

UDL in 15 Minutes
With Emily Art

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 Emily Art, who is the Dean of Special Education at Relay Graduate School of Education. Today, Emily is going to share where they are now, where they're headed, and the big ah-ha's that have come from these steps. Hi Emily, how are you?

EMILY: I'm fine, how are you?

LOUI: I'm great, thank you so much. Can you share a bit about relay Graduate School of Education?

EMILY: Sure, Relay Graduate School of Education is an institute of higher education that trains pre-service and in-service teachers. So, we offer certification programs and master's programs. We have two special education specific programs one for general educators who are looking to expand their skill set to work with all learners, and that's an Advanced Certificate in special education. And then we have a master's in special education for folks who are beginning their teaching careers and intend to be special educators.

LOUI: Lovely. Then also, can you tell us about your teaching background?

EMILY: Definitely. I have had a lot of teaching experience in a range of settings. So, I have taught in traditional public schools, charter schools, I've taught students with disabilities in pre-kindergarten, in eighth grade and all the grades in between. And I've worked across a number of different class settings over that time. But for the past six years, I've actually been working with adults, training teachers in training Relay faculty as we build our skills around inclusive practice in PK-12 environments and in our institute of higher education.

LOUI: Nice. Is Relay Graduate School of Education, is it all online? Does it have a face-to-face component?

EMILY: We have campuses in 17 different states right now, and some of the components of our program are in-person and some of them are online. Of course,

everything has been online for the last year and a half because of COVID. We have done a lot of learning in the hybrid instructional space alongside our teachers.

LOUI: I bet! I bet! Well, thanks for that. I understand that your certificate and the masters level students have been learning about UDL for a while, but you all decided to embed UDL within the practices you were using to teach those students, too. So, what did that transition look like overall and is there a course example that you can give?

EMILY: Yeah. So, we sort of discovered the Universal Design for Learning Framework in building out the curriculum for our graduate students, so we were learning about universal design alongside our students. And as we learned, and our knowledge grew, we realized that there were more spaces where we could build choice into our graduate sessions and into our assessment systems. So, whereas five years ago, you know, we had a session on universal design for learning that had flexibility built into it, over the last five years we've really been examining our practices to see where could we offer students greater choice in the materials they engaged with? How can we give them choice during class about the processes they use to move toward the objective? And then when it's time to communicate what they know, what are the various ways that they can do that that would align with their strengths? And then this past year we've really been pushed in a great way around sort of the level of flexibility we provide because the landscape is so vastly different across the states that we serve in terms of how much access teachers have to their students, how they're engaging with their students, what types of assessments are we using whether they're assessing students at all. And so, we've had to really rethink our approach to teaching teachers to ensure that we're giving teachers the opportunity to practice skills in a way that is meaningful to them, given their context during hybrid teaching.

LOUI: Yeah, that's been the fascinating thing that I've been thinking about is that you've got these 17 different states, and working really hard to help all of your instructors understand how to utilize the framework within their instruction as they're teaching others about UDL. How have you guys facilitated that?

EMILY: Well, we have a variety of different collaborative spaces where we sort of engage in conversation around this. One is, we teach a similar curriculum across settings and across campuses, and so we prepare together. And in those conversations

where we're preparing to teach, we identify the opportunities for flexibility that might not have been initially built into the lecture or the learning experience when we designed it, and redesigned it over the years. So, we've been able to sort of incrementally change our approach and push against some of our practices in the moment in class. And then, we ask for a lot of feedback from our students. And so, at the end of class each week our students say, what worked for them as learners and where they face barriers, and through that feedback we get a ton of insight into, you know what might be happening in someone's context that is really affecting, you know, their capacity to show up to class and collaborate with their colleagues, or what really worked for someone that leverage their strengths that was sort of an ah-ha moment for them, that we can then continue to build into our instruction in subsequent weeks. And so, we get a ton of graduate feedback around the learning process, which is super helpful for informing our practice.

