UDL in 15 Minutes Transcript

With Jess Lombardi

[A logo with the words UDL in 15 Minutes in a circle followed by a photo of Jess Lombardi with her arm around one of her 4th graders. All photos of children in this podcast have a smiley face covering their face for confidentiality purposes.]

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 Jess Lombardi who is a fourth-grade teacher at Winthrop Elementary School in Melrose, Massachusetts. Today, Jess is going to share how she empowers her students to understand their own learning needs, track their growth, and lead their own conferences. Hi Jess, how are you?

JESS: I'm doing well! Thank you! How are you?

LOUI: Oh, I'm wonderful, thank you so much. So, can you share a little bit about Winthrop Elementary?

[Screen shot of Winthrop Elementary website homepage]

JESS: Sure. So, Winthrop is a K to five school in Melrose, we're just north of Boston. And it's a school that has a strong community investment in education, so there's lots of parent involvement. There's a strong sense of community within the staff and we have a really supportive administrative team. So, it's a really great place to work.

LOUI: Awesome. And go ahead and talk about your teaching background.

JESS: Sure. So, I have been teaching at the Winthrop school for six years. It's actually where I started my career as a teacher right after I finished graduate school so I jumped right into teaching in Melrose and haven't left! While I've been in Melrose, I've developed a lot of great teaching skills and I've kind of grown into my own as a teacher, and I now work to support new teachers as part of the second-year mentor team. So, I've been kind of involved in supporting newer teachers as they dive into our district.

And I've also participated in lots of professional development presentations, both in district and out of district, and presented to our school committee with lots of students and kind of sharing what's going on the Winthrop, so it's been great to kind of get my feet wet and all those different places.

LOUI: Wonderful! Wonderful! So, parent teacher conferences they happen everywhere. You know that. But when those are student led. They're just an incredible thing to behold, and I love it if you give us a rundown of how you design, like your year so your students can achieve this fabulous outcome.
[Screen shot of a guiding document titled, "Student Led Conferences Agenda"]

JESS: Yeah, absolutely. It's been a really fun experience to kind of dive into these student led conferences. During one of my first few years teaching, one of my administrators suggested that I give it a try. And I was like, "Okay sure!" I just dove right in. But basically, it starts day one. We kind of draft the year in a way that is beginning and continuing and ending with student reflection and just thinking about who they are as learners. The past few years, Melrose has really jumped into this personalized learning journey and kind of thinking about making sure that the learning process known is personalized for each student and that they're really getting what they, their education. And one of the big facets of personalized learning is UDL and making sure that our curriculum is designed in a way that supports all learners. So the best way that I've kind of found do that is to help learners figure out who they are. So, we have these four habits of learning in Melrose and one of them is self-directed and lifelong learning. [A slide with an action plan written by the student] And one of the ways that we really support students in becoming self-directed and lifelong learners is embedding the goal process into a lot of what we do. So, students are setting goals throughout the year but are also setting bigger goals at the beginning of the year just like teachers set their SMART goals, students are also setting SMART goals. And that process begins with a self-assessment, so students are considering and reflecting upon their current strengths and areas of need and then are developing a SMART goal based on one of those areas. So, if a student thinks that maybe they need to further develop their reading

fluency, their SMART goal would be related to reading fluency. If they felt like they had an area of growth in terms of writing in response to text, their goal would be connected to that. So, after they've set their goal then they spent the year obviously completing assignments and kind of thinking about that goal as, as the thread for, for their learning and they're collecting evidence. So students, as they're working on assignments, are keeping track of data, things like scores or examples of what their, their work might look like. And then, as we get further into the year, they start to curate that data into digital portfolios. So students are using different platforms, most recently Google Sites, to be able to kind of curate all of their work and their progress into this digital portfolio that they then share with their families at student led conferences. So, in place of traditional parent teacher conferences in the springtime, I work with students to help them to guide that conference process with their families. So, I'm not sitting down with parents and telling them how their child is doing, their child gets to do that. [A photo of a student sitting with her grownup and leading her conference] So, it's really great to be able to kind of watched the students in the springtime after all of this hard work together and stand up in front of their grownups and say, "This is what I'm proud of and this is what I've achieved this year." And they're able to share their portfolio and really just dive into all of their achievements, over the course of the year, share their progress toward the goal that they set beginning of the school year. And then I'm there to check in and, and I provide any guidance as necessary, but really, the students are, are paving their own way through that conference and it's a really great way to watch them kind of own their learning.

