

Juan Gallardo

UDL in 15 Minutes Transcript

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 Juan Gallardo, who is the Dean of Students in Sharpstown High School in Houston, Texas. And today, Juan is going to talk about his shift from reluctance towards UDL to being an advocate of UDL. Hola, amigo. Como esta?

JUAN: Muy bien! Como estas? [laughter] I never thought that we would start this in Spanish! That really caught me completely off guard! How are you, Loui?

LOUI: Well, it's wonderful to talk with you. So...

JUAN: Likewise

LOUI: ...let's just start off with you talking about your education, your teaching background and your current position.

JUAN: Well, I have a bachelor's in English in Universidad de Granada. In Spain. I have an unfinished bachelor of humanities in the Universidad de Almería, which is what I'm from. I'm from the, from the southeast of Spain of the Spanish Peninsula. And I have a master's degree in education administration with the Lamar University. And you asked me also about my teaching background. I taught all levels of Spanish from Spanish one to AP Spanish literature. For a couple of years, I was a magnet coordinator. And for the last three years I've been a dean of students at Sharpton High School as you said yourself in the introduction.

LOUI: Wonderful, wonderful. So, all right, we're just gonna dive in. And as the listeners heard at the beginning, you had a reluctance toward UDL when you got started. So what did that beginning look like for you? What were your experiences?

JUAN: I guess that we need to give our listeners and your listeners the appropriate context. I considered myself before I even knew anything about UDL, an effective teacher. I mean, it's not like I was the best teacher in the world, but I thought of myself as an effective teacher. I come from a family of teachers. Mom and dad are teachers in Spain. They're both retired. Doing well, by the way. And so, when I say that I was effective it's not so much an opinion as I had data to back me up. Like when I started teaching AP Spanish, you know that that is, there is a subject that kids take an exam with college board. That is out of my control, right? When I started teaching in Chaves, I think the percentage of passing students for the Spanish was around 35%. Then when I took over a number of classes, it went up to 65%. And then when I became department chair for my department, and I and I also have other teachers teach. I mean, they have their own married and they're very strong, but we were together, doing our lesson plans, etc. We went up close to 85 to 90%. So, at that point, I'm introduced to UDL, right? And also to give your listeners some even more context, in my school at the time, we had so many initiatives. We had a new principal back then, and he tried to change everything. And I guess his idea was to keep, you know, throwing stuff at us. And when I say initiatives, I'm talking about I don't know if our listeners know about Capturing Kids Hearts, all kinds of problems, right? And one of them was UDL. I remember that one day I counted it, and we had 21 initiatives going on at the same time. Loui, this is crazy. Wednesdays used to be our early dismissal day, so kids will leave like at noon, and we

had four hours for trainings for working on stuff like this. And I remember that one Wednesday, I was supposed to be in four places at the same time. I was part of three committees. I also have my, some meeting that I have with my, as department chair. So he was crazy. It was the AP thing they blah blah, blah. And, and UDL was the last thing to be added. So of course, I thought this is just another thing. It's something else they put on my plate. And I remember even having arguments. I was one of those horrible people that go to trainings and argue with the presenter. I am one of those when I was like, Okay, I went okay, "If I'm doing things right, why do I need to change? Like I don't understand this!" And I remember it was one actor they admire a lot Arnold Schwarzenegger, he said if what you're doing is working, don't change it, right? So, I felt kind of like, "Why do I have to change anything?" And that went on for like about a year. I mean, I like to be in compliance. Don't think of me as one of those, you know, people that keep, you know, wrecking everything. But I was clearly reluctant, you know, and when it was the time for me to drop something because I was into so many things, I kept thinking I need to let go of this UDL thing. And that's that was my starting point and that was your question. So yeah.

LOUI: I really appreciate you being so open about that, because of course, I've met you after you learned about UDL, but like you've said, you're a great teacher and had great results with your students and so you were really trying to figure this out. And so now I understand you had like this moment, this little ah-ha where you reflected on the framework. So talk about that because I think that's such a crucial part of the story.

JUAN: So it's actually two moments that build on each other. The first moment was one day that I'm administrating the summer in the University of Houston. I think our, my good friend, I think she's your friend too, Liz Berquist...

LOUI: Yes!

JUAN: ...was one of the presenters. Love her to death. Like, really! And at a certain point I'm like, "Let me just look at this, because I used to see like nine little squares. And that made no sense to me. And then the moment that I realized that there was some sense to the sequence, and there was some sense to the columns to the principles and the guidelines, I'm like, "Okay, I still don't like this, but now I know what it says."

