

UDL in 15 Minutes

With Donzell Lewis

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 Donzell Lewis, who is a youth theatre educator/director, actor and comedian. He's a theater teaching artist for several schools in the Los Angeles area. Today, Donzell is going to share how UDL helps him guide third grade students in the creation of STEAM play at Walgrove Elementary through his work with P.S. Arts. Hi Donzell, it's so wonderful to talk to you!

DONZELL: Hi, Loui. It's so great to speak with you as well. Thank you for having me on!

LOUI: Oh, you're so welcome. I was so excited to read about your program in American Theater, but before we get into the programs you're leading and how UDL is influenced that work, can you share a bit about your background and how you came into educational theater?

DONZELL: Yes, absolutely. It's so important to talk about background because where we end up going, it's definitely a projection of where we were, right? So for me, education and acting have been a part of my life since I was a young child. So, let's give you the abridged version of my story into education. I grew up in the church and my grandparents were huge Sunday school teachers. I would spend a lot of the time on the weekends with them learning how they developed their lessons. And when I was a teenager, they wanted me to start teaching the younger students in church. And so, naturally I did because I loved what they did, and I loved teaching, and I ended up finding out from an early age that that was very enjoyable for me. And I would really enjoy making these Bible stories come to life for these younger students. And it was a great way for me to combine my love of performance and storytelling, and learn this art of education from my grandparents. Then, as I grew older and kind of lost interest in the church, my new interest started to go towards martial arts. I started to train martial arts when I was 11 years old, and I actually still train martial arts to this day, but throughout my training within martial arts, as I grew older and I started to look for after school jobs and the martial arts school

said, "Why don't you just work here with us and you can work in our after-school program and again, teach the younger students." And, I was like, "Of course!" So, that became the first time that I was paid as a professional to educate was in this after-school program. I did that for a number of years throughout undergraduate. By the time I moved into graduate school, I was still teaching at the martial arts studio and then I became the director of the after-school program. And so, then I was in charge of the educational programs that we got to create and I had a great time finding ways to make the martial arts come alive but also, we had to engage the students beyond just martial arts because they would be there after school for a few hours until parent pick-up. So, I would engage them with other curriculum and pull in their schoolwork and we found a way to make, again, the martial arts come alive through story and performance and through literature. And that kind of became my thing and it became this joy that I really loved. And when we got to turn tournament season, which was when you know you get your performance team together and you hit the tournament circuit and you start competing in martial arts to rack up your trophies. Well, I decided that, why can't our martial arts performances be like mini-martial arts movies? I'm an actor. I also love martial arts. Let's do this! So, our tournament performances became very theatrical and very engaging the audience in that way beyond just standing up and doing these martial arts skills. It became about what's the story? What is the beginning, the middle, the end? It was almost as if you're watching a mini-martial arts movie. Then what ended up happening from there, as I was in graduate school, my mentor Dr. Tonya Pettiford-Wates, pointed out that I've been doing this for a long time naturally, and I was in graduate school for theater pedagogy, and she suggested that my thesis be about my work that I did in the martial art school and how I combined theater with martial arts. So, I've, of course, as you do with all good mentors, you take their advice, and I did. My three-year study in the martial arts was about how to take a community of martial arts students, nonperformance students, and how do you teach them performance? And how do you engage the arts and the theater with something that is considered an athletic sport?

LOUI: Yeah, and she had a theory, right, an acting method that she taught. What was that?

DONZELL: Yes, so she had an acting method herself that I was studying in graduate school. It's a black acting method called Ritual Poetic Drama within the African Continuum. Now this is one of several black acting methods. It's important to note the history of the black action methods because anyone who's listening to this who has studied theater, or still studies theater knows that there are very popular Eurocentric acting styles and methodologies that teach students how to be the best actor they can be. In our country, we have a history of several black acting methods that were used within the black community to reach black artists throughout history. Basically, how to approach the craft of acting while also maintaining your cultural ancestry. And what Dr. T found, as well as many others, what they found was when students of color would study these Eurocentric methods, it was very exclusionary. It was very much about you need to sound like this. Your speech should be this clear to be the standard American Speech. Get rid of your dialect. Get rid of the things that make you who you are. Get rid of your essence. Lessen those things, and put on this mask of what we say the standard American should look like of all colors. Well, that's not what makes our country beautiful, nor is that what makes art beautiful by making it all the same.

LOUI: Yeah.

DONZELL: Some students are great at taking those methods and really learning how to become the best actor that they can be and not lose their individuality. And I think that's amazing. I don't take away from those methods. I don't want to lessen those methods. I think those Eurocentric methods are very important and they're very good at what they do. However, they also have a blind spot as all things do in life. And that blind spot affected a student like me, where I couldn't connect with these Eurocentric ways. I just couldn't connect. So, what ended up happening was, I was told by the chair of the theatre department that I was too gay to be an actor. And he said that I should leave the department. I mean, this was a very intense conversation in my

sophomore year. I was in fact then put on probation and told that I would have to audition again at the end of the semester to prove that I could stay in the department and stay an actor.

