UDL in 15 Minutes
Amanda Tong and Clair Sheppard
The Transcript with Audio Descriptions

[The UDL in 15 Minutes logo]
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 Amanda Tong and Clair Sheppard, who will share a story from when they worked together and an independent school in Sydney, Australia. They're going to talk about how Clair's students shifted in how they saw themselves as learners. Hi Amanda! Hi Clair! How are you?

AMANDA: Hello, we're really well thank you.

CLAIR: Hello, lovely to be here.

LOUI: Oh, wonderful. So, can you each share a bit about your current roles, as well as the roles that you had at the Independent School? [A headshot of Amanda with shoulder-length brown hair and a brightly colored scoop neck shirt]

AMANDA: Absolutely. So, I'm a special education teacher by trade. I've been working in that field for the last 17 years in both special education settings and mainstream settings with diverse student populations from preschool age right up into adulthood. And most recently, I've been working in an independent school, a mainstream school in Sydney. And I coordinated the Learning Support Program in the prep school, the primary school there for many years, before transitioning to a UDL coaching role working with staff across the school from kindergarten to year 12. And I had the pleasure of being involved in a project based around UDL with Clair during that time as well. [A head shot of Clair who has straight, chin-length hair and has green eyes]

CLAIR: So, I'm Clair. I'm a primary school teacher and I've been teaching for seven years. I'm currently teaching Year 2 at a school south of Sydney. However, during my time working in Sydney, I taught Year 4 and Year 5, and worked with Amanda in a professional learning group to learn and share my experiences with UDL. [A sunset photograph with the Sydney Harbour Bridge in the background and the Sydney Opera House in the foreground]

LOUI: Perfect. So, from what I understand, part of the success with UDL that you both experienced came from pairing teachers and learning support teachers. So, could you

describe those relationships and how those were set up and how those were supported?

AMANDA: Yes, so I guess in some ways a little bit of background information about the school would be helpful. So, the model of delivery for learning support when I arrived at school was a very traditional one. So, learning support managed all of the programs and individualized plans for students with an identified disability. And students who weren't performing in class at a level commensurate with their peers were referred to learning support for additional assistance. So, this support was delivered largely through withdrawing students to attend remedial sessions, or through the provision of a Learning Support Assistant or teacher's aide to work one on one with students. We were looking to move away from that really obsolete model of support provision towards a more inclusive one that honored our obligation in the Disability Discrimination Act, to provide students with access to the curriculum on the same basis as their peers. So, we were committed to students being best served in the context of their mainstream class, and we were really looking for a feasible and sustainable way to support teachers to better cater for the diversity in their classroom at both ends of the spectrum, really. [The CAST UDL graphic organizer with the guidelines] And UDL was a perfect, really natural fit for us. And is best practice when it comes to inclusive practice. So, our challenge was, then, once we decided on our philosophy and pedagogy and our mode of delivery, what's facilitating buying from staff. Traditionally, our school had adopted a real smorgasbord approach to professional development for teachers. And as a result, new initiatives weren't often readily received by staff who were a little bit confused about our goals, and, and sometimes they lacked motivation to invest time and energy in things where there wasn't that level of accountability for them having to implement new ideas that have been introduced, particularly because they knew that at our next professional development session, we will have moved on to something else. [A CAST graphic with suggestions on how an expert learner behaves] So, we were challenged to think about how we could introduce the idea of Universal Design for Learning and support it's effective and ongoing implementation in a way that was really authentic and organic and sustainable. So, we decided to trial a co-teaching initiative in our intake is, which is Year 3 and Year 5 where a special education teacher and a classroom teacher would take joint responsibility for the class and teach them together for the whole year. They were both provided with training in UDL, and were supported to use the UDL guidelines to meet the diverse needs of the learners in their class. And they also met with myself weekly throughout that process as a UDL coach to guide and mentor them. It really was valuable because it provided a unique opportunity for both teachers, from different backgrounds and with different experiences, to learn and benefit from each other, and they grew together in their understanding of UDL. And, and that relationship that, that joint sense of responsibility for all of the students in the class. I felt was so much more

