students' attention in terms of self-assessment. I want them more focused. [Two other power standards]

LOUI: I see. That makes sense. That absolutely makes sense. So, earlier you talked about having your students embrace their struggles. How do you bring them into that? That is so interesting!

IAN: Yeah it is interesting. I mean, it's a mindset thing. So it's hard because there, there are elements of that that are impalpable or almost or feel that way. Like it's, it's hard to actually pinpoint. And I've tried many different things. [Carol Dweck's book, Mindset] You know, as a school a few years ago, we all read the book Mindset by Carol Dweck, a very famous book about having a growth mindset versus a fixed mindset and, and a huge portion of that is about embracing struggle, right? Understanding that like, in order to learn for real, you must struggle because the very definition of it is you're trying to do something that initially you don't know how to do. So, I spend a lot of effort in the very beginning parts of the, first couple weeks of just trying to kind of model that attitude for them and talk very overtly with them about how important it is for them to see struggle as something positive. [The CAST principle of Engagement] Yeah, and I think I don't have any, like, good scientific formula for how to get them there. But obviously, when you, when you look at it through a UDL lens, if they're not engaged and I mean like that real engagement. Not compliance. I mean like they're engaged, and they want to learn, and they want to overcome the hurdles that stand in their way of learning this thing, you

have to sort of do your best to try to foster that.

LOUI: Yeah, yeah. Absolutely. Okay, so I interrupted you. I took you back into the rubric, so I guess moving forward then, because you talked through the standards. I think you've given us a nice picture of the rubric. [The last two power standards] And so where do we go next?

IAN: Sure! So, I mean the rubrics are introduced early on and then I tell the students, "Okay, so the whole process," and this has taken a little bit of time to figure out because my school, by and large, still deals with grades in a very traditional way. So the, the actual grade reporting system that I use, which at my school is SchoolBrains. [Student posters with recommendations for podcasts, games, books, movies and shows] It's still all numerical, right? I have to put in grades for assignments and they come out and all that stuff. [The grading section of the class syllabus] So, the way that I deal with that is I tell my students okay I do not grade individual assignments any longer. I don't grade papers. I don't grade choice assignments. It's all any kind of standards-based assignments I do. What I do is I give them feedback and multiple opportunities at revision. And that is all about engaging in process, which is another thing I talked to them about a lot. I basically, what I tell them is, you know, it's my job to design this stuff so that if you engage yourself thoroughly in the process, you will grow. You will get toward a place that I'm trying to get you toward, but you must engage in that process and worry a little bit less about that finished product. And I'll say that I have seen some really incredible results from that approach, especially in terms of writing. Kids who are used to checking boxes, like I talked about before, what they are familiar with is, "I do this set of things and I get an A. And I'm just used to that and I do that over and over again." When you take away that "A" and replace it with constructive feedback, then, what you're doing is saying to them, "You're not a perfect writer. Nobody is. There's always improvement. There's always somewhere else to go with it. [A student-made classroom mural of a fire dragon] And the only limitations we have are really time and space," you know. And students who are intimidated by the grades, who are used to trying their best and getting back a C or something like that, it removes that kind of label that can feel final. It could, you know, sometimes students internalize this stuff and start

to think of themselves as "I am a "C" student" or "I am a, whatever." When you remove that and just engage with them on that level of like "you are a writer, and here's my feedback for your writing." it takes a lot of this other superfluous stuff away and feels much more authentic to me. Like I say, in the real world when you write, you don't get grades. You get your drafts torn to shreds by an editor and they get sent back to you and then you got to do it again. [The goals section of the class syllabus]

LOUI: Right. Have you had any feedback from parents along the way with this journey?

IAN: Only positive. And I find this really interesting because that's one of the big questions that other teachers have for me when I talk about this. And I always couch it by saying, I have not had any upset parents, yet! But I don't know, maybe I will at some point. Maybe I'll encounter a parent that just thinks I'm too, you know, out in left field with this stuff or something, I don't know. But, um…

LOUI: Yeah, but it seems like you have, I mean you really have a solid hold on this. And the reason is you've got a great why, and it's all based in Carol Dweck's work which is heavily researched, and your implementation of giving them this wonderful rubric to follow, and to engage with, and to reflect on, it's just given you this beautiful platform to help move this piece forward. I think it's beautiful!

IAN: Oh, thank you. That's very nice!

LOUI: Oh, you're welcome!

IAN: I think, you know, what I try to do is use that. I think you're right, you know, the things that I'm basing it on are, you know, they're researched and they're, they're shown to be effective in a lot of ways, including my own anecdotally. [Additional student made murals] So, what I try to do is just sort of like preemptively figure like what might parental concerns be? And I always at the beginning of every semester I send a fairly lengthy email on the parents that describe the whole process. I try to write it in a way that my personality comes through and my passion, my dedication, all those things and that seems to be at least at this point have satisfied whatever curiosity might have about it. I've also gotten some very specific feedback from parents about how much they liked it because when they ask their children about what's going on in class. It's always a more substantive discussion when it's not just "Oh I gotta, you know, whatever on my last quiz" or something.

LOUI: Yeah. I have one last question. So, this has taken time for you to create. About how many years or semesters would you say you've been working on this and fine tuning it?

IAN: I would say that I've just started the second semester of the school year a couple weeks ago. And this is I think my sixth semester run at it, so about three years now.

LOUI: Yeah. So, you are absolutely modeling growth mindset throughout this whole thing yourself, which is brilliant!

IAN: Yeah, I guess so! I just put it out there and see what happens! I mean, I, I…

LOUI: Yeah!

IAN: I will say that I'm very, very lucky to have a supportive environment. And I am very lucky to have had a lot of professional development in UDL right from the get go when I got to this district. [Podcast guest Ian Wilkins] And not everybody has those resources so that, that makes a big difference.

LOUI: Yeah, it does make a big difference. It does. That's exactly right. It's one of the reasons I do this podcast to help reach out to these people that are not so lucky. So I am really thankful that you gave your time today to record this podcast. Thank you so much. This is so powerful for so many people to hear and across the grade levels that across their own knowledge base level of UDL! Thank you so much!

IAN: Thank you! I appreciated this opportunity! [Video captures of the website theUDLapproach.com followed by podcast host Loui Lord Nelson]

LOUI: Oh, you're welcome. All right, so for those of you 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 which is the www.theUDLapproach.com/media. 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 and revolutionizing education through UDL and making it our goal to develop expert learners.