

UDL in 15 Minutes with Laura Taylor 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 Laura Taylor who has taught for 26 years in Groton Massachusetts at Florence Roche Elementary School. She's going to share how she implements UDL in her kindergarten classroom. More specifically, Laura is going to share how she used UDL to design her writing instruction. Hi Laura! How are you?

LAURA: I'm great! I'm excited to be part of your podcast series. Thanks so much for inviting me.

LOUI: Oh my gosh, thank you so much for accepting. I'm really jazzed about this! So in this intro, I mentioned you've been teaching for twenty six years. So has that always been at Florence Roche Elementary?

LAURA: So I've been teaching kindergarten since 1992. So it's been 26 years all in kindergarten. And I started out teaching half-day kindergarten. I worked a little bit in two-and-a-half-day kindergarten, which is two full days and one-half day, and I currently teach full-day kindergarten. So yes, they've all been in kindergarten, all part of the Groton-Dunstable Regional Schools and Florence Roche was just a school within that district that I'm, I've been at for over 10 years. So, 26 in the district!

LOUI: Wow! Oh my gosh! So this might not be a fair question, but, so when did it shift to full-day kindergarten?

01:29

LAURA: Ever since I've been here in '92 we've had full-day kindergarten, but it's a tuition-based program. So all of the children are able to take, have half-day kindergarten, but if you wish to choose full-day it's, there's a tuition fee. And we've just got more and more students who need the full day and want the full day.

LOUI: Yeah.

LAURA: So, we have more of them than we ever had before.

01:52

LOUI: And we're gonna get into this, but my gosh, that is a totally different beast to plan for is the full day!

LAURA: It sure is! [overtalking] It sure is! And it's never the same day twice!

LOUI: So also give us an understanding of the students in your school in your classroom and and has there been a shift in demographics over that time?

LAURA: Sure. Florence Roche is a public school in Groton, Mass (Massachusetts) and we're about an hour outside of Boston. We have about 475 students in grades k- to 4 And as I said, I have the full-day kindergarten. I have 23 students in my class. And, my class, I have I have a handful of kids on IEP s and a tiny percentage of students who receive ELL services, and, and of course kids that haven't been identified yet, but I think the shift has been gradual over the years. The classes are getting bigger. We have more and more students who want the full day, and, and obviously 23 is a big group of kids for kindergarten, but we've had about that over the last 10 years or so. It hasn't changed too much and Groton doesn't have a whole lot of diversity, but then we certainly have more than we used to have before.

03:06

LOUI: And then how long have you been working with the UDL framework (we'll just dive in)?

LAURA: Oh yeah! Well, I, in our district we're really fortunate to have Katie Novak as our Assistant Superintendent and our curriculum director. And Katie, obviously, is a UDL guru in my mind and she takes a part, takes part in a lot of our professional development and she's able to share her

wisdom with us here. And I was able to take a course with her a couple of summers ago, so that was really the beginning of my learning of UDL.

LOUI: Well, you got to learn from one of the absolute best in the UDL community! Katie is fabulous! All right, okay, so let's shift to you. How did you get started with it? where did you go with that?

03:56

LAURA: Well, I, I have to admit when I first took that UDL class and I learned a little bit about it and I sat there listening to Katie, who was really dynamic and exciting to listen to and interesting, and I sat there and I kind of crossed my arms and I said, "I already do this! I already do UDL!" And then I kept thinking, "Ah, these are just good teaching strategies. Everybody teaches this way!" Oh, and then I thought, "Oh, it has to do with elementary teachers just do this then. Maybe they don't do it at the middle school, high school level, but we already do this." And I just kept thinking it was really a new buzzword and that there wasn't anything new. And then by the end, it was a week-long course, and by the end of the week I thought, "Oh, wait a minute. I guess I really don't do this." And I think I had been teaching for so long that I thought it really was what I was doing, but the more I dove, you know, I dove deeper into what UDL was and I realized it really was different. That there were a lot more levels to and layers as to what UDL was.

