

UDL in 15 Minutes with Blake Beckett

The 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 talking with Blake Beckett who is a sixth grade English language arts teacher at P. K. Yonge Developmental Research School in Gainesville, Florida. Today Blake is going to share how she empowered her students by teaching them about the UDL framework, and how they can be reflective learners. Hi Blake, how are you?

BLAKE: I'm well, thank you! How are you?

LOUI: I'm good, thank you so much. So, can you share a little bit about P. K. Yonge Developmental Research School?

BLAKE: I'd love to. I have found this as a great teaching home for myself after wandering around the country for a while because it is grounded in research and asking teachers to reflect on their own practices. It is associated with the University of Florida, and we control our student population through a lottery so that it reflects the student population in public schools across the state of Florida, which yields a wonderful diverse mix of all different kids from all different kinds of backgrounds.

LOUI: Nice, nice. And within the school, so it is a regular K-6, K-8? What levels does it go to?

BLAKE: It's actually K-12 which is wonderful as a working mom. because I have my, my own children go there. And it is a public school. The state of Florida Department of Education wrote a budget line item to create four different developmental research schools in the state of Florida over 20 years ago. And we exist to test and disseminate best practices for educators around the country and world.

LOUI: Oh, that's awesome. So, I'm going to ask you next to talk about your teaching background, but I'm gonna jump ahead slightly or you can answer wherever you want to because I know you're working on a degree right now which means you're really just kind of crazy busy. So, I'd like you so much for fitting me in but make sure you make that a part of your story.

BLAKE: I will. So, this is my 24th year of teaching. I started in first grade, and became obsessed with how to help kids learn how to read and write. I began my career in Gainesville, Florida at a public school in the county. I then made my way out to Denver, Colorado, where I earned my master's degree from the University of Colorado at Denver in a department called Language, Literacy and Culture which was this wonderful bridging of literacy, but also to culture. That's so important to remember when working with kids and ourselves. And I worked in a bilingual school in Denver Public Schools there teaching second grade and as a Reading Recovery teacher, which is where I fell in love with data and how data should drive our reflections and our decisions with children. And then I moved to a little town outside of Boston in Framingham Public Schools where I taught first grade and then English for second language learners in Framingham Public Schools. And that was a wonderful experience. And then I made way, my way back home to my hometown here in Gainesville, Florida, and eventually back to, to P. K. Yonge where I taught third grade for four years and now I'm in sixth grade in middle school.

LOUI: Man. And now you're working on another degree, right?

BLAKE: Right. So, I am that quintessential teacher nerd I always know that I can do better and I always know that there's more to learn and to do better by my students. So, I have taken advantage of a wonderful Ed.D. program here. Ironically, it's right in my backyard at the University of Florida, but it's an online program so my cohort of classmates are actually from all over the world. And it is an Ed.D. which is a Doctorate of Education and I am being trained to be a practitioner scholar who studies her own

practice in her own classroom in a school. So, I'm beginning to propose my dissertation topic which is centering UDL in my classroom with my students.

LOUI: Ah. So, reflective practices. We know they're at the base of every quality profession but especially teaching so that's so exciting! That's just incredible that it's built into your program. I love that!

BLAKE Yes, I feel very lucky and supported to do the deep challenging work that should be done every day in classrooms with students.

LOUI: Yeah, so you took that reflective practice, and then you brought it to your students because I know that you took her students into the UDL framework and helped them learn how to use it. So, I'm curious about what drove you to do that and then what steps you took to get them started.

BLAKE: Well I laugh. My master's thesis was all about metacognition, so I have really been thinking about children, and them thinking about their thinking for over 20 years. And when I started to learn about UDL, I just thought it was so empowering to students. And it really coupled teachers and students in a proactive relationship where we need to be giving each other information constantly to do the best work we can. So, when I came across a book by Barbara Bray and Kathleen McClaskey called How to Personalize Learning, I saw that they actually gave the UDL framework to students and taught them all about the guidelines and how it impacts what they do in school every day and what teachers are trying to do. And I loved that concept of, you know, in The Wizard of Oz, when they finally lift the curtain and you see what's really going on, that's what I wanted to do with students, and sharing the UDL framework, gave me that language and images to talk about what I was trying to do. My hopes for what I had prepared for them for each day. And because I created a UDL image that hung in my classroom as I taught them about it, I would refer to it almost every day at different points in our lessons to anchor what was transpiring between us as we negotiated the work we were doing.

LOUI: That's fabulous. And I think you have like a specific unit that your students were working on and you have a story that's attached to that.

