

UDL in 15 Minutes Transcript

Sara Soria

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 Sara Soria, who is a principal at the Coaling-Huron Alternative Education Program. Today, Sarah is going to share how she sees UDL as a pathway for the artistic expression for both students and teachers. Hi Sarah How are you?

SARA: I'm well how about yourself, Dr Lord?

LOUI: [Laughter] I'm fabulous! And it's Loui! It's Loui! [laughter]

SARA: I know! Loui [overtalking]

LOUI: It's so great [laughter], it's so great to talk to you. Thank you so much for coming on the podcast!

SARA: My pleasure!

LOUI: So, right off the bat...oh, thank you...you have a really varied background in education and otherwise, so can you share some of that with us.?

SARA: Sure! Before I worked as a teacher I worked for the County Office of Education where I really worked with students who were marginalized. They were not in continuation, they were kicked out of the system, but one more step of disciplinary action and they were going to go to the county where they would provide the education. But once I received my credential and started working with the kids, I went into Elementary. Then I moved over to middle school. I was a Charter High School teacher and I love that. And then one of my principles was just amazing and really just supported my entry into administration. So, I started that a couple years after I earned my master's degree. Taught at the university for adults. And now currently in my doctoral program studies at a Central Valley University in California, so I enjoy working with all different age groups and ability group so that's what I really enjoy.

LOUI: Wow, you really see all of this from such different directions. That's so fabulous.

SARA: I enjoy it. And I think one of the things that we can learn as teachers is to really use a variety of ways to help students learn. Whether they're adult learners or teachers or, you know, I work at the university helping single subject teachers earn their

credential, and it's just exciting to use all the different research-based strategies that we learn using in high school or an elementary school. It really works for all of us, all of us need a variety of ways to learn.

LOUI: Wonderful, thank you so much. So can you share a little bit about Coalinga-Huron's student body and the community?

SARA: Absolutely. I come to a district where the school district is comprised of two separate communities. Huron is one of the poorest, high in poverty in the state of California, you can look that up. Huron, California is over 90% English learners. Same with Coalinga. We have a variety of students who are English learners and I think it's important to note that when you're in California, specifically in Central Valley, we really serve the most needy and really, it takes a lot of educators to really come together and collaborate on best practices for our communities.

LOUI: Yeah, absolutely. So then, it's two different communities. Are these students responsible for driving themselves to school? Do they have transportation? How are they getting there?

SARA: They are riding the bus. If you look on our website it's really neat, our website really demonstrates our transportation. We go literally from one end of the county to another, so it's several miles of a vast agricultural land. And so the children get bused about 20 miles each way. So, they have to get up pretty early in the morning to get on the bus to get to Coalinga.

LOUI: Yeah, that's a huge commitment on their part, and I think it speaks to what you're providing them, because if they're showing up, then they've obviously got a connection to you all.

SARA: Absolutely, absolutely. And Huron does have an elementary school and middle school, and of course the alternative education site that I oversee, but then also the kids who live in Coalinga will go to the middle school here in Coalinga and elementary schools as well as one high school. So if you live in Huron, you will get bused to the high school, but if you're a middle schooler you can go to middle school at Huron or at Coalinga. But if you're going to go to the high school, you will ride the bus, into the community.

LOUI: Ah, okay, so we're going to switch gears here a little bit. While you were in your graduate course, you saw this direct connection to UDL with the arts, and what was that connection and how is that influenced the way you provide training to your teachers? And what do you want to see at Coalinga here on that brings all this together?

SARA: Absolutely. Well, I had a professor who was just really an integral part of my learning UDL. Looking at different phases, how we represent material to the kids' curriculum instruction, assessment. But when I looked at the arts and I looked at music and sound and how we are really creating our lessons, I was taken back to my childhood where I really learned the value of song and music and sculpture and art, through the eyes of my father and my brothers because they really enjoyed photography and oil painting. So, I learned, I learned that perspective. Early on, like very early on, maybe as a six or seven-year-old. So, as I went to elementary school in a small community in Central California. My teachers really fostered that growth. Not knowing later that I would be a writer, a researcher, and now of course an administrator who can really develop those strengths in students and those strengths in teachers and really help them understand that we can use a variety of representations and give kids a variety of options when it comes to demonstrating what they know and how they can assess themselves and how we can provide them feedback.

LOUI: Yeah. And what I was really intrigued by when you and I were chatting about this earlier was you saw this as a way for students to gain knowledge. So we're representing information to them but then you also clearly saw these artistic expressions as a way for them to show what they know and then you also clearly saw this engagement so it does sound like you found, kind of like a home for this part of you, this artistic expression part of you and how to foster that into the learning environment in a way that links to the UDL framework, right?

SARA: Absolutely, absolutely. And I think children don't realize that they're learning when they're having fun. And so, when they're, when they're creating representations or when they're explaining in, in writing with pictures and song and dance, they don't realize that they're really learning, but I think it's important that we educators really foster artistic side of them. Because you know the with the brain research, it's really important that we that we tap into that part of the brain and making sure that they're

making those connections and those connections may not be our connections, but if we provide them a variety of ways to demonstrate their understanding, certainly the brain will capture that and it'll remember, you know, how they learned and how they can really improve their learning.

LOUI: Yeah. So, you've also given us this huge gift of sharing some different videos that people can watch to get a better understanding of what you're talking about when you talk about arts and bringing that alive at Coalinga-Huron. So, is there anything you want to share in addition to what people are going to see? Any kind of background information about those?

