

## UDL in 15 Minutes with Rachel Barillari Transcript

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 Rachel Barillari who teaches in Baltimore, Maryland at Margaret Brent Elementary Middle school. She's going to share how she implements UDL in her eighth-grade humanities block. More specifically, Rachel is going to share how she used her new knowledge of UDL to shape her poetry unit and she'll share how the outcomes experienced by her diverse learners just blew her away! Hi Rachel! How are you?

RACHEL: Hi! I'm really well. How are you?

LOUI: I'm fantastic! Thank you very much. Let's just go ahead and go on with what your teaching background is.

00:57

RACHEL: Yeah, absolutely. So, I came to teaching and to Baltimore five years ago through Teach for America. And I've been teaching at my placement school ever since. It's a place I hold very dear to my heart, has a very strong community atmosphere, and it's an art integrated focus school as well. And at Margaret Brent I've taught fourth through eighth grade and I've spent most of that time though teaching Middle School humanities and specifically English language arts.

LOUI: Tell us a little bit about the students at Margaret Brent, and then those specifically who are in your class.

01:35

RACHEL: Yeah. So, Margaret Brent is a very diverse learning community. We have students from many different backgrounds at our school and those backgrounds are racially diverse and socio economically diverse as well. And they all come together in this school in the heart of Baltimore City. And we have one to two classes per grade and, um, in my class specifically where there is one eighth grade class and I have 35 students. In my classroom my students are extremely diverse as well so that diversity comes in all shapes and sizes. So, I have students who are of many different racial backgrounds. I have students who are recent arrivals to the United States coming from a variety of countries and bring with them a

variety of really beautiful languages. I have students who receive special education services in the form of IEP's and 504's. I have students who are highly gifted and highly advanced, so it all kind of comes together in the one classroom.

LOUI: That sounds wonderful. It sounds like a really, really rich environment.

02:51

RACHEL: Yeah, absolutely, and that's one of the things that I loved most about my school when I arrived. There was, um, not only to the diversity, but also the students, um, empathy for one another and their curiosity to understand the different backgrounds of the people that they were going to school with and so I immediately gravitated toward that and wanted to foster that, um, that curiosity and empathy within all of them and to create a really genuine community where the kids could really express themselves and feel safe and feel love and really want to arrive every day to learn.

LOUI: Yeah. Okay, so before we talk about the poetry, because I really want to dig in there, but I'm curious because it sounds like this is something that's a part of the school culture because you teach eighth grade.

03:52

RACHEL: Yes.

LOUI: I also taught eighth grade.

RACHEL: Okay.

LOUI: And many of our listeners, I know, are middle school teachers and a lot of other people go, "Oh my gosh, I would never ever touch middle school." [laughter] And so, but the sounds like a culture within the building of, of acceptance and warmth and some of these other adjectives that you use to describe. Can you talk about that just a little bit?

04:12

RACHEL: Yeah, I think that it's a big part of our staff and the fact that many of our teachers feel, um, have this desire to really foster these core character traits in our kids. Um, you know, like I said, the school is a small school and, you know, everybody knows everybody. And our principal, you

know, really enforces this idea of it takes a village and we all are looking out for all of these children. And so those core values, that's what we call them in my classroom, core values, things like curiosity, reflection, kindness, and grit, and persistence, um, are things that are felt throughout the school and, um, as well as you know really trying to work on those social emotional learning needs of our kids and restorative justice practices. Many teachers in our school use those practices as well, which really, you know, really tackle that whole child approach to, to our kids.

05:19

LOUI: Well, okay, then tell us how you wrapped UDL into, to shape your poetry unit and, and how you used UDL, it essentially it sounds like enhance some of these things are already going on. If you're talking about core values, those who are already there. It sounds like you've got a really nice engaging environment. But then in our conversations, it sounds like it just exploded through the implementation of this poetry unit.

RACHEL: Yeah, absolutely. So, like I said one of our, one of, one of my in my own life teaching and beyond, one of my core values is reflection. And that's something I really work to foster in my students. It's something we do every day, practice reflection, and you know I looked at my kids and I was noticing that, you know, even with all of these traits that we're working on in the classroom, I'm still noticing chunks of my student body not consistently engaged. And one of the times the year where saw that a lot was with poetry. So I started to really reflect and think like you know why is this such a tough time learning wise in the year for a large group of my children? And these were students who have a hard time focusing. They're students who really need extra assistance when it comes to reaching learning targets in a variety of ways. My English language learner students, I was noticing them really struggle and really lose the engagement at, during this time. Um, and so a couple of years ago, I began working with Lisa Carey of the Kennedy Krieger Institute, which does a variety of things, but one is specialize in special education needs as well as brain research. And Lisa really educated me on what UDL was and from there I began to research both pedagogy and brain development myself to really dig deep and better understand what my students need and how UDL could be an incredible strategy for reaching every one of my students every single day. And so, I began to ask myself like how can I really incorporate what each of my students brings to the table into this unit? Where can I, how can I design my instruction to meet their unique skills and interests? And, how can I

