UDL in 15 Minutes with Elish Sheridan
Transcript with Audio Descriptions

[Podcast host Loui Lord Nelson followed by a photo of Elish Sheridan with her red hair pulled back with pink sunglasses]

LOUI: In response to how most educators are delivering instruction right now, I'm hosting a special series of UDL in 15 minutes episodes where I'll interview educators about their use of UDL to design online learning experiences. If you want to share your experiences contact me via my website www.theUDLapproach.com.

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 Elish Sheridan, who is a literacy coordinator and a second year tutor at Kingswood Community College in Dublin, Ireland. Today, Elish is going to share advice she and her colleagues pulled together on using UDL during distance learning. Hi Elish, how are you?

ELISH: Hi Loui. Thanks so much for having me on your show.

LOUI: Oh, you're welcome, you're welcome. It's so great to talk to you. So first off, can you tell us about your teaching background?

ELISH: I can, of course. So, I came into teaching a little bit later. I've been teaching for about four years now. I actually started out first of all in post-production so I worked as a post supervisor for six years, and then in my late 20s I decided to go back to college. Teaching had kind of always been something I wanted to do, and I think I was kind of finally able to accept that that was really what I wanted to do with my career and I retrained, and I've been teaching now for four years. [A photo of Elish standing next to the school sign in front of the modern style school]

LOUI: Okay. And so, have you always been at Kingswood Community College?

ELISH: I've been in Kingswood now for three years of the four. So it's actually the school itself is very young, and we are just finishing up our fourth year actually so I've been there for three out of the four years. And we opened our doors in 2016, with just over 50 students. And coming into, hopefully we will be back in the school by September, 2020 (fingers crossed!), and when we come back in September, we'll have over 700 students so it's a…

LOUI: Oh my gosh!

ELISH: Yes, so it's a very new and growing school with a lot of potential and a lot of innovation happening there, so I'm I have to say I'm delighted to be there for the last three years.

LOUI: Wow, give us a little background about Kingswood Community College.

ELISH: Yes, so it's a mixed school in the southwest of Dublin. Kingswood Community College is a one to one, digital school, so, all our students, and all our teachers have iPads. So, we kind of have the infrastructure also in our beautiful brand-new building to accommodate that. [The Kingwood Community Schools homepage showing an iPad as well as a notebook with writing and highlighter marks] And in secondary school, I know it's different in different countries, but in Ireland secondary school is from the ages of about 12 to about 18. So that's kind of the age group that you have at second level.

LOUI: Okay. Wow, so how did they grow that the 50 students to the 700 did they start with, are those fifth years?

ELISH: Yes, so we kind of started off with first year students so we took in two groups of first years in 2016, and then every year we've taken in the first year, it's become the second years and so on, so, this year will be our first fifth year cohort, and every year we've kind of grown in admissions. So, this September Coleman will be accepted in 180 into first year, so kind of each year has gotten bigger, as we've gone along. And then the school has grown obviously. The students have gone up each year to kind of reach the plus 700 where we are now and we could be anywhere between, sort of 850 to 1000 when we're at full capacity. So it's going to be a big school. [A map of Ireland with an arrow pointing to Dublin]
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LOUI: Wow, that's gonna be huge!

ELISH: Yeah, very exciting.

LOUI: Yeah. And so help everyone understand this: first Is it a public school or is, as internationally different as that is, but talk about that and then also, is it an inclusive setting? Are students with disabilities included within the student body and then in classrooms?

ELISH: Yes, so it is a, I suppose public school. And in Ireland, we have some fee paying schools and then a lot more sort of public schools and, which is what Kingswood Community College is. We do have a ASN unit in the school, that Additional Support

Needs. And we are an inclusive school. In Ireland, a lot of schools cater to students with additional support needs and we would have the great resource of SNAs which are supports needs assistance in the classroom. But what we do in Kingswood is, even though we do have the additional support unit, all the students are in mainstream classrooms, so they aren't segmented they aren't separated in any way. We use a support unit for additional learning purposes for support classes for resources, and for students and for teachers. So we do have the unit which is fantastic and the work that they do is incredible, but the school itself is a mainstream school and all the students who attend the school are in mainstream classrooms. [A map showing where Kingswood Community College is within Dublin, Ireland]

LOUI: Alright, so then, as you all have transitioned you've been under stay at home measures for a while in Dublin, right?

ELISH: Yes. Yeah so, just the second week of March was when we had our official lockdown. So all schools, primary and secondary and third level, everything has been closed officially since the second week of March. So it seems like a long time ago now. It does seem like quite a while ago now and like a lot of schools we are adjusting to distance learning and online teaching as quickly and as efficiently as possible.