powerful and positive than learning support staff simply kind of dipping in and out, and providing advice to teachers about what they should be doing to better support the kids in the class. So, they were working in partnership together to make it happen, they were planning together on a daily basis, and working alongside each other teaching day in and day out in this one classroom. And Clair was one of the first teachers to participate in this co-teaching UDL initiate at school, so she'll have some really unique feedback and insight, too, about how that experience was for her and how she found that experience for her personally, but also the benefit for the students in her class. [Two male students wearing brain hats while creating their spelling board game]

CLAIR: Yeah, so from my perspective, my time co-teaching was really the most transformative experience in my career so far. It allowed me to learn from an incredible educator and therefore, become more confident in my abilities to cater for all students, which was really something that I felt was lacking from my own tertiary studies. It also allowed me to experiment with the UDL guidelines with someone else, I wasn't doing it alone. So, we constantly reflected on what worked, what didn't work, and we were like-minded educators who shared the passion for improving our practices, and ensuring all our students have equal access and opportunities. So, this was really, this was really key. We were open and honest with each other, so it really kind of balanced each other out. So, it was just such a perfect way to take on board something new and learn together.

LOUI: That's perfect. So how were teachers paired with one another? Because this…you had to build an incredible bond of trust, and just like what you talked about Clair, having that open and honest conversation along the way, that's, that's a real relationship. So, did people already have a working relationship before they went into this partnership? [A student-generated board game based on Pokiman. During this game, students have the chance to earn and spend money in a Pokishop if they spell words correctly]

AMANDA: They did we approach teachers that we knew, initially, would be on board that had a similar kind of philosophy and approach to education and interests in working with a diverse population of students. So, in particularly in Clair's scenario we had 100% buy in from herself and from the special education teacher. They were really motivated to participate in the project and make it work. The second class that we trialed it in, we had 100% buy-in from the special education teacher. The classroom teacher, however, was selected and asked to be part of the initiative despite having some reservations herself, and some differences pedagogically herself. And we definitely saw a big difference in terms of how effective that relationship was effectively staff were able to

work together, and the positive impact on the students and the culture of the classroom that they managed to create together in that space.

LOUI. Yeah. You know we all have to come to, kind of a mindset with UDL to be effective implementers, and for some it just takes a little bit longer or they just need to see something before they can move forward so it's exciting that that teacher still said yes I'll give it a shot. So, you know, over time, there's possibility, there's always possibility. [A second student-created board game with multi-colored squares around the edges of the paper and directions written at the top to help students practice their spelling words]

AMANDA: Yeah! Absolutely! And, you know, definitely I think that when we surveyed the staff about Universal Design for Learning and their knowledge and where they are at in terms of their UDL journey. And, you know, any kind of concerns they had around implementation, one of the biggest things that they said was I really want to see what it looks like in practice. I can understand the theory behind it. I can understand why it's important, but what does it look like? How is it different from some of the other things? How is it different from differentiation? How is it different from providing my students with a menu of learning options in the classroom? How is it different from thinking about de Bono's thinking hats when I'm designing learning experiences? So, they really wanted to see what does it look like in practice, and what does it look like in terms of my planning and preparation. This project was really kind of nice way of us showing them what that looked like in practice day in and day out as well.

LOUI: Yeah, yeah. Absolutely. [A photo of the chalkboard with "5D Spelling Buffet" and choices written on it]

CLAIR: I think, I think in terms of the, the co-teaching relationship, one of the most challenging parts initially for me, the classroom teacher, was giving up a little bit of control and sharing the journey, and the class, and the responsibility with someone else. And I think, given that I was quite new to the teaching profession anyway I wasn't really set in my ways. I was really very open to trying anything and everything, so I think that was part of our success in that it was a little bit easier for me to give up control and, and say, "Okay, you know my co teacher today's is really going to run the class and I'm going to work with a small group." Where I know from working with Amanda and talking with teachers, some of the hesitation is the classroom teacher not wanting to give up that responsibility. And in that case, it's just not going to work it needs to be a partnership.

