

UDL in 15 Minutes Podcast Transcript: Liz Hartmann

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 Liz Hartmann who is an associate professor in the Department of Education at Lasell College in Newton, Massachusetts. She also co-teaches a course at the Harvard Graduate School of Education in Cambridge, Massachusetts on UDL that will be the focus of today's conversation. Liz is going to share how she and her colleagues have used UDL to design a course about UDL to support these graduate students to advance their risk taking, like demonstrating their knowledge. Hey, Liz, welcome! How are you?

LIZ: I'm great. Thank you so much for having me.

LOUI: Oh, you're very welcome. I just said that you teach at the college level, but you have a really rich teaching background story to share. So, go ahead and share.

LIZ I started out as a teacher of the visually impaired and blind and I mostly taught students with Deaf-blindness and students who had additional either communication or physical support needs or students who had visual impairment and intellectual disabilities. I started out as a classroom teacher and I worked at two schools for the blind here in the US and then eventually moved into a role as an itinerant teacher where I worked in public schools and private schools around the Boston area in the San Francisco Bay Area. And as I became an itinerant teacher, I also started teaching in higher ed and began teaching in programs and visual impairment, and I was actually thinking the other night about how I've been teaching now in higher ed, the same amount of years I taught in pre-K through 12, so it, it feels like an important time in my life where I've made this like critical shift where next year, I'm going to be teaching more in higher ed than actually in with the with the younger kiddos. So, now, mostly what I do is I teach pre-service teachers, both gen, future general and special ed teachers. And as you mentioned, teaching this course at HGSE in UDL.

LOUI: Wow. And was it during your K-12 experiences that you learned about UDL or was it through your university and college level teaching positions? How did you come to learn about UDL?

LIZ: So, I actually learned about UDL right towards the end of my doctoral program. At the time I was really intensely studying the education of students with Deaf-blindness and I was looking for a way to frame their needs and supports in a way that could bring it to a broader audience, in particular general educators, or even people interested in special education who might be focused more on supporting learners who have what we would say mild, moderate, or higher incidence support needs like learning disability. So towards the end of my doctoral program. I learned about UDL and I really resonated with this idea that the curriculum was the problem in needing our attention, not the child and I saw it as a very powerful way for me to think about Deaf-blindness and visual impairment, and the richness of what I learned from studying that and teaching those students, which I knew could help support all learners and how I could bring that to a larger audience. So, then it was through my UDL post-doctoral program where I really got to explore that idea more. And in doing that, I realized that UDL was so powerful for me and helping my own instruction and higher education. I realized that I actually needed a lot of support and scaffolds to better teach pre-service teachers to really make sure that I was preparing them to meet the realities of being a really effective classroom teacher. And so once I started implementing UDL into my own teaching and using it as this way to leverage what I knew about learners with Deaf-blindness and visual impairment, I just couldn't stop thinking about it. And I found that I was constantly thinking about how to just innovate more using UDL to play my lectures. workshops, I saw the value in it and I couldn't turn back!

LOUI: Yeah! We, so we met the first time...Tracy Hall and Richard Jackson, who essentially created that UDL postdoc opportunity at CAST, and I came there with Yvel Crevecoeur in 2012, and it's when they had that little mini reunion that we met. And I just remember being blown away by how much you had already done in this transition in your thinking of, you know, what you saw as benefiting the students who were, again, in

the Deaf-blind population or those with disabilities, and then beginning to apply it into your higher ed, and not even beginning because by that time you were really you were really, truly digging in! I just remember looking at you and going, Oh, I just really admire her!

LIZ: So, the feeling is mutual! [overtalking]

LOUI: [laughter] I appreciate it. My gosh. Okay, so this Harvard Graduate School of Education course that you co-teach, talk about that because, what I really hope is going to happen here is, we've got some folks out there who unfortunately misinterpret UDL, and this concept of lowering barriers, and they see that as, "making things easier." And we know, uh no, that's not what's happening. And obviously, you're not going to do that in a graduate course! And, just describe the course and, and, I know that that rigor is going to come out when you're talking about it.