BLAKE: I do. So, I was wanting to explore book clubs and a lot of language arts teachers do book clubs, but I wanted to have an online component through the Canvas platform to have students interact every day through a discussion on Canvas modules. So, I told the students all about why and how I was setting this up. And I had my day the week before we started where I gave my book commercials and I asked them to write down their favorite book, their choice out of five. And then I told them, like, I was so proud of myself! I was learning how to create discussion groups on Canvas and this was a new technology skill for me and I was, it was tricky for me to get good at. So, on the first day I passed out the opening to their chapter one and we were all so excited. And then a student pretty loudly fake whispered, "Man! I now want to read that book!" And it was very clear that he did not want to read the book he had elected to read the week before. And the whole class sucked in their breath of like, "Oh, what is she going to do?" and all eyes were on me and I knew that they were anticipating a tiff or an argument or a disappointment or something from me because I had expressed how hard I was working to set up these discussion groups online. And I immediately went, "Oh, that's totally fine. We're going to switch you right now. I know how to do it, I'm so proud of myself." And then I turned to the class and I said, "You were not expecting me to say that, were you?" I said, "Do you know why I want to make that change for him right now?" And I walked over to the UDL image on the wall and I said, "Because, if I don't, I'm going to lose him right here at engagement and he's not going to be so into his book club for the next two weeks. And so, I want to help him stay engaged, to do the very intense hard work of understanding and analyzing these books together for two weeks, and so we're going to make that change." And it was just such a lovely tool to have that negotiation between teacher and student of what we're doing. I want us all to feel like we're working at high level, every single day, but I want us to know why. And to be aware of how we can support each other in that.

LOUI: Right. So I have so many reflections, but I'll just try to narrow it down. [laughter] So I was, I was thinking about, as you were telling that story that, it's just beautiful, the room you gave to the student to say, you know, it's fine if you, if you switch your mind. Somewhere, and I'm not even sure where it starts, but there's this, there's a mindset that's out there that, it's as if as teachers we're supposed to say, "Well you made your choice you have to live with it!" And I don't know where that came from, but it's just so exciting for me to hear that just kind of exploded and left behind, because it doesn't serve the child to learn. That's the first reason I'm just so excited. And then the other part, I was thinking about was that you said [to] your students, "I know how to change that. I'm so excited because I learned how to make these groups in Canvas!" And you were modeling resourcefulness and knowledge to them, just by saying that you were modeling to them, "Hey, you know what, I'm empowered to make this change because I learned something. So, you benefit from my empowerment." And that's such a strong message that I don't know that we all articulate so well with our students and especially when maybe we don't feel as comfortable, we don't maybe feel as empowered or knowledgeable, but especially in those times when we do. It was so exciting for me to hear and I wondered if you could just reflect for a second on this point of when you know and you feel resourceful as a teacher how it benefits your students.

BLAKE: Absolutely. And I think both of your reflections are connected and I've thought about power and I think in public school classrooms for hundreds of years there has been this power struggle for teachers to hold all the power in the room. And the teacher is the center of the goings on, and I am uncomfortable with that. I don't think it's particularly awesome for students, if that's very strong. And so, I really like the idea of examining those issues of power and the UDL framework is just such a great tool in that work because it centers students. They're the most important thing in that room, like I tell I tell them every day. The reading and writing activities I have planned are never more important than you, and the work that we do. And they are just a vehicle, I think, to serve us, the content and curriculum should be a vehicle to serve them on their journey. And yes, I love modeling for kids, my own humanity because I think I was really lucky in my formative years in college and graduate school, I had some amazing professors who

I so admire to the ends of the earth, and they were people who first modeled for me saying things like, “You know, I don't know that yet. I can't wait until I can learn about that how could we go about that!” Instead of sometimes pretending like you know or creating a distraction away from your discomfort because you don't know. So yes, I try to model that and constantly be reflective in front of the students. And we laugh, and we giggle, and we discover, and we shrug our shoulders together sometimes at the confounding things in the world, but that honors life, our lives and how complex they are.

LOUI: Oh, absolutely. I wrote down “the content and the curriculum are the vehicle.” I have this image, I have [laughter] like you have the front wheels and the back wheels or what have you, but that's driving it down the road and that's, that's all it is (I shouldn't say all it is), but it's the vehicle, it's the student that's at the center of all of that it's a beautiful way to think of our students as part of the entire environment because they are! Because we talked about designing the environment. And sometimes that's forgotten...

BLAKE: ...right.

LOUI: ...that the humans are part of that environment.

BLAKE: Yeah. Yes. And that's an important thing to remember, you can start with a really great lesson plan but you also have to be ready to change it at a moment's notice because whatever happens in that moment between you and a student, it will be much better than what you had planned. And yes, you should have a guide and you should have these clear strong goals, but that flexibility of how to help a student, get there is so beautiful. But you really have to kind of be in that jazz moment you know ready to like, “Okay. Where are we going now? Or, how...how, where, how are we going to get there?”

LOUI: Absolutely. Oh Blake, this has been such a powerful conversation. Thank you so much for squeezing me into your very, very, busy life.

BLAKE: Thanks for squeezing me into yours! This has been a pleasure!

LOUI: Oh, you're so welcome! You're so welcome! So for those who are 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 www.theUDLapproach.com/podcasts. And finally, if you have a story to share about UDL implementation for UDL in 15 minutes and you can contact me through www.theUDLapproach.com. And thank you to everyone for your work in revolutionizing education and making it our goal to develop expert learners.