LOUI: Yeah, well, you and others at your school you, guys develop this resource tool, but before we get into that I love to hear about your school's use of UDL. Is it widespread? Was it there from the get go? How's that worked? [The CAST UDL Guidelines graphic]

ELISH: Yeah, well what actually happened was we came to UDL about a year and a half ago. We had a fantastic introductory session by Margaret Flood (@magsFlood is her Twitter handle_, and she was in the school, she had been working with some of our teachers on her research for her PhD in inclusive education with Dublin City University, and through that she had got to know UDL. I was very excited about it, and thankfully she was in the school at the time and she helped us sort of begin our journey for UDL. And what we decided to do as a staff was to use UDL framework in a very collaborative way which I think is really why it has been so successful in our school. So what we did was we set up a UDL committee to kind of steer the process. And really what the committee did was work on keeping resources on CPG for UDL available to the teachers throughout the year. We share a lot of resources on our VLE, a lot of cross curricular stuff that's not specific to any one subject which is one of the beautiful things about UDL. And then what we did with the backing of management, which was fantastic, was dedicate time in our staff meetings to allowing staff members to present their UDL activities and lessons that they found successful in the classroom. [A screen

shot of the Ireland TeachMeet wiki] So as teachers know, you just don't have a second and you really a lot of the time don't get to tell your successes to your colleagues, so we just thought it was just fantastic to have this moment for departments to be able to share with the rest of the school, some really effective UDL practices. And from that we were able to kind of spark off one another and use each other's UDL resources in all different classrooms in all different contexts. And that was actually how the resource tool that you mentioned there, Loui came about from a kind of TeachMeet style staff meeting that we were having online, because it was during the lockdown. And from that sort of TeachMeet style I put together this resource based on how the teachers were implementing UDL to help with our distance learning.

LOUI: Oh, that's fabulous. So going back, you mentioned how you all have, from the get go, approached this that UDL isn't, it's not subject specific, and in the tool it actually addresses that and so how did you all come to that and what are ways that you also support that outside of the tool? [The UDL Tips & Ideas tool which lays out four different suggestions for distance learning for each of the three principles]

ELISH: So, what came across immediately when we started really looking to embed UDL in the school is how it can be used across a variety of subjects. So, even though a lot of the classroom experiences we were having were specific to our subjects, we were really more interested in sharing the kind of methodologies behind them, which is why we really enjoyed using UDL as a framework because it's not reinventing the wheel, it's just a collection of really good practice ideas and guidelines for how to structure your lesson, and how to best deliver your curriculum to your students. So what we did as a teaching group is through these kind of TeachMeet style staff meetings that we were holding, we were able to pick our best experiences using UDL in the classroom and share those with the staff. And some of the examples that came out of that is what we've put into our UDL framework for our school so it's very adaptable. It's, as I said, we are a digital skill or a one to one iPad school, so a lot of our UDL framework is based around the optimizing the iPad so it's very specific to what we do. And then, also from the online TeachMeet that we had since lockdown, we were able to kind of hone in on some really important points and feedback that we were getting having a couple of weeks of distance learning under our belt and how to best use UDL to forward and to really support what we were trying to do. [A close up of the UDL tool showing, the phrase, "Trust students to self & peer assess. Co-create success criteria and provide marking schemes"]

LOUI: Nice. Well I saw that, for example on the tool, one of the ideas is trusting students to self- and peer-assess. So then I'm assuming that was something that was shared during the TeachMeet. Sometimes, teachers, especially of students who are older, have

a tough time helping the students self- and peer-assess. So how did you guys help promote that and through using UDL?

ELISH: Yeah. Well, one of the kind of things that came back from a lot of subject departments, was that the corrections from doing the online teaching were really starting to build up. I'm sure a lot of teachers are in the same boat right now in that you're getting so many submissions. And because all of the work was coming back to you online, and it was really starting to pile up, and teachers were kind of looking for ways to really effectively assess and also to manage their time so that they could best support the students in the upcoming classes instead of trying to catch up on a high volume of assessment from the teacher. So once that kind of came across we started sharing a couple of ideas, and it was actually one of the language teachers had said that one of the things that he did was actually dedicate assessment as self-assessment with his students as an entire lesson online. So rather than just giving out the classwork, accepting the classwork as an online submission, and moving on, actually, the classwork that was submitted from the end of that class would then be used in the following lesson with the success criteria that the students knew they were to aim for or with the marking scheme that the teacher had created and giving back to the students and using that lesson to give the students the time to assess their own work, to make any possible improvements or alterations, and then to submit either a revised version of their work, or to submit their assessment feedback to the teacher. So in that way, not only have you saved yourself from midnight corrections every night because of online assignments, but also the students have sort of been allowed into that area of understanding and assessing their own work and seeing their own areas of improvement. And that came across and multiple subjects, so that was a really interesting point that we found in our online TeachMeet.

LOUI: That's just a brilliant and beautiful example of expert learners I mean taking the students through that process and helping them learn how to do that self-assessment. They're that internalizing level. They're really using their own executive functions. They're really self-regulating across things and they're having to comprehend their own work, and then all the structures having to be in place ahead of that, that are actually above that,

ELISH: Exactly!

LOUI: Oh it's just,

ELISH: yeah,

LOUI: beautiful!

ELISH: I think sometimes, you know, teachers, you can kind of feel like you're always supposed to be delivering the content. You're always supposed to be pushing to the next stage of the curriculum and the content. And the assessment is something that teachers I think can take on almost too much, in a way. And allowing students into that arena really enriches not only their understanding of their learning, but also the teachers, understanding of where the students really are, because once they can say to you, oh actually now that I realize I didn't put in this key point, or I should have improved this slightly, it's not just a bonus for the student also the teacher gets a more realistic idea of where their learners are.

LOUI: Oh, beautiful. [A photo of Elish in Budapest sitting with a bronze statue of a politician followed by video screen captures of theudlapproach.com followed by podcast host, Loui Lord Nelson] Elish, thank you so much! You have given us a jam packed 15 minutes of beautiful information about your school and about your teachers' engagement with UDL, and how you've all just taken it in. So,…

ELISH: Thank you so much for having me!

LOUI: Oh, you're welcome, 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 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.