

UDL in 15 Minutes Transcript
With Lizzie Fortin

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 Lizzie Fortin, who is a former high school art educator who is now an instructional coach with the Worcester Public Schools. Today, Lizzie is going to share how she provides coaching on UDL and radical love, and what that looks like. Hi Lizzie, how are you?

LIZZIE: As well as can be in these current times. How are you doing?

LOUI: Oh, I'm good, thank you. I am good. So, can you share a little bit about Worcester Public Schools?

LIZZIE: Sure. Worcester is a district that is in Massachusetts. It is considered large there but in, certainly in comparison to districts around the country, it's much smaller. It's an urban district that's filled with immigrants from across the world. We are an inclusive school district where we have a range of students that have disabilities, and other special needs and they are included in all of our schools.

LOUI: Wonderful. Perfect. So also, can you tell us about your teaching background?

LIZZIE: Certainly, I began teaching about 15 years ago and when I started teaching, I was teaching elementary art. And then, nine years in, so which is about six years ago now, I started teaching high school art at North High School. And then two years ago in the middle of the school year, I moved into an instructional coaching role, and which I totally love.

LOUI: That's awesome. So, did they post the position and you went to go through interviews or was it somebody came to you and said hey do you want to try this? How did that work?

LIZZIE: I'd been thinking about making a move. I wasn't really sure what my move was going to be, and so it was something that I was thinking in like a five year plan. And then one day my principal, who was new to the building, showed up in my classroom while I was teaching and said, "Hey, I'm thinking about getting another coach in the building," and I said "That's a fantastic idea!" And then about an hour later she came back and said, "Hey, I think I want you to be the coach." And I said, "Oh, I need to...Oh, oh!" I was, I was, I was totally surprised at that. So, I did half a school year in that position and then I had to apply for the position. So, we went through the rigorous application process. I got this position and so now I've been in the position for two years, which is, you know, an interesting amount of time because it's mid-year, so it's been two years and two months now.

LOUI: And I bet it's been incredibly different to do instructional coaching during the time of COVID.

LIZZIE: It is. It's, it's I think as challenging, or I wouldn't, I would not compare it to teaching because I think teaching is probably the most challenging thing right now on the planet in COVID, but it is incredibly challenging because so many of my conversations and so much of my work happens face to face and so much of the work happens in sort of like in between quiet conversations, or like in the hallways of like. "Hey, how did that go?" Or stopping by a classroom just to see how teachers are doing with instructional strategies, or SEL things, or checking in with kids, and so really having to adapt my practice to these COVID times has been challenging, but really rewarding because I think I've been way more intentional in my work this year than I've been in previous years.

LOUI: Yeah, yeah. Well, I asked that because I feel like it weaves right into the next question that I wanted to ask, and this is just kind of diving into this big thing that we're going to talk about, but you talked about translating the guidelines into a coaching language, and then how to live the guidelines as a coach rather than just supporting just the implementation of the guidelines. So, can you talk more about that?

LIZZIE: Yeah, so I felt like when I was in the classroom, I could live and be the UDL guidelines, because they're written for educators and they're written to be implemented with learners and I feel like they're written to be implemented with that power differential of teacher to student. And I didn't feel, initially, that the guidelines were written as a coach and working with sort of less of a power differential between colleague, as in coach and teacher. And so, trying to look deeper at the guidelines and translate them into my own language of coaching has been the gift of this year, of trying to see what does, you know, 'Optimizing individual choice and autonomy' look like in a coaching conversation virtually these days. And so, how do I live these guidelines that I feel so deeply about rather than just do them? And I don't know if that makes sense but I want to really imbue these into my being. And so how can I be the guidelines as a coach, rather than just implementing the guidelines in my PD or in the actions and I'm doing.

LOUI: That absolutely makes sense to me. I think we live from the same space. We are both really committed to the framework. And I think that we both are looking for ways that, other than standing in front of people and while we're teaching them about UDL, that we're modeling UDL, so we're giving them examples of what it looks like to recruit their interest as adults, and within a professional development atmosphere. And that's a fabulous level to work on and we always want people do that, but I think what you're sharing is that you're looking for ways, just as I am, to consistently help people feel safe when they are in discussions about UDL or, frankly, anything related to helping every single kid feel included and feel like a learner in that environment. And we're looking for ways that we will use our language in any way that we're communicating with educators, and quite frankly anybody else. So that, for example, we're supporting them to use a language that's helpful for them to communicate and at the same time we're

using a language and the way we're using language is a way that we're trying to create a bridge. Is that what you're saying also?

LIZZIE: Yes, that's exactly what I'm saying. And one of my favorite examples of this sort of living the guidelines was a coaching and facilitating experience that I did this summer. People were expressing the need to figure out how to build community, and co-create community with students. They were thinking about what that looks like in virtual remote setting. And so, I heard what teachers were needing and so we did something where we met once a week, virtually, and it was completely opt in, and so we had about 25 people decide to spend their summer with me thinking about community, and community co-creation, with students. And so, first in order to do this we needed to build our own community of adults in order to learn, because you know, knowing what the guidelines say about fostering collaboration community. We must do that as adults in order to have a safe and inclusive space to work, and to learn. And so, the idea was to build community while the content was the importance of community, social emotional learning, with academics and identity work. And so, teachers would then input their own content when they were going to move into their own classroom. And so that would support student learning in classroom community building. We use identity maps from Be the Change from Sara Ahmed, and we talked about power and privilege. We shared our stories and our content areas and we talked about why it is important to talk about race and all the content areas. And then the sessions allowed us to build the adult community we were so needing this summer. And we also got to see what a universally designed professional development felt like. And the guidelines were helping me to plan the PD, but I focused heavily on those engagement principles which I think are how I weave all the other principals in. And I focused heavily on minimizing threats and distractions and fostering collaboration community, as I said, and I feel like these are either skimmed by educators, or just used for classroom decoration or group work. And to me, minimizing threats and distractions is one that I've been really thinking about in connection to radical love this year because it means more than like a sticker or poster, it really means to connect with learners in a time when there's so much non-school stress and learners cognitive load already filled with stress. We must work as Zaretta