[A photo of a student sitting with his grownup and leading his conference]

LOUI: That whole thing is just incredible. It's fabulous. So, I have different questions that have come to mind. Two of them that you can start with because maybe polar ends or ends of the continuum, so thinking about students who are either challenged in learning due to a disability, they're challenged in learning due to context, environment, how have you supported those students who may be other teachers might look at honestly say, "I don't know the students can have their own conference." And then thinking about those students who are gifted or they're just really exceptional, and sometimes teachers aren't sure how to help those students graph their growth because instructionally we're

struggling with giving them growth opportunities. So, either one of those or both of those.

JESS: I think that one of my favorite things about this process is that everybody has their own access point, their own entry point into what it means to goal-set and monitor progress, and reflect and then be able to celebrate that. Our students who are potentially struggling with content are able to enter their, their year and set their goal at their level, so to speak, and so they're able to set a goal that is realistic and rigorous and then track their progress, and share their growth as the year goes on. And our students who are coming into the year having a strong foundation are really doing the same thing, just maybe with different content or at a different level. But I think that what's really been the most powerful part of this for me, when we get to those student led conferences in the spring and I can kind of sit back and watch my students shine, is that every one of them, regardless of their abilities, really does come to that student led conference and feel proud of what they've achieved, and are excited to share it with their families. [A student standing in front of a laptop as her parents flank both sides to watch the digital portfolio she is sharing]

LOUI: That's just the best feeling! That's just really exciting! So, for students who have an IEP, do you partner with the special needs teacher, resource teacher, whatever the title is in your school? Is that how you move forward or is that completely separate? The students are setting their own content goals specific to your fourth-grade classroom.

JESS: I've worked a lot with my special ed teacher over the last couple of years to kind of mesh what she's doing with her students outside of my classroom with what I'm doing with my students inside my classroom. So oftentimes, she's also engaging in goal setting with her students and so if it's applicable we will blend their SMART goal that they're setting with me with the goals she's working on with them. And one of the things that we've noticed is that the more goal setting the better, so when the students are setting goals in multiple settings or across multiple subjects we see more growth because they're more excited they're able to kind of see how they're progressing as time goes on.

[A PowerPoint slide with a student's action plan]

LOUI: That's awesome. If we weren't recording, people would hear me jumping up and down and saying, "Yay! This is so incredible!" This is, this is, this is wonderful because the two of you have really blended and meshed to totally support those learners and to be, as you said before, as self-determined as possible. That's fabulous support and then to see that kind of growth. And I'm sure that families are just blown away, especially if their kids haven't had the opportunity to shine in that way. And that's true for any student, that's not specific districts with disabilities, but I bet you are able to show parents a side of their children that maybe they haven't seen before. Have you ever had parents talk to you about that? [A student and her grownup sitting in front of a laptop as she shows her digital portfolio]

JESS: Oh, absolutely! We've received feedback from parents that has run the spectrum of "Holy cow, I can't believe my child does did that!" To, "Oh my gosh! How did you do that?" To, "I can't understand how you prepared them for this! That was incredible!" Parents are usually blown away when we have this conference day in spring. Parents are really thrilled to see what their children are capable of and, and the students are so excited to share with their families after putting all of this together for so long, because their portfolios really are a reflection of them. Some of them prefer to take pictures and share their work that way. Some of them prefer to write a narrative and share their words. Some of them might prefer to record themselves doing something and put that in their portfolio, so it really is personalized experience that they then get to share with their families. [Jess posing with her students and the Superintendent after presenting to their school board about student led conferences]

LOUI: Yeah. And I realized we haven't really spoken directly about UDL because, of course, we're both like oh this just meshes so perfectly, but I think about the fact that all year long, within this construct, you're helping students become expert learners, but is there a more specific way that would encapsulate that in, you know, we have about a minute left. [laughter]

JESS: I think that, that overall. The goal of this process and, and a lot of how it connects to UDL, is just that students are developing these skills that turn them into lifelong learners and develop their ability to own what they're learning. Students are really figuring out what works for them as a learner, and they're able to kind of take that and run with it after they leave my classroom. They won't be fourth graders forever and so when they leave me I want them to be able to hold on to the skills that they've developed in my classroom.

LOUI: Absolutely! Oh, well Jess, this has been fabulous! I am so thankful that we got to chat with one another and for you to share about these students led conferences. I'm really hoping that others will take the inspiration and look into this and pull it into their own milieu of teaching strategies. Thank you for being such an inspiration.

JESS: Thank you so much for having me.

LOUI: Oh, you're welcome! [Screen captures of www.theudlapproach.com followed by the UDL in 15 Minutes logo] So, for those listening to this podcast, you can find supplemental materials like image montage with closed captioning, that montage with audio descriptions, a transcript, and an associated blog and my website, which is www.theudlapproach.com. Finally, if you have a story 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.