SARA: Well, in the first video, I'm the youngest of seven, and I grew up also in poverty, so like I make a connection with these students because, particularly these are teenagers whose parents are picking lettuce and then they're traveling to other sites, and they're really making a living and trying a variety of ways to help their children and they'll want their children to be successful. And so, I wanted to capture that piece in my representation that it doesn't matter what your background is, we're all overcoming obstacles, be it personal or professional obstacles. And so I really wanted to capture that my participants specifically, understand what I connected to, be it the arts, be it Rodin, oil painting, pictures, photography that my father enjoyed taking, and I think it just really speaks to the idea that we're all learners, and we're all teachers as well and I think if we use the art, and that that was just an example of, of how I overcame barriers through photos of family, and my faith, and my students and my students artwork. You'll see a beautiful representation of a woman in the first video, and that is one of my students at Fresno State who, who just had a variety of pictures and I thought, what a great way to highlight him! And the second video that I shared is a video of what we do here at our school site at Coaling-Huron Alternative Ed. And it really speaks to the students who are not at the comprehensive high school, who are in an alternative setting and really making growth and it's just amazing that if we create that culture where we're providing them choice. I just really wanted to demonstrate that in that video. So hopefully I did that for folks.

LOUI: Yeah, I think you did. I think people are gonna really love seeing it. All right, I have one, maybe one last question or it might be one of two, we'll see.

SARA: Okay!

LOUI: So, when you were learning about the framework and more specifically the nine different guidelines, was there one that just really jumped out at you or a couple of them really jumped out at you at first that you were like, it was your initial a-ha connection with the framework?

SARA: You know there was. As we look at the guidelines, the representation, the action and expression and the engagement, I really focused on action and expression. And that really spoke to goal setting. And I think if we know our roadmap, if we know where we're going, we know exactly what terms to make. And I think, for my kids here at alternative education I created success agreement for them. And really it's just a logic model to self-evaluate and self-reflect. What are the goals that I have as a personal student? What am I thinking? Where do I want to go? And who do I need that input from? And what are the outcomes? So I really just wanted the students to be able to frame their ideas. And that really was rooted from, from "provide multiple means of action expression". Really create kind of a framework for students to set their goals or personal goals. It's not what I want or what teachers want it's, where do they want to go and how are we going to foster that success for them? We really want to be champions for our students.

LOIU: I love that you're using that logic model to help walk them through essentially the executive functions...

SARA: Absolutely!

LOUI: ...having them lay all of that out. Yes! And I knew I was going to have one more question

SARA: [laughter]

LOUI: ...so it's just going to have to be my last one!

SARA: Absolutely!

LOUI: [Laughter] You're the principal! You're the principal of this building and so you're bringing UDL in from that leadership perspective. What would be something you would share with other principals who are really excited? They've learned about UDL and they want to bring it into their building. So, what's a step that you took? I know it's a huge question, but just one example of a step, you took to bring it into your building.

SARA: I think all of us need to be able to see what something looks like, what it feels like, what it sounds like. And, at the beginning of school year, the video that I posted on our website is one of my family, and how I overcame barriers. I presented that to the teachers and prior to that, let me give a little bit of background, I asked them to come to our professional learning community with a video in a hand to demonstrate what their life looks like, through their perspective. So, I started first. I created that, I guess that culture for them, that very first day of school when all the teachers come back. And I demonstrated to them okay this is who I am and this is how I overcame barriers and we're a team, we're going to create a culture. So, when they presented all of their pictures with music some without music. Some with poetry. And I think, really laying out what it looks like for me, and allowing teachers to demonstrate what does that look like for you? What does UDL look like for you because it's difficult. Some people, it's hard for them to think of art, but really art is everywhere. Art is in the air we breathe, in the leaves that are flowing and the colors of the flowers. I think that really demonstrates who we are and how we overcome things so, just to come back around to your question, I modeled it. And just as teachers we all know we have to model it so I modeled it, and I showed them, and I demonstrated who I was, and then they got excited, and they created their own. And it was kind of a time for them to just get to know each other. And they realized that they didn't know each other as much as they thought they didn't, but after we did this artistic representation, this montage, they were really impressed with each other. And so, that for me was, was huge and it was golden.

LOUI: Yeah, you've modeled recruiting interest. You, modeled how to minimize these threats for these teachers as a way to minimize barriers and I have the feeling that even teachers who would be nervous about using an artistic forum to talk about themselves, I'm assuming you even gave them some ways to think about this and there's some ways into this. Am I right?

SARA: Absolutely! Because it's scary to be transparent. It's scary to show you, to demonstrate, and we'll see that, to demonstrate to you that my parents worked out in the fields. My mother was a strawberry picker. My brothers and my sister picked oranges and hoed cotton. And my grandparents hauled all throughout the United States during the 30s and 40s and, and so it just, sometimes it's difficult to be transparent, but I

think we're so transformative and we really, we can help students realize that, you know, we come from a varied background and it's exciting to see how we move forward and how we progress and how we really endeavor in our goals and our ideas.

LOUI: Oh, absolutely. Well, Sara, this has been such a joy, thank you so much for taking time out of your upcoming busy day, because it's a little bit earlier in the day out there for you than it is out here for me out here on the east coast!

SARA: Yes!

LOUI: You're out there on the Pacific Time Zone,

SARA: Yeah!

LOUI:... so thank you so much for giving time this morning. This has been a delightful conversation!

SARA: Mine as well! Thank you so much for this opportunity! I appreciate that!

LOUI: Absolutely! 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, 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.