LIZ: Yeah. Well, let me start by saying I co-teach this course with an amazing teaching team. So, my co instructor is Jose Blackorby, who's the Director of Research and Development at CAST, and then we have two fantastic teaching fellows who assist us in teaching - Ari Fleischer and Heather Francis. And I just wanted to acknowledge them because they are such an integral part of the stories that I'll tell about this course. This course is T560 and I believe it is actually the first course ever in Universal Design for Learning, and we've been teaching it now for three years. And the course has a pretty, I would say, predictable structure where the first couple of weeks we introduce UDL as a framework, and then we go into this routine where each week we dig deep into one of the nine UDL guidelines. The course has a real nice kind of rich routine to it as well, but at the same time, I think that there are some students that, that repetition can be a barrier for. And in the last couple years we've been really thinking a lot about design thinking and how we can use the tools of design thinking and UDL frame, the UDL framework together to make this a really rich and rigorous experience for the students at Harvard.

LOUI: And what is the overall goal? Sorry to interrupt, but what's the overall goal of this course.

LIZ: So, this is a graduate course in a variety of different programs. So, whereas some of my coursework at Harvard is really, you know, super focused on preparing pre-service teachers. This is a course that would have a variety of master's students and doctoral level students at Harvard who want to learn about UDL in it. So, our goal is really to have them leave the course with a deep understanding of UDL and, and be able to teach it in a way that's flexible enough that they can apply it to their future lives as educators, as leaders, as entrepreneurs. We have students who come to our class and they want to learn about UDL because they're designing apps for educational settings. We have students who come and they want to learn about UDL because they're going to be teaching next semester in the Boston Public Schools. We have students who come internationally and they want to learn about UDL because they're going to return back to their country and become leaders in the field of disability. So, we have a really rich diverse group of students who come into the class and they all have different reasons for wanting to engage with the UDL framework and we try to provide them with a course that will really leverage or optimize that learner variability, so that they leave feeling like they not only know about the framework, but they have the skills to be able to implement it in their future careers.

LOUI: Yeah. And one of the things we talked about and I mentioned in the intro, is that you really pushed that risk taking with your students. And you see that in the final products that they provide to you. So, I was wondering if we could jump to that, or if you feel like there's a bridge there you need to offer first, but I'd love for people to hear about these products that are created.

LIZ: Sure! So, I had a really interesting experience last spring I was on sabbatical. And during my sabbatical I decided to audit a class at a HGSE, at Harvard's graduate school. And you know, I've been a professor now for quite a few years and I thought that this would be a really nice learning experience for me and helped me, you know,

build some knowledge in an area of need that I saw. So, being someone who was auditing class, I had this fantastic like insider view of what the everyday life of a graduate student was like. I learned that, you know, we have this idea of rigor, especially in higher ed, and I think, especially at institutions like Harvard. And what I saw was that students were really, including myself, I have to say, struggling to keep up with the reading, keeping up with assignments and that experience really reframed how I thought about T560, and in particular one goal related to part of our course which is a weekly reading reflection that we have the students complete. So, like I said before, we have this, you know, nine guideline sequence where we go through each guideline. And previously we had this goal that, you know, students will reflect on each of the guidelines as they go through the course. And we set it up so that in past years that the students would read, they come to class, and class was always a combination of lecture, a hands-on workshop where they get to immediately apply what they learned, and then they work on some final projects. And then, after that class they would write their reflection on the guideline. But I realized that there were some major barriers with the way we had set that assignment up because we weren't providing support for the students to engage with our readings and media that we provide prior to the in-class lecture and workshop that we that we engage in. So I, with our teaching team, began to ask our reflections really encouraged more active engagement with material prior to our face-to-face class. And what if our reflections really tried to leverage the learner variability of the students that we had. We know they're coming with different identities, coming from different countries, different background experience. They have different strengths in terms of their own academic abilities and areas of need, and this could be a really powerful way for them to see not only their strengths and areas of need, their own variability, but also it could open up more options for them in terms of how they think about the ways they engage with rigorous academic content prior to coming to class. So, we changed the assignment we gave them a strong goal, which was to engage with the content prior to class and gave them open options for them to communicate how they did that in whatever way they saw best suited their needs at that moment. And, of course, we scaffold it in class and we showed some examples. The teaching staff, we all created examples of how we would go about this assignment so that we could model