04:57

LOUI: Yeah..., I'm gonna ask if there's one way that you would describe one of those shifts and maybe one of those layers that made you say, "Oh! Oh this is, this is a little different!"

05:08

LAURA: Well, I think, I guess if I think about how when I started teaching 26 years ago, the classrooms are different in the sense that, you know, we do have a little bit more diversity, but I also think that where, we have a whole lot more academic time in kindergarten, in particular, I'm sure in every grade, but you know there's more academics, there's more rigor. We

didn't even have a written curriculum to follow when I started teaching so, because there's so much more that we are teaching them it gets more and more challenging to meet the needs of every student. And that's when I realized UDL really had that missing piece because it really allowed me to fine tune my teaching so that I really could reach each and every student when I was using UDL strategies in my lessons.

LOUI: Nice! Well, and I know you have a story to share to help people understand what you mean by that by the fine tuning, so go ahead give that to us!

LAURA: Sure! So I really thought as I was taking that course that I would begin with math and I think the message I heard loud and clear was that you really needed to start small. That I didn't need to change everything that I was doing, but if I did a little bit at a time it would feel more natural, so I decided I would start with math. And I figured it would just be easiest if I started to offer more choices so that the students could really be showing their knowledge in different ways. But I was really nervous about that because you really can't give five and six-year-olds that many options [laughter]. I did not want to lose all control. And people who know me know that I like to have a fairly organized controlled classroom, so by starting small I realized I didn't need to have, you know, fifteen choices. Not even six! That I could just offer the same math activity, do the same lesson, but at the end of it when the kids were working independently, give them two choices. And so I started doing that. And that kind of got the ball rolling and I realized that I had a really structured way to introduce the choices and it wasn't so much that I was offering two different activities, but I was offering two choices that led them to show me what they are understanding was of the concept, just in different ways. And maybe it was as simple as giving them paper to show how they do what they understood about that number, or a dry erase board, but it was really simple and small. And the more I started doing that, the more I realized that they were becoming very thoughtful and careful on their own about what they were picking and why. And I hadn't really thought that five and six-year-olds would do that and

they surprised me! So that's when I really started realizing I wanted to try more UDL strategies in my writing lessons.

LOUI: Okay.

07:49

LAURA: Which that was a big challenge. [laughter] I was not sure how I was gonna do that because I kept thinking, well writing, everybody has to write, right? There's really no gray area there. You need to write! And so I had to start thinking about not just the way the children would show me what they know but how I would present my information. So it was really, that what of it, the what they were learning. So I, I was working on a How-To writing unit at that time where the students were writing stories about how to ride a bike, how to brush your teeth, how to make a sandwich, you get the idea, right? Instead of just modeling writing with paper and pencil I started bringing in props and adding little short YouTube videos and different things to present the idea of writing that type of story. I brought a silly cardboard surfboard and we brought it up front and the kids all pretended to show me, and I pretended to show I didn't know how to surf, which I don't really, but I got on a cardboard one and they taught me how to do it. I brought a vacuum in and I had the kids tell me how to use it. How to unplug and plug it in, and how to turn it on. And all of these props began making them much more invested and they were really, it was authentic. It made their stories much more interesting. And so, by using that along with things like YouTube videos, I found a video of young children making pizza and I, they were able to see other children making something and how to do it, describing the steps, and then they were able to use these same kinds of stories in their own writing. And they used whiteboards and interactive boards. They really, I had them hooked and I had never really seen kids writing and being so invested in writing before.

LOUI: Yeah! I, what I'm so intrigued with, and what I'm hearing, is that you essentially started with the whole Action & Expression thinking of, "How am I gonna help them demonstrate their ability to write, creating these stories?"

And in the process, it was this great connection to Engagement because, like you said, it became authentic to them.

LAURA: Yes.

LOUI: And they under, they could understand what the story was gonna be before they were even putting the words down on the paper.