Hammond says to calm that amygdala. The only way to do that is to understand one's own identity and positions of power as educators, and I was a huge, huge, huge part of this PD this summer. And it was super successful, which I don't normally brag on sort of the work that I've done, but it was successful. The teachers are still talking about the work that they did, and they're doing it with students. And the students are finding much higher engagement with students in the remote setting and finding better connection with families, and they're grappling with those broader ideas now, such as equity in grading gatekeeping and courses, and where racism shows up, which is promising and creating a school setting is welcoming for all students.

LOUI: Oh, that's so awesome. I was just reflecting, when you said that you dig deep into the principle of engagement and use that to bring in the other principles. And that's, that's exactly what I do I just haven't set it in that way. And mine, too... my, my favorite, I think checkpoint, and it's hard to say that because I'm usually not a favorites girl, but minimizing threats and distractions. I mean, even how I set up this podcast, I work really hard to minimize those threats and distractions. And I think my second favorite one is the increased mastery-oriented feedback, just because of what that prompts me to do in how I communicate with anyone, not just somebody who's in a like a learner role but, but, bringing that role to that equity stance. I want to give anyone else feedback that helps them move toward whatever goal they've got whether or not I help them set that goal, regardless of that, I want to help them reach that, but they can't get there unless they're feeling like they can and I've created an environment where those threats and those distractions are minimized. And I think that other part of that which you so hit on I just love it feels like you did an entire series on one checkpoint, like that was your grounding.

LIZZIE: Yeah.

LOUI: You really just pulled that, not even I won't even say pulled it apart, you instead, you blossomed it. So pulling it apart makes it sound destruction, right? You grew it! You made it get bigger, and in that course of making it bigger you welcomed more people

into it! I've got this vision of this just big like beautiful bloom coming out and then everybody gets to walk into the flower. I don't know. Anyway...

LIZZIE: I love that image. That's a beautiful image. And I think that's really how it felt in a time that did not feel like things were blooming. You know this summer was filled with protests and racial injustice and violence and fear of an election that was impending, and I think in that context, you know, in this little group of people, which is a big group for a school during the summer, things were blooming and things, people were really thinking about what collaboration and community means beyond just group work, which I think is a limiting idea of what that guideline says. That it's beyond just like putting kids into groups randomly and having them work together, it's really the basis the foundation of any good classroom that you have to have that community in order to do any learning.

LOUI: Right. Right. Well, we can think about us as adults, right? When we're placed into any kind of group before in any kind of professional development that our learning situation, when we're placed into a group and we haven't had the opportunity to build any kind of community among ourselves, there's just some silly expectation out there that, well, because you're adults, you're going to be able to just start producing together. It's the same expectation, false, really bad expectation that we place on kids, and I love, I love that you had that significant emphasis on that piece, too. And you really went after that, in those workshops! Just wonderful.

LIZZIE: Well, thank you. It was, it was a lot of fun and I think it also helped, you know, I think because we were building community in like the fierce definition of community that I think connects to radical love that like, community isn't just, you know, being friends. And you were talking about, increased mastery-oriented feedback and all I could hear in your definition of that is accountability, and accountability not the word that we like, so often think about in terms of schooling, which is a scary horrible testing, kind of way. I'm hearing accountability in the way that, like, a good relationship is that, you know, my best friend holds me accountable to my values. And that's what good mastery-oriented

feedback does, and that's what a good community does. And so that's what this community brought, you know. At first we were just friends. But then we started to hold each other accountable for these other pieces that are so important. And I think, you know, it's I'm just like, I'm just looking at the, the guidelines that say any effort and persistence, that, that section there. It's the hard stuff. It's the hard stuff of what community needs, and the hard stuff or what society needs I think beyond just what you know I think that's, you know, circling back to the beginning of what I want to be in the UDL guidelines, I want to be held accountable for my values I, you know, if I say that I am you know one thing I want somebody to say, "Hey listen you're not acting that way," with kids and with adults in the world, in schools everywhere.

LOUI: Yeah, absolutely. Oh, okay, we could like keep going for...easily...[overtalking]

LIZZIE: Yeah, we could talk about this forever

LOUI: ...forever! Forever! And we have definitely worked up to our 15 minutes plus a little bit beyond, but I'm sure people have just been holding on. I want to thank you so much for this conversation and I have the feeling we're going to have additional conversations because this workshop provides a lot of fodder for this, but I know people are going to be excited to see the images that you're going to share that I'll have within the photo montage, and if people are curious about this workshop that you created are you okay with them contacting you about that?

LIZZIE: They can certainly contact me, it's also, I wrote a blog and shared, all of the resources from it on a blog post on my blog www.lizziefortin.com.

LOUI: Perfect. Well, we will put that with the other resources for this particular podcast, and I thank you so, so much for this.

LIZZIE: Thank you so much.

LOUI: Oh, you're so 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, 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 in revolutionizing education through UDL and making it our goal to develop expert learners.