[laughter]

LOUI: All right, that's step one! [laughter]

JUAN: Yeah! Great! And then I guess my real revelation was when I was, okay, so I was ready to be an expert on all of them once I knew what it was, right? And to my surprise, I was fairly proficient in engaging my kids. Not because I practice or I have any kind of a book I was reading, out of instinct, I like to connect with kids. I like to be funny. I think that I make people laugh. You notice that by now. Because that is emotion. I mean, it was Maya Angelou who said, "You remember how people made you feel"? If you connect that emotion with your teaching, that's the best way for your students to remember something. So, what better emotion than having fun, right? So, I'm like, "I'm pretty proficient about the levels of engagement or at least the first two, recurring interest and sustaining effort." I thought I was really good at representation because I've been a musician in my life. I've been a comic book artist, etc. So, something that my dad told me was to use all your weapons. So, if you know how to draw, you need to use

that in your classroom. If you know how to play music, play music in your classroom, but I sucked at actually an expression. Because my kids will do whatever I told them to do. And that's it. I mean, I couldn't check a single box, a single guideline in the action and expression thing. Like none. And that's, that's what I thought, "Huh. So maybe I don't know this. I mean, either I'm not great or this action and expression thing is this good for nothing. It has to be one of the two. Right?" So, I realized that I wasn't great. I realized that yes, I mean, I had some results and I had good results. But I realized that I had a lot of room to grow. And that's exactly what I started doing. A few months after that, it started. It was like a very slow aha moment that went on for like, four or five months. And in one day, Christmas break, it was like four months after the summer, five months after the summer, I started with the environment. That's the way I started doing. I change my classroom completely to make it as UDL as possible. Like, instead of changing me, let's change my environment that let the environment change me, right? So, I gave my students all kinds of for opportunities in my in my room to express themselves to say how well they understood the class, opportunities for them to interact with the board with the other board, to they started posting their work in a certain way. I mentioned before that I like to draw. I drew for my AP Spanish literature class of the authors like in a cartoonish version in one of my whiteboards on the side and I connected them, and I let my student write their favorite quote. And they will change that every day because that's very important. When you create an environment, it must be dynamic. It cannot be something that looks the same on day and on day 200 of the school year. And suddenly I saw myself giving my students more opportunities to express themselves to decide what to do and how to do it. Always remembering that my

goal was for them to learn my content. It didn't matter what they do, to show it to me as long as they show that to me. And that's like I say in a matter of like maybe five, six months, something like, that I went from, I won't say hating it because I don't hate anything to be honest, but just totally disliking liking it to strongly loving it.

LOUI: So, I know that there are going to be other AP teachers who are going to listen to this and think, "You know, it's awesome. That Juan figured this out, but you know, for me, AP is really structured.

JUAN: Corret.

LOUI: "There's a test at the end. We have to teach the kids all this content. It just feels like UDL is going to take up more space." So, how do you respond to that?

JUAN: Of course, there are certain things that they need to they need to and they need to do well. Like for example, something that just came up, but I just thought about when you were asking me the question. In AP Spanish, I think it's both in no also in the Spanish language, one of the things that they need to do in the exam is to talk, interact with a person is like a robot, right? Like you listen to something and you react to it. And another one is a short essay in which you record your voice about a certain topic. So, something I started doing is in the long essay that they need to write, I tell them you know what, now you need to record that essay, too, and send it to me. And something amazing happens. When you read something that you wrote, you realize all of the mistakes that you made because sometimes things read well, but sound horrible.

LOUI: Yep.

JUAN: So by mixing the two, and this is just playing around with the options that I have been given, that by itself. And you know what? That kind of, how can I say, inspiration

comes from having a certain attitude. Inspiration never strikes you, you need to be looking for it. You need to be ready to accept inspiration, right? So, when you are in that mental space of trying new things, of giving the students options, and stuff like this happens. Like when you think okay, so if I have if I only have three options, that means that I actually have three times two times one now I have six because I can mix them in any way I like. And that's just one example of something that you can do is staying in the parameters that you've been given, but change the way in you you're doing it. Like use one of the activities you need to do and mix them with the other. Or better yet, let your students decide how they do them. So, I hope that answers your question, Loui.

LOUI: Oh, it does. And I really love that you used the words "playful" and the whole aspect of listening for inspiration. I mean, that's, that's just what makes the whole teaching thing fun is when you come up with those interesting ideas, then you get all excited about them and you want the kids to try them and that's just what makes it rock and roll for me. I know that. So, my last question, it's related to what I just asked, but you know, a core aspect of UDL is its access, it's just allowing our students to have that full access to all these different options and choices and opportunities so they can learn, but for some reason, some educators just get stuck. And they think, "Oh, well, if I'm giving them access, I'm making things easier." They don't see that it makes it actually more rigorous. So, talk about that a little bit. What are your thoughts about that?

JUAN: I mean, if I understand the question correctly, maybe their problem with that kind of attitude is like they're mixing format with content, so to speak. What you shouldn't change is the rigor in the content. For example, I mean, there's some beautiful

examples in your own book, Loui, about the book of you have with Patty Ralabate. I say her name in Italian.

LOUI: Yes! [laughter]

Juan: The one about I think it's Culturally Responsive Design for English Learners. Don't let the format get in the way of assessing what you should really be assessing. You know it's almost like, I'm gonna assess how well you speak English by singing a song to me. What if you cannot sing?

LOUI: Mm hmm.

JUAN: You know what I'm saying? So, so as long as you know what you're measuring or what you're assessing, what you're evaluating, if the format has nothing to do with it, you should have no problem changing it.

LOUI: I absolutely agree. Oh, Juan, oh, muchas gracias. This has been so wonderful. Thank you so much.

JUAN: De nada. All right. Thank you. Thank you so much for having me. It's been an honor for me. I really like you. I like your books. I've been following you on social media for several years now. And again, it's it's such a true honor to be here talking to you.

LOUI: Oh, you're so kind! 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, 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.