LOUI: Yeah, and I'm really intrigued by this idea of prepping together, and I'm thinking about those circumstances that happens K-12, that happens post-secondary, where a group is working together and maybe one person or two see an opportunity for flexibility and potentially there's someone else in the group that they don't see that as an opportunity for flexibility. What did those discussions look like? Do you have protocols that you use for these discussions? How do you move through that?

EMILY: That's so interesting. We're actually just having a discussion today because our Dean of Special Education in New York, Lauren LeBental was leading an assessment working group, where we're trying to build greater flexibility into our summer assessments for the upcoming term. And so, we had sort of made up a set of proposals around how we could increase flexibility and how students respond on their summer assessments, and introduced it to our faculty across multiple regions and serving graduate students in multiple states. And we have a shared commitment to providing choice and providing flexibility, but sometimes the choices that faculty members want to make available to their students vary, and that has to do with their own preferences as instructors right and, and what they feel like they have capacity for, for the types of technologies that they're most comfortable with, etc. And so, the initial conversation is always an invitation, right, we want to provide choice but what are the choices that feel most aligned with your particular context. And then at the end of the summer we'll have

a debrief where we look at student performance on assessments, are we talk about how the summer instruction went, and that's a time where we can really highlight, "I offered this option and here's what I saw when students engaged this way," or "I reworked this session in a particular way so that it was more flexible and here are the outcomes that I'm seeing as a result of that change." And so, we really make connections between those instructional moves and the student's experience, like qualitatively, what they share for their feedback and quantitatively in terms of their rubric scores on assessments. And that sort of builds shared investment in maybe trying a new strategy that you're not super comfortable with or a technology that you haven't engaged before because you're hearing from other colleagues who are finding success with it and seeing graduate students really eager to take up that option.

LOUI: This is an incredible conversation because it really taps into and appreciates and adores the variability of not just the learners but also the instructors. And it's creating, I'm sure, this environment that just feels way more inviting than an environment where we plan for the variability of our learners, but maybe the instructors don't feel like they're appreciated for their variability too.

EMILY: Right.

LOUI: Yeah! And I'm sure that comes out in your student feedback but I don't know how you're collecting that or if you have even a way to tap into that.

LOUI: Well, you say that our Director of Curriculum, Tasia Chatman today during the conversation said, "You know, just as we provide flexibility to our students, we need to extend the same grace to ourselves." And that's a sentiment that I've heard echoed across our faculty that like, as we're becoming more comfortable with the idea that the learning process is separate from us, you know, we're not like, it's not a reflection of who we are as humans, which can sometimes feel like when you're not thinking through a UDL lens, but as we get sort of distance from the learning process, we see that as something that can be flexible and different across classrooms and all of the ways that it can be expansive rather than restrictive, we're also more expansive in our appreciation of each other's variability.

LOUI: Yeah, it's beautiful, it's beautiful. So, you guys had some big ah-ha's for your team and for your instructors as they've been implementing UDL and as they've been teaching about UDL, so what are some of those bigger ah-ha's?

EMILY: Yeah, so there are a couple that just sort of knock me over, bowl me over. The first is just the impact of choice on the power dynamic in the classroom. And this lesson was learned as we were actually engaging faculty in a professional development course around choice and the value of choice. And we found that as soon as we offered options, we're getting ready to say, "Okay, now choose your thing and go forth and engage with these materials," and we got, like, 10 hands. And people started saying "Well I don't want to do A or B. Can I do C? Or can I do part of A and then some of B?" And people were just like, quick to ask, you know, "Can I make this my own." I've led professional development for many years, this is the first time that dynamic existed in a learning space with adults. And I attribute it directly to offering the choice. And so, before that I had thought like, universal design means choosing some different options and making them available to students. And now, I realized that the availability of choice, makes the number of options available infinite, because if you're saying, "I want you to do something that works for you right now," then you're giving students permission to actually think about what does work best and to choose a third way, or a fourth way or a fifth way that aligns with their strengths. So that's been huge. And then the other thing that I think about a lot, and this sort of came up in the conversation around faculty and how we engage and how that's changed over time, is just the value of adults knowing ourselves as learners. This isn't something that many of the faculty members and graduate students that we engage with have had a lot of time to reflect on in their PK-12 or undergraduate experience. And so, as a result we sort of bring our baggage as students to this space and we say, you know, "I never was a math student," or "I hated reading when I was growing up." We sort of internalize what we think is true about ourselves, about what's strong and what's weak, based on the learning experiences and the structures that we engaged in, not really realizing that those structures were determining our success in that space. And it's a real source of agency, to be able to say, "Wait a second. Okay, we have the shared goal. But there are lots of different ways to get to this shared goal. There's no one right way." And once you start

