

UDL in 15 Minutes
With Andretesha Fitzgerald
The transcript

LOUI: Hello and welcome to UDL with 15 minutes for educators discuss their experiences with UDL I'm Loui Lord Nelson UDL author and leader. Today I'm talking with Andrea Tisha Fitzgerald, who is the Director of Human Resources for the East Cleveland City School District in Cleveland, Ohio. Today Tisha is going to share how her connections with her students have continued to build community around the country. Hi Tesha! How are you?

ANDRETESHA: Doing great! How are you, Loui?

LOUI: Oh, I'm good, I'm good. Thank you so much. So, first off, I'm just gonna say congratulations on your book, Antiracism and Universal Design for Learning. It has been a gift to everyone, so thank you so much.

ANDRETESHA: Thank you.

LOUI: You're welcome. And then, can you share a little bit about East Cleveland City School District?

ANDRETESHA: East Cleveland is a little city, inner ring suburb right outside of Cleveland, Ohio. Historically speaking it was the home of John D. Rockefeller and Millionaire's Row many years ago. And it's the city that seen his share of glory and gory, and through the last decade or so, we've been in a rebuilding period, really looking for revitalization in the city and with the schools. As far as the student population, it's about 99% African American. Many of the students, about 90%, are at or below the poverty level and receive free or reduced lunch. And we have a world-renowned marching band who appeared in the Olympics in China, and we have amazing scholars who go on to do fantastic things both in the community, and all over the world.

LOUI: Oh, those are great highlights! I love hearing all that! That's fabulous! Wow! Those students got to go to China. That's really cool. That's insane. So...

ANDRETESHA: It's an experience we talk about all the time and we still bring it up and rehash, I mean to go to China to represent East Cleveland, it's a three mile city, very small, but they've seen the world. So, it's awesome.

LOUI: Oh! It said that's incredible and that's such a legacy for the students to have. It's beautiful. So, tell us about your teaching background.

ANDRETESHA: So, I've taught English for a number of years [laughter] particularly in the classroom for about eight years, and with English it's always been a passion of mine. The funny thing is that I started off in college for engineering, and I had been in programs throughout my own high school experience to become an engineer. After an internship at NASA, if I was supposed to be an engineer, it would have been a dream come true. It was not, not for me. And I recognized that those who are supposed to be in engineering, they know it by the experience. For me, I did a program called Upward Bound where I was the residential coordinator and I lived in residence with one hundred 9th through 12th graders for six weeks in the summer. And I knew right then that education was the path for me. And so, at that time, I had to explore what area that I want to teach. And so, when they looked at my transcript, I had just as many classes in English language arts as I did in science, so I'm like, one class away to be certified in chemistry, I will never take the one class. I know that English is my passion, and so I've had the honor and privilege to teach English language arts for about eight years...

LOUI: Oh my gosh..

ANDRETESHA: ...before the administration.

LOUI: So, yeah, a summer with, you said, 9th through 12th graders, was that it?

ANDRETESHA: Yes.

LOUI: Yeah, that'll teach you a lot!

ANDRETESHA: Yes. It's called Upward Bound. It is a federal program for first generation college students. So, they are potential first year, first generation college students. So they all come, many from different backgrounds, different experiences, but it opens the door to the possibility of a different path for them to choose college, so.

LOUI: Nice, nice. And it definitely helped you understand your path too, so that's excellent. So, the story you're going to be sharing is from when you were in the classroom teaching English. So, give us a little context for that.

ANDRETESHA: So, when I was teaching English, I was a part of a collaborative with Facing History and Ourselves and so a teacher who also was in the school and we share the students we had, it was the small school concept, so to speak, and our small

school was law, leadership, and public relations. And so, students who had an interest in either of those areas because self-select into the school, and it doesn't mean that they had to go into that field, but they were curious about it and so we had to create experiences that gave them more information about those career fields and experiences. And so, one of my close friends, and she was my team teacher, Lori Urogdy Eiler, she taught social studies and I taught English and so it's a natural pairing. We work together to create some units, and we worked with a partner organization, Facing History and Ourselves to talk about the human behavior that's associated with choices for equity. And so, in that unit that we put together, that one particular unit, we were reading an article that happened to be in the newspaper, our local newspaper. And in that article, it was about our city, East Cleveland. And Cleveland is a small city, great history. Lots of local pride. People stay connected forever. And the writer of the article dubbed the city, "three miles of misery."

LOUI: Oh!

ANDRETESHA: And as we were reading that the students started to question, "Why do people see our city this way. Why do they identify our city as miserable? What is it about us, because it's personal when you talk about a city, it's personal! When you make these statements about children and where they live. Why is it that we are seen this way?" And then, the questions quickly turned into, what can we do about it? And so, at the end of our facing history cycle that we were going through, there is an action called choosing to participate. And, every learner on our team chose an issue, a problem, something that they saw in their city. And so, they identify the problem, maybe a couple of problems that were overlapping, and they took the time to think about, okay, here's the problem that I would like to focus on. Or here's the issue that I am going to raise. And then they decided that they wanted to do a letter writing campaign. And with this decision we were able to, you know, thinking about the UDL framework and you think about recruiting interest. They identified an issue that was important to them. For some of them it was potholes on certain streets, for some of the streetlights. For some it was gang violence. For some, it was lunch choices in the cafeteria. Whatever it was, it was something that was important to them. And so, when you think about the individual choice and autonomy, it automatically minimizes threats when the choice is your own.