LOUI: Yup. You're exactly right, giving up some of that control. It's a big part of it. Yeah, and then, but having that partnership can feel a bit more secure.

CLAIR: Absolutely.

LOUI: Yeah

AMANDA: And those open lines of communication, too. You know, it was really lovely for us to have those facilitated kind of reflection times together. Because there were doubts along the way to, you know, I remember at some points in that kind of process, Clair would be unsure of what kind of value she had to add but being really open with, of course she had so much value to add to that relationship and a different perspective and skills and expertise to contribute, but it was just about being open in terms of those lines of communication and communicating that with her co teacher, and for her to respond in that really nurturing way as well. Because I think both teachers interestingly, you know, Clair said at the time she was quite a new teacher that the special education teacher had been working in special education settings for 20-30 years, so very experienced but similarly was experiencing the same level of kind of doubt you know. This is a new context for me. I'm not used to working this way or in this relationship. What value do I have to add? So those reflection discussions, and together, were really important. And those open lines of communication, too. And that that feeling of safety to kind of express those concerns and doubts and move past was is really important as well.

LOUI: That's a great segue to the next question that I actually wanted to ask which was about the students reflecting on their learnings. We have the teachers being so reflective but then how did you help the students start down that path of reflecting on their learning because we know that's what is needed for them to understand what it means to be an expert learner. [A mind map of student ideas stemming from the question, "How can we recruit our interest in spelling practice?"]

CLAIR: Yeah, so have you worked with UDL for a couple of years I was looking for a way to kind of take my experience and knowledge a little bit further. I wanted to, I suppose, have my students finish the year with a really good understanding of what learning looks like for them. To really get inside themselves and figure out what works and what doesn't work. And I suppose, up until that point, I'd been using the UDL framework and probably still making too many decisions for my students. So, I now wanted to hand over the reins. So, I had my students reflect on what an expert learner looks like. And their responses were actually quite disheartening. The majority of the responses are really based around compliance. So, "I will look at the teacher." "I will

listen to the teacher." "I will sit still." So, from this I took spelling as a focus area, and I opened up to the discussion with students and ask them, how do they and others like to learn? And we brainstormed different ways we could engage in our spelling practice and then the students made and created learning resources. [A capture of the Trip Advisor review from one student. My entrée I scored a 10 out of 15. I am confident but I need to work on it more. My main course was the maze. It was okay. I think I will choose something else next week.] From this we created a spelling buffet and each day students selected activities which suited their needs and their mood. And at the end of each session students used a bit of a TripAdvisor style reflection about their experience not only with the task itself but how well it engaged them. And during this time, I was using student friendly UDL guidelines to help students focus on selecting activities that would recruit their interest and to help them to stay motivated. So, I was really working within that engagement area. Something I found that was really important during this initial phase was being really open and honest with my students and allowing them to feel comfortable enough to speak their mind. It was important for me to take a step back and give them the freedom to use this time to explore their learning needs, even if I didn't always agree with the choices that they made. And I really noticed a difference in, in their own personal reflections within a week of doing this. And then I was really thrilled to see them. Applying this same approach, the same process into different subject areas without me even prompting it. So it was a really powerful experience to give the students some control and some freedom as to how they like to learn so that they could best learn about themselves. [A second Trip Advisory Review reading, In my entre, I scored 5 out of 7 so I think that I need a bit more practice. For my main course I used the board game and thought it was a fun way to work. I rate it an 8 out of 10."]