10:23

LAURA: Exactly. And you know, a lot of the kindergarten standards relate to, and they tell you, the students can dictate it. So being able to offer that as an option for me to have the kids dictate their stories and just the rich conversations prior to writing really led them to be better writers. I mean I had one student in particular who he struggled to do anything with writing. He didn't like it. He wasn't really able to do a lot of it, and it was, everything was really a challenge, but you know there was one day he said something about liking ice cream sundaes and so the next day I gathered materials to make a giant paper sundae. And we spread it out on the floor and I had all the pieces and I said, "Now, if I wanted to make an ice cream sundae how would I do that?" And they each gave their ideas and the steps and he was right there with me. And before you know it, by the time the lesson was done he had all the pieces assembled and he was helping me to hang it up on the wall, and he wanted to label all of the items in the sundae. And so although he wasn't writing a story, he was still writing and I had found a way to connect it to something he was interested in, but also some at his level, so that by just labeling the text with little index cards he knew suddenly that he could participate in the writing just as much as anybody else. And it really it just kind of snowballed from there because he was more interested and more invested in writing than he had been before.

11:53

LOUI: Yeah! And so, for people who are listening and maybe you've got your UDL guidelines in front of you, this is an incredible example of how you, you brought that student in, again, with some authenticity, but then you helped him sustain that effort because you, you varied those demands

and resources. Those challenges they, they were appropriate for him to be able to hook in and now he's sticking with it and he's really excited and he's now self-regulating through the skill and in fact volunteering to participate in the writing and dictating of the information! It's just so exciting!

LAURA: Exactly! The other piece that was so fun for me to realize is that I think I personally was hooked to the UDL idea because I thought, oh it's gonna help me to reach the kids who are below benchmark, but what I realized is that an activity like that hooked everybody. And even the students who were really above benchmark they were soaring because they took the same lesson, but they wrote even more and they wrote it in different ways. I had students who were asking to be able to write on iPads who wanted to write five-page booklets, giant chart paper, and we had paper everywhere [laughter] they really wanted to, and they became resourceful on their own and they really were thinking about what kinds of writing spoke to them. And so, not only was I reaching the students below benchmark but I was reaching a lot of those students that I feel like I sometimes don't get to who are above benchmark, so it's a great, it's really been a great way for me to reach everybody.

LOUI: Yeah, yeah! Well, it makes me think of one last question because we're gonna run at a time, but because I just heard you talk about your students and now they're writing more and, um... additional resources, and that made my brain go "Pop!" And so that idea of bringing in additional resources - I think that's an overwhelming part for people who are just getting started with UDL because, just like you said, at the beginning, you know, a key part of this is to start small. And do you, do you have a sense or a memory of how you've moved forward with adding resources into your classroom and how you've managed that?

LAURA: You know, I, I really don't because I think I've, I often fly by the seat of my pants. I try to go with (LOUI: That's fair!) what the kids, what the kids like. You know, if somebody suddenly is interested in stories pertaining to the bus, I mean I went home and looked through my kids' old things and I found a plastic school bus to bring in. I, I find things as I go along that that

jive with them, but I also had kids bring things in, and so I didn't really have to do a whole lot in terms of bringing new materials to the classroom because I kind of used what was at my own fingertips. But, I can think of another example also because they were really interested in telling about different things that you could do at the playground, and I took my phone to the playground and I took pictures of the kids doing the task and the skill so that if they wanted to write a story about climbing the monkey bars I had a step-by-step visual for them to see. And then they were able to use them in the classroom, so it really didn't take a lot of resources to be able to give them that extra option.

LOUI: Yeah, yeah. Oh, those are great examples! Great! Well, once 15:15 again, here we are. We've hit the 15 minutes (LAURA: yes), and there's so many more ideas to share, but this has been fabulous thank you so much Laura.

LAURA: Well, thank you. And thanks for giving me the opportunity to tell you about my journey with UDL.

LOUI: Oh, you're very welcome! And for those of you who are listening to the podcast, you can find supplemental materials like an image montage with closed captioning and 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, you can 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!

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