meet them where they are and keep building? So, um, this year I was teaching poetry to eighth grade class during the first quarter and I continue to ask myself, first, what do I want all my students to accomplish? And then I was asking myself, okay, what barriers are in the way of 100% of them being successful? And after analyzing my curriculum, I knew that I wanted all of my students to create a portfolio of poetry that really told a story about who they are as individuals. I wanted them to have the tools to write different types of poems and to have the skills necessary to express themselves, both in performance and in their writing. And most importantly I wanted them to be proud of themselves. I wanted them to leave the unit with a stronger sense of voice and belonging in our classroom and school community. And so, I knew that was my goal. And then I thought about my barriers and I saw that the barriers included a lack of interest in poetry as a as a text, as a type of text, as a genre. Not having the English language skills to support analyzing rigorous poems and creating their own. Not having the organizational skills to create a portfolio of work. And just in the past, you know, expressing a high level of disinterest in poetry. And I knew that I had created a space with high expectations and with student choice, but as I planned the unit I reflected a lot on how I could strengthen that for 100% of my students. So, in doing that I really thought about how could I create an entry point for every single student and then after that entry point a real hook? Like how could I keep them hooked so that they would develop their poetry skills and also develop their own voice, their own storytelling voice? So we did a variety of things. And I really like choice, so one of the first things I always do every year is design my flexible seating. I really think that's important and letting the students have some autonomy, especially in middle school for the different activities. So that's a baseline every day. But beyond that, I expose them to poetry with themes and topics that they were truly interested in. I tried to be really mindful of selecting a variety of works beyond the curriculum to really draw them in and show them, you know, how poetry could showcase their voice. I modeled at least 15 different types of poetic forums and structures and let them choose which they wanted to experiment with. And when writing students had the choice to select frames and organizers if they decided to or desire to. And we did explicit modeling of using the thesauruses, dictionaries, translation tools on the internet. We used novels in verse, poetry via audio, traditional analysis, spoken word. We saw multimedia poems, visual poems, songs. We analyzed rap, we analyzed hip hop music that you hear on the radio now for their poetic elements, and, um, for many of my students who are more

interested in the sciences or express a higher interest in the sciences, we spent a lot of time studying the brain and what happens to your brain when you read poetry. And students' works encouraged to express their, their learning through multiple modalities, including PowerPoint, posters, the visual arts. We analyzed speeches and TED talks about storytelling and poetry. And with this rich, rich background in the layers that were built, I found the students immersed in this world of poetry. And layer by layer every student was on board. And those who were traditionally on board, um, I saw them exploring multiple, multiple ways instead of just wanting to be engaged in the material.

12:04

LOUI: It's like listening to you and, um, I always encourage the listeners to have their UDL framework out in front of them, or if you're driving, it's okay. You can pick it up later, but I'm listening to you and you are just hitting all the guidelines. You just dove into this to make sure that authenticity was there for the recruiting interest and you had different structures in place to help them stick with their work and the analysis tools and of course that self-regulation to have that motivation, but then all the different ways you represented these poems to them and made the poetry accessible to them, again relevance, but then not letting the language get in the way.

RACHEL: Hmmm.

LOUI: The different dictionaries, all the different tools there, and then how they were able to express these, so, we're gonna run out of time, but, tell us about tell us about the products that came in.

RACHEL: Yeah, yeah. So, through all of this on the expression at the end and through all of the feedback from both their peers and myself as we were going, right? Really creating this comfortable environment, every one of my students presented their portfolio of poems to our class and students also made a visual poem to go with their written portfolio and they display that on an easel right next to them and really talked us, in this incredible storytelling atmosphere, talked us through their narrative and then shared with us some of their pieces. And what was incredible was two things. One was the stories that were told. Watching my eighth-graders really connect with themselves and then with their classmates about what they have experienced that's made them who they are was so moving and you know the level of confidence with that, too. And then the second thing was

watching the rest of my students really appreciate their classmate and who they were and their experience and you know no judgments, but rather empathy and encouragement and just the kindness and ability to know that um, you know, for my English language learners who shared their work in their first language and then in English as well was such an incredible experience for the for the rest of the class. To really get to know their classmate who they might not engage with all the time because of a language barrier so much more. And I was then able to watch, you know, this new level of appreciation, understanding, and sense of community just flourish in the room.

LOUI: That is incredible and beautiful and I'm sitting here thinking about how anybody listening to this is gonna be like, "Oh, I wish I could have been in her classroom." I know you're gonna be sending me pictures. RACHEL: Oh my gosh I have so many.

LOUI: Yeah, for the montage so people will eat those up. I know they will I get lots of comments from people saying, "I love watching the images, along with the stories and podcast!" So, I unfortunately have to bring us to a close here but it sounds like we might get another story out of you again in the future.

RACHEL: Absolutely! I'd be happy to share.

LOUI: Oh, That would be wonderful. Thank you so much for giving your time and telling your a story about the poetry unit and about your school and the wonderful students that you have, and I think they'll be excited to hear this podcast, too.

RACHEL: Great. Thank you so much.

LOUI: Oh, you're welcome. So for those who are listening to the podcast, you can find the supplemental materials like the image montage with closed captioning, and that same montage with audio descriptions, a transcript, and then associated blog at my website, which is [www.theUDLApproach.com/media](http://www.theUDLApproach.com/media). And then finally, if you have a story to share about UDL implementation for UDL in 15 minutes you can contact me through [www.theUDLApproach.com](http://www.theUDLApproach.com). And thanks to everyone

for your work and revolutionizing education through UDL and making it our goal to develop expert learners.