LOUI: I'm just like so excited. Like jumping up and down in my chair. It just sounds so perfect! I love the spelling buffet. I love the TripAdvisor style of feedback. And then using those, the student friendly UDL guidelines and saying listen, we're doing this all together, it may not go great all the time but this is what learning is all about. Not, of course, using the word iterative with them but that's essentially what you were saying. It's just beautiful. I love it!

CLAIR: Thank you.

LOUI: So then, Amanda, I just want to get from you, where you know, so Clair is working on this and they're building this so then how were you offering the support that you offered. What did that look like? [Student work reading, "An expert learner knows how they learn best. They can draw, listen, or see better that's how they like to learn.]

AMANDA: Yes, so I was offering support in a number of different ways. So, as I say, I was in a bit of a coaching and mentoring role at that state, at the school at the time. So, Clair and I were meeting weekly to kind of discuss the project and how it was progressing. I had a little focus group to have teachers who were like minded, and we were engaging in some communal online professional learning as well. But in addition, I was working with some other staff K to 12. And it was interesting to compare I guess how engaging in a similar kind of process looked in a different context for teachers who didn't have that same background as Clair. And I think without generalizing too much that that process of scaffolding student learning and laying those really strong foundations to support their understanding can sometimes come a little bit more naturally to teachers who have that strong grounding in early childhood education and in that primary setting. I've worked with lots of teachers, as in instructional coach kind of role who really gravitated towards the idea of providing students with extra options. They love that menu idea and that idea of giving them options to express their understanding, but then in that other sense we failed in some ways to grasp the importance of providing them with options to engage their interest and support their understanding at the same time. The importance of setting students up for success by checking their understanding and conferencing with them regularly, which Clair did so much of. And making sure they have a clear understanding of the expectations required of them for any given task by, for instance, providing them with a rubric, an exemplar, or pre-teaching key content and subject specific vocab, explicitly teaching them how to use the tools they need to complete the task that you've set for them, particularly when it comes to the use of assistive technology. Designing a research task and providing students with options for how they could demonstrate what they learned isn't going to be successful if you haven't actually taught them anything. If you haven't provided them with any scaffolding or guidance about credible sources, taught them how to read for key information, or supported their understanding of what they've read by pre teaching vocabulary and concepts, or taught them how to take notes by synthesizing and summarizing what they've read. All of that important groundwork needs to occur before they even get to the point of being able to demonstrate what they know, and, and Clair supported her learners so well in the context of that project in terms of setting up all that, laying all of those really strong foundations for the kids in her class. And that's ultimately why we saw so much success in that particular context. And it was certainly interesting in my role to see when we tried to replicate that and there wasn't that understanding of the importance of all of that, the results were much more variable. [Student work reading, "An expert learner in my mind is someone who can learn with no problem. Someone who listens and learns from mistakes and someone who rises to the challenge. For example, someone is given a test with an optional part with it, due in a day. They would put all the effort into learning and the test."]

LOUI: Yeah. Yeah. I'm sure. I mean I could talk to you guys for hours but we've, we've definitely filled our 15 minutes plus! This is so…! I want to say thank you so much to both of you. It's just so inspiring and I love the fact that you're moving this forward, even as you've shifted in your positions you've taken UDL with you. I know we didn't talk about that here, but I know that. And so, I want to say thank you for that because you're just spreading it to new places and other kids are getting opportunities, too. So, thank you so much for your time. I really appreciate it.

CLAIR: Thank you for the opportunity.

AMANDA: Thank you. It's, it's a real joy and a real pleasure to be able to chat with someone so highly esteemed in the UDL field and knowledgeable and wise so we're the lucky ones, Loui.

CLAIR: Yeah.

LOUI: Oh my gosh, well thank you so much. [Video capture of the website theudlapproach.com followed by the logo for UDL in 15 Minutes] 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.theUDL approach.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.theUDL approach.com. And thanks to everyone for your work in revolutionizing education through UDL and making it our goal to develop expert learners.