

Stephanie Craig Transcript

UDL in 15 Minutes

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 Stephanie Craig who is an assistant professor in the Department of Education at Marietta College in Marietta, Ohio. Today, Stephanie is going to share the shifts that she's seen in her own application of the UDL framework as she's moved from elementary school teacher, to UDL coach, to assistant professor. Hi Stephanie! How are you?

STEPHANIE: Hi Loui. I'm fine. How are you?

LOUI: Good, thank you.

STEPHANIE: Great!

LOUI: So, can you share a bit about Marietta College? STEPHANIE: I would love to. Marietta College is a small private liberal arts college that was founded in 1835, and that's as far as the history lesson will go. [laughter] It is in Marietta Ohio and it's right on the river, so if I'm correct, because I'm learning trying to learn the history around about the area in Ohio, Marietta is one of the first settlements in the Northwest Territory. So, there's a long rich history in, of the area. Very historic, but last semester I think we had a little over 1,200 students enrolled and they represented over 30 states and seven countries. We actually were face to face this whole last semester which was awesome. The students loved it, and it was really nice to be there in person. And I'm part of the education department and I really could not ask for a better team of people to work with. They're supportive, they're innovative, and they're just really striving for excellence in the preparation of new teachers.

LOUI: That's awesome. And it's great because it's your first position after achieving your doctoral degree from the University of Kansas, so congratulations. That's just awesome!

STEPHANIE: Yeah! Thank you! [Stephanie standing with her hand on the back of her head sharing information about the brain to a group of elementary students who are seated on the floor. Some of them have their hands on the back of their heads]

LOUI: You're welcome! So, tell everybody about your teaching background because that's a nice variety there.

STEPHANIE: Well, I started teaching in 2002 at the elementary level. I was in the classroom for nine years and for most of that time I, I was teaching fifth and sixth graders which is ironic because when I was a teaching assistant, I was scared of that age because I'm five foot tall and they towered over me! So, but I loved teaching that, that grade and I had been approached a few times to leave the classroom to take on different roles in the district and I finally decided to leave the classroom and I was the title one interventionists for a year. The funding got pulled for that so then I went into instructional consultation team facilitator and the district I was in in Columbus, Indiana actually adopted these IC teams to replace pre-referral teams so our mission was to support teachers in meeting the needs of all students. And that turned into the UDL facilitator about a year later I think, but I was one of nine there at Bartholomew Consolidated School Corporation and they had adopted the UDL framework as their district framework, so it was very much supported and I did professional development with teachers. I helped them when they went one to one with the learning management system and just trying to implement the framework as, as best they could. And I loved my job, but about four and a half years ago for some odd reason I decided to travel to Kansas and pursue my doctoral degree in at the University of Kansas in the Department of Special Education. And then started here at Marietta college this fall and I've come full circle! I'm right back into the classroom and it's, it's exciting. It's, it's a whole new demographic of learners that, that I'm teaching now so just another learning experience for me.

LOUI: Yeah. The reason why I really wanted to talk to you is because you have been utilizing the framework in all of these different settings and I thought what an interesting conversation that can be because you're just, yeah, you've seen it from the position of using it, you've seen a position of teaching about it, you've seen it from the position of researching about it, and now you're seeing it from a position of, again, helping others learn about it. So, you have, kind of, two different themes that you want to share and so let's see if we can get through both of them! The first one focused on that self-reflective

question because that why was so important to you. And, and talk about how that continues to be a driver for you.

STEPHANIE: Well, when I first became aware of UDL as a classroom teacher, I really had this block in my mind. I had difficulty wrapping my mind around the framework and how it was different than what I was already doing. A lot of times I think it was to ease our anxiety, but we would hear from principals, you know, "It's okay. Don't stress. You're already doing it." But when I really got into learning more about it, and I'd always been interested in brain research and how that has its place in education, so when I learned the why and that there's intentionality behind it, that it's a design and you're really trying to create an accessible and flexible environment for everyone, I really had a shift in how I looked at teaching. But even more importantly, I had a shift in how I looked at how learners learn differently. And it's not just students who struggle and students who don't, but there's just this wide variety out there. Then you fast forward, when I became a coach and began presenting, I would always begin with the why because that had been so important to me. But I found that some teachers, they didn't really need to have that much focus on it, you know it's variability, right? And so many teachers, they just wanted to know, you know I'm on board, how do I get started, I still would, would have a short description of the brain research, but that was enough for them. Then when I was presenting and coaching teachers and doing my PD, I always, I learned that I really needed to model, even with adult learners, I needed to model UDL and be very explicit with this is what I'm doing and this is why I'm doing this is how you can apply it in a classroom. [A drawing with a stem and three overlapping shapes. The center one is labeled Engagement, the second larger is labeled Representation, and the largest is labeled Action & Expression). And I still need to be aware of how deep I go into the framework based on my learners or the audience that I have. Being a recent student myself I, I always look at myself as a lifelong learner, but as an official student, I realized, wow, there's a disconnect here, and I, I'm not seeing this, you know implemented as well as it could be. And I really had to advocate for myself for some things that I knew I needed and that just sort of cemented my belief and desire to get this framework out. And so, now that I'm at the undergraduate level. I have students who are so passionate about becoming teachers, but they're learning so much just

about basic pedagogy that I still hear some of the same questions, you know, “How is this different from good teaching?” And so I always still cover the why I weave it through everything I do, just because that was my foundation that that got me started

LOUI: Yeah, as you were talking. I was reflecting on and saying, Yeah, I definitely agree with them. So, one of the things you chatted about was the explicitness of modeling...