to think in that way, then it's no longer that 'I am sort of caught up in the learning process. And my success in it is a reflection of me.' It's that the learning process itself is this thing that is changeable. And I can engage and I can change it. And if it's not working, it's the learning process that's not working. It's not me. And I think that that even though we are no longer children and we are no longer in a space where our agency is limited by all of the structures around us and family and home etc., there's something so freeing about being able to separate yourself from the learning process and being able to say, "Oh wait! I experienced that in second grade or last week, because I engage with the content differently than other people do and I was continuously asked to read, or I was continuously asked to interpret graphs, and I never had the scaffolds or choices in place that allowed me to move toward the objective in a different way."

LOUI: Those are both incredible ah-ha's. I was thinking about the first one, that impact of choice on the power dynamic, and how, when we realize that it moves from just two choices or three choices or A B and C, then all of a sudden, it's the infinite, that, that is when we are positioning our learners to gain the skills that move them toward becoming expert learners because they truly are owning that process. And until they reach that level of agency, they're on the runway. They haven't really taken off yet. And so, it's just beautiful to hear that kind of an example, because that's really when the plane takes off.

EMILY: And I think a lot about like, special education teacher prep standards, I know a lot of things about that, and advocacy is always, you know, a big part of the standards through the CEC, and we're supposed to teach teachers how to effectively advocate and then teach teachers to teach students to effectively advocate for themselves, but in the absence of these conversations, advocacy becomes a sort of like flat thing of like well "What does it even mean to advocate for myself if I don't even know that there's a different option? If I don't know that there's like a choice that I've tried before that does work for me, because I'm in the space of so uniform in its approach to teaching and learning that I, that I don't get the insight into what works and I don't get that opportunity to develop my understanding of self." And so, we try to like artificially teach advocacy without creating the spaces where you would actually be able to advocate because you'd be able to learn about how to leverage your strengths and service of learning.

LOUI: Mm hmm. Absolutely, and I also the second ah-ha. In thinking about knowing ourselves as learners, I totally agree with you, we bring our own experiences of learning forward and they just kind of shine through us until we do that metacognitive action of thinking about our thinking and thinking about our learning, and then how are we reflecting that through our design. And helping your teachers thinking about what they are bringing into the classroom as the educator and knowing that it's, it's great that you bring yourself, that's what makes it all to life! But to recognize that your learners are going to have completely different experience than you did, so you can't just put your experience on top of them.

EMILY: Right.

LOUI: You can't layer yourself. Oh, brilliant.

EMILY: Oh, I have this really cute anecdote about choice, that just happened like 10 minutes ago. We went to Joshua Tree with my family last week for spring break, and my younger child who's five was telling a friend about it. And he said, "How was it?" And she said, "Oh, it was great! There were these really big rocks there and you could climb up them and it was amazing! You could get to the top!" And he said, "Was it scary?" And she said, "No, because there were lots of different ways you could choose which way you went!" And I thought that was just like such a beautiful analogy for how choice impacts fear and psychologically impacts you when you're doing something new or you're, you're reaching toward this case like a scary to-your-mother goal of climbing up 50 feet in the air [laughter]. But it was beautiful.

LOUI: Oh, absolutely. Well, I could talk to you forever, but we have definitely hit our 15 minutes Emily...

EMILY: It flew by!

LOUI: ...but I, oh my gosh is so appreciate this. You know, you guys have really embedded UDL into your culture and that's just so exciting to hear about and thank you so much for coming on and talking about it.

EMILY: Oh, well thank you so much for having me. Really, anytime. It's one of my favorite things to talk about.

LOUI: You are so welcome. So, for those of you 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. 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.