it for them. And what we found, kind of early on, is that the students were a lot more active in class. We got more questions. We got more engagement in discussion. We also heard like a richness of the student students in terms of their discussions and they're connecting the different guidelines to the background knowledge which we hadn't heard before. So that was all really exciting to us, but we also noticed that they were still relying on very traditional formats to show what they know. So, then we said, well, how can we better support the students so they take risk because we saw this as an important opportunity for them to really push themselves to show their knowledge in kind of unique ways that either represent their strengths or an area of need that they just felt like they would want to work on in the context of this course. So we began to highlight in class, at the beginning of class, some of the students who had taken these risks and just called them out very briefly for a minute, say, "hey, that's really cool! This new format. Someone wrote about a song about this guideline we, we want to play it today." And of course, we would ask the students permission beforehand and when we started to do that. We got an influx of all these creative reflections that students submitted. We have students submit slam poetry on a guideline. We had a fantastic video of two students interviewing each other about the guideline and how it related to their past work teaching in international settings. We had students who are more design focused creating infographics of the guidelines. We had students sharing their color-coded notes. And, even like really some meta examples like when we were talking about the guideline related to *Providing options for comprehension* as a student decided that she was going to structure her whole reflection as a KWL chart, because that was an important support for her own comprehension. So slowly, over time, we saw our students taking risks and in doing that, they really, you could see them just really enjoying the assignment and not only enjoying it, but they were talking in class about how powerful it was for them to not only understand the content but push themselves to think about academic rigor and new ways.

LOUI: You know, I'm going to point out the fact that within this, it's just like UDL on top of UDL on top of UDL, which is just incredibly exciting! And we had talked earlier, so I think you're prepared to offer some images and some pictures that go along with this to

help people really see what you were talking about with these students and how they've and what they produced. So one last question, because we've, we've gone over the 15 so I'm just gonna let people know...

LIZ: Sorry! [overtalking]

LOUI: No, no, no! Do not apologize! Because that's, you know, part of that's my role as the podcast host and I was just like, nope! We're just going to go! [laughter] So when it came to students that you saw reaching beyond that safety net, you talked about some scaffolds that you provided so can you give one example that, that helped, because you gave examples for the students to follow but then maybe something else that you did to help these students who are such high achievers. Everyone thinks of Harvard and they think, "Oh, these kids got it", you know? But you guys provided additional scaffold and support through the use of UDL guidelines to help these students, to propel them even further. So, could you talk about that for a minute?

LIZ: Yeah. So, um, you know, I mentioned before, like calling out different students and excellent work on these reflections and I think that was really powerful, but another support that I think really helped is the students were very concerned about how they were going to be evaluated. And they asked us you know about the rubric for the assignment and one of the decisions design decisions we made in setting up this assignment is that we actually wanted the students to evaluate their own reflections and provide themselves with a grade at the end of the semester. We thought, "Hey, why not let's really push this to the UDL limit?" and you know, these students truly will be expert learners and UDL, then they should be able to at the end of semester look back at these nine different reflections and, you know, ask themselves, did we meet the goal of this assignment? And, and then provide some rationale as to their grade in, in relation to that goal.

LIZ: And so we took some time in class to, to remind them that they would be self-evaluating, and that this is the goal of the reflection is to, you know, engage with the

media and the content of the course so that they can better understand it and better prepare themselves for the work that we do in class. And I think, at first, a few of them kind of felt like you were tricking them, like, “Really? We're gonna grade ourselves?” And, but then, you know, as you go through the course and you learn more about UDL and you really dig into examples of UDL implementation, you know, especially as we got to those guidelines that talk about executive functioning and self-regulation, it began to click. It's like, “Oh yeah! Of course we're going to grade ourselves, because that's what expert learners do!” And I think once they, they fully understood that, then that is, I think, when we saw them take those, those really big risks. And, and of course we supported and, and rewarded those risks, which, you know, gave them more empowerment to, to even push further.

LOUI: Right, right. Oh, well, this has been fabulous. They don't want to quit the conversation, but that's the way it always goes on every single one of these podcasts, because you guys are all awesome! So I'm saying thank you to you and Jose and Ari and Heather in how you've constructed this course. I know people are going to be incredibly curious to learn more and hopefully see more, and I wanted to say...

LIZ: Any time! And I wanted to say thank you so, so much for this podcast! I've been really enjoying listening to it.

LOUI: Oh. Well, thank you, Liz! That's awesome! Thank you so much! All right. And, so, for those who are listening to this podcast, you can find supplemental materials like an image montage with closed captioning, that montage and audio descriptions, a transcript, and associated blog at my website www.theUDLapproach.com/media. 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 at revolutionizing education through UDL and making it our goal to develop experts learners.