STEPHANIE: Yes.

LOUI: ...and how sometimes we literally do an activity and then pause with everyone and say okay let's take this activity apart. I want to talk with you about how I designed it, yeah, and how UDL was infused within it, and even at that point it's been interesting for me, that sometimes people come into a workshop with either an interpretation of UDL or maybe they've had a different person leading them in a workshop. And then, when I go through that explicit side then I'll have people who still say, “Well you really weren't using UDL because...” Sometimes it's because they think there should be technology involved.

STEPHANIE: Definitely.

LOUI: Sometimes they think, maybe I was supposed to be more entertaining. Sometimes they think... and it's, it's yeah, it's things that are that are outside, they're always outside of the framework so that we have to take time, right and go back and review those things and see if they can find those things within the framework.

STEPHANIE: Yes, yes.

LOUI: Yeah! So that's a big one, and then I love hearing you talk about the fact that you needed to advocate for your needs and, and basing it in the UDL framework. But it's good, it's great to hear and remind us all that as adults we still need to continue to advocate for ourselves, especially when we're in a formal learning situation but even in an informal learning situation. Like when I'm talking with my dad who's a former teacher, he taught for 38 years, but you know even he will go through with instructions, and I'll say, “Okay, dad. I need to think through this with you in a different way because that didn't make sense to me. So, are you willing to try a different way?” Then he always smiles and, “Yes, yes, yes!” And so, thank goodness that he knows where I'm coming from with it, but yeah...

STEPHANIE: Right.

LOUI: We have to keep advocating for ourselves so that's why we have to teach our students how to do that. [A notecard with "UDL is respecting kids' capacity to become anything."] So, okay, then we have that other theme that focused on a question so many teachers and pre-teachers have when they're new to UDL which is the, "Where do I start?" You know they want to do the right thing for the kids and they just get overwhelmed by the framework. So how has your message shifted over time.

STEPHANIE: Well, you are definitely right i think teachers really do want to do what's best. But first, I think what's important is having support. Whether it's a buddy that's doing, also implementing UDL with, with me or it's a group, whether it's in my district in my school or outside, I think without the support we all fall back into comfortable practices. And a lot of times there's two reactions that I've seen to the framework. One is, oh my gosh this is a lot where do I begin. And they sort of freeze and they don't begin because they don't know where to start or it's already do this and they just keep doing what they're doing. So first of all, I don't think there's a right or wrong way to begin to implement the framework. I've come to learn to start with what teachers already do comfortably and what they feel that they are successful at and help them understand the benefits of providing multiple ways of, whether it's representing information or letting students act upon information. For learners, that's a, that's an important piece because they already then have that confidence. So, for example, I worked with a teacher that had stations set up for the literacy block and he would, he wanted students to go through every station. And so, we talked and I said, you know, I know you want them to hit all these stations, but maybe you could let them choose what stations they do each day and you just put in the parameters of what they have to do each station at least once or twice a week. And when you start doing that, then you're bringing in those supports that help develop those executive functioning skills like goal setting and time management and organization, organization, and planning and setting goals. [A bulletin board with the words "expert learners" written above the three brain images shaded based on the UDL guidelines and the expert learner descriptors written below them] And so, then they're really sort of bringing in more of the framework as they're going along. So, I also think that the framework is structured so that teachers can really focus on being competent at the top three guidelines which are called the access guidelines.

And that's the options for recruiting interest, perception, and physical action. That's a good starting place, and I say that's a good place for some teachers to start because they're still, I think teachers need scaffolding in letting go of the control, because that's sort of what the bottom line to UDL is is that we want to develop expert learners who are independent and autonomous and they know what they need and they advocate for themselves. I tell teachers to begin where they're passionate. For me it was in when I was in the classroom, it was in literacy. And I had some students who struggled. They really wanted to read Harry Potter and the library wouldn't let them check them out because they weren't in the reading range. And so I said, "What the heck," and went out and bought Harry Potter on CD, a multiple headphone jack, and let them listen and follow along and because my passion and my goal was to have them love to read. And to have them sitting and struggling with books that they knew were below their peers levels was not building that confidence and it wasn't really helping them any. But the beauty of UDL is, it's a design. So, wherever you start, once you've embedded a practice in the environment you don't have to keep reinventing the wheel every year, or if you get a new student who has different needs, you've sort of already planned for that in a way. And you might make adjustments over time, but it's a process, and you're always pushing the edges of access further out so that you can welcome more variability into your classroom.

LOUI Absolutely. Oh my gosh. So, there's so much to say, but we have reached 15 minutes, so I will say I totally agree with you and the, the access part and I call that the welcome mat.

STEPHANIE: Yes!

LOUI: Yeah, it's the welcome mat for students and it's actually it's welcoming for teachers too, and you're right getting, getting people to just kind of step back and that it's that letting go. Boy, that's key.

STEPHANIE: Yes.

LOUI: Oh, but thank you so much. This has been wonderful Stephanie.

STEPHANIE: Thank you for having me! I really appreciate you asking me.

LOUI: Oh, absolutely. You're so welcome. Thank you. 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, which is www.theUDLapproach.com/podcasts. 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 and revolutionizing education through UDL, and making it our goal to develop expert learners.