And so, every student chose, and we did not deny any idea. Of course, we had conversations to refine them because the next step was to then identify who in the world, not just in our city, not just in our sphere of influence, but who in the world could do something about the issue, could bring about change in any way shape or form. And so, as a teacher, and any teacher will understand this fear when your students identify the school board president as the person that they're going to write to, or the superintendent, or the state superintendent, or the President of the United States so what was a great idea at the onset that I was cheering on quickly turned into, "Is this gonna cost me my job?" Worth the risk. Worth the risk every time. And so, they took on this task of reaching out all over the world to different entities who they felt could make a difference about their issue. And so, they wrote these letters. And the funny thing is that as an English teacher, of course, in other methods of teaching, I always had to push them to check for grammar and mechanics, but because the audience was authentic, they wanted to send out the best product possible. They took such pride in crafting these letters that would reach the audience. They weren't sure if the person would actually open them or read them, or if the eyes they intended were the ones that would they would actually reach. But what I found was that there was such ownership. Such an urgency. They made deadlines for themselves. They were motivated to complete the assignment, because the assignment was for more than just my eyes. And so, as we paused and pored over every letter, they had not only my team teacher and I, but they went to different individuals in the school. They went to other teachers, they went to other students, they went to, you know, senior class members they went to people in their community, they went to their parents and brought them into this. They said, I am going to do something about fill in the blank. And they chose their words carefully. They crafted these projects and ways that there was a light bulb became one for them, but also for me as a learner to see what makes them tick, what works for them. And when they can shape society, and make a difference to maybe a writer who would never even read their words, the one dubbed the city "3 miles of misery." It was just so beautiful to see that, that light come on. So, they wrote the letters, they gave each other feedback, and then the moment of truth was when we put them in the envelopes and stamped them and sent them out to the world. I was terrified and excited all at the same time,

and so were they, and are just remember one of my students Travis saying, “They better write back!” And I told them, you know, as we were going through the project and working on the assignment, there's no guarantee that who you want to receive it will receive it maybe someone else will, you may get a response, you may not. And then we began to talk about, well, what will happen if you do get a response? What happens when your words are taken seriously? And when we talk about the power of voice, the most energy that we can put behind the power of the voice or the way that we can honor the voice most is to release their voices to the world. Maybe it's through a blog. Maybe it's through a letter writing campaign. Maybe it's through a video, but to take the four walls of the classroom, or even the virtual classroom, the four box walls of zoom, maybe, take those off and release their brilliance to the world and I have not been so proud as a teacher as I was for that project. And the magic happened, maybe two weeks after we released the letters, we started to get the responses. They made the decision that they would open their letters in class. So, when the letters would come to the school, we would bring them into the classroom. They would sit and wait for the learners for that period to come together and they would read their letters out loud. And I was so amazed at who responded and who didn't. So, we had letters from Tavis Smiley, who is an activist and a TV personality. We had responses from...

LOUI: so powerful...

ANDRETESHA: from the President of the United States sent a form letter back. Hey, is the form letter, we'll take it.

LOUI: Yeah!

ANDRETESHA: We had responses from council people and school board members.

And there was one, Travis, the one who said “He better write back!”, he wrote to a football player who was very influential in a different community and he was asking him to encourage the football players in our community to get more involved in districts like ours, and he didn't get a response. And he said, “The President of the United States can send a letter but this one cant!” But it was a wonderful conversation about priority and connection to the community and who honors your voice when you share it with them.

LOUI: Yeah.

ANDRETESHA: So, from their project, we learned so much.

LOUI: So powerful! The big thing that comes to my mind, and we just have like two minutes left, but what keeps reverberating in my head was this was a direct hit on stereotype threat, right? That this article's been written that seemingly confirms the lives that these students are living, but you all put together this unit and this project, and you emboldened your students and had already been giving them that strength, obviously, but emboldened them through these skills and the support to have a voice that essentially shattered that stereotype threat. It just shattered it. And that was beautiful and so for anybody listening that isn't familiar with stereotype threat, I will have stuff in the accompanying blog about this because we don't have enough time to talk about it, but that this is just a wonderful example of just breaking that down. Beautiful. Absolutely beautiful.

ANDRETESHA: When we find ways to allow the brilliance of learners to shine, no matter what their race or socioeconomic status or their zip code or their ability or disability, when we find ways to let their brilliant shine than the world needs to know about it.

LOUI: Absolutely. Absolutely. And, and, like you were saying that we let the world know about it but then as our students are speaking that out to the world it reverberates back to them with such strength and I love that you all had those conversations to say you know what, we love getting responses, we really, really want to have those responses, but it's okay if we don't, in that you have taken the power and you have moved this forward. So, I'm just gonna let everybody know we have hit our 15 minutes but I want Tesha to share, because some of these students, I mean, you've seen these students grow and you've seen them in other community positions now that that harken back to this experience, so just share a few of those. I know we're going to go over everybody but that's just what's going to happen.

ANDRETESHA: Hang in there for just a couple more minutes! Well, I've got students who were leading the marches after George Floyd passed away, after he was murdered, they were leading the marches in Atlanta, leading the marches in DC. We have one of our students here who works with a community organization they make sure that students have what they need, the resources, the opportunities the experiences. We have many of our students who have gone on to become lawyers who

fight for civil rights every day, and one who works with a local organization for women's rights, particularly women's reproductive rights, so from that experience to find a way to that their voice matter, number one, that when you speak your voice will be heard, and that there's a way that you can craft your message that will make people aware of inequities and do something about them. And I'm still watching them, I'm still amazed, I'm still awestruck, they are growing every single day and they are changing the world. LOUI: So wonderful. Oh, so wonderful! What a beautiful story. Thank you! And I know you have so many others and you've gifted us all with your book and sharing some of them in there, but I know you have a slew of them so thank you for taking your time today to share this one with our audience. Thank you so much.

ANDRETESHA: Thank you, Loui. Thank you for having me.

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