LOUI: Okay, this is [pause with laughter] oh gosh! Please keep going with the story but I am just reeling from this.

DONZELL: You know, and I am healed from this. Of course at that time there was trauma and it was many years of trauma, but unfortunately, that's what happens when we who are educators are put in positions to shape and craft students that get to their highest potential. If we don't have methods to reach them, and to reach all students, then students are often leaving being directly or indirectly told that they are not enough. That they can't do it or that they are not capable. And that's the exact opposite of what we want to do in education. And so, Dr. Tonya Pettiford-Wates method of Ritual Poetic Drama is the exact antithesis of that. It is looking at every individual student and saying "You yourself are enough and I don't want you to hide who you are. I want you to bring all of you to this stage and from there, I will meet you where you are at and then we will move forward and grow and we will develop your artistry." So, Dr. T, at that time had a very blunt talk with me because I didn't know her. I didn't work with her. I was a sophomore. You couldn't work with her until you were a junior. But she was the only black faculty member. So, I didn't go to when I heard that. So, I went to her and I felt comfortable talking to her. And she was very honest. And she said the problem isn't that you cannot act. She was like the problem is that the faculty doesn't know what to do with you because you don't fit in a box. You don't fit in the box that they've been trained to teach in. And that is their problem, not your problem. And from there she took me under her wing and mentored me and used her methodology to reach me by always, every class instead of it being "Don't be Donzell. It will show up in the fullness of Donzell." She even said just trust the process. I guarantee that I will get you to the other side.

LOUI: Absolutely. So, everything in here is all I know building up to why you connect so strongly with the UDL framework.

DONZELL: Yes.

LOU: And what I'd love to do is to dive into your work with P. S. Arts because I think they're the ones that introduced you to UDL and then...

DONZELL: Yes...

LOU: ...okay and you're working with a couple of schools that adore you, but we're going to focus on Walgrove Elementary and the STEAM project.

DONZELL: Yes!

LOU: What I love about that huge project is that it's truly collaborative and that the "Arts" is definitely equally represented. So, can you give us an overview of that? The project and P.S. Arts and then in UDL? How does it influence that big STEAM project?

DONZELL: Yes, absolutely. So, when I first came to P. S. Arts I came to P. S. Arts as the theater teacher that I was at that time, and I gave them you know, my portfolio and showed them what I did with my martial arts studio, with my thesis, and they said to me, we love what you've done here. Can you do this with theatre in the public schools? And I just knew I could. I didn't know how! [Laughter] But I knew I could!

LOU: Nice!

DONZELL: Because I come from, you know, I'm a teacher of Ritual Poetic Drama where the answer is yes, you can! We just have to figure out the how! And as an artist, many theatre artists will come with a strong methodology of how they create their craft. But the way that you teach that craft in the classroom, especially a public school classroom, is different craft. And that's where the disconnect was. I knew that I was a great theater artist. I knew that I was great theater teacher. I knew that I could get the students to arrive. However, being in a very inclusive classroom, because at the time when I started Walgrove, we started with a grant for special needs students to create inclusive classrooms through the craft of theater, music theater, to create inclusive classrooms. We had this grant from the Tommy Hilfiger Foundation. And so, I was all for, like, "Let's jump on it and do it!" P. S. Arts is such a great organization and it was

through P. S. Arts, they introduced me to the UDL framework. And that's when I said “ Ding, ding, ding! This is it!” [Laughter] “UDL lines up with Ritual Poetic Drama!” This idea that **every student is 100% capable to do it. How you access that student is where the magic happens.**

Now we've got to find a way that we can create a classroom that every child feels seen and heard and knows that they are welcome to be the best learner that they can be. And they cannot fit the box. They can break the mold completely. But they are 100% welcome and just as empowered as every child who may or may not fit that quote unquote box. That was how I started.

LOUI:It's so powerful. So, I'm curious about how you collaborate with the other teachers for this STEAM project. So, I don't know if you're in their classrooms or are they sending you stuff? How does that work?

DONZELL: So, every class has one hour a week with me in theater at the school. The way the same project works is I collaborate with third grade teachers. We talk about what is the topic that we want to approach that year. We throw out many different ideas as the collaboration process happens. And we even gain you know, buy in from the students and recruitment from them of what is the most engaging topic for them. Once the topic is selected, then what ends up happening is they are sent out on a mission [laughter] to collect as much data and content as possible in every way that's possible. We're going to get to this play, we're going to create an original play. We're gonna create an original performance. Now here's how we're going to get there. And we're not going to say “No” to receiving the information. And we're going to be very open and creative of how we get the information. One example is we've done a black history project. With the black history project, what they were assigned to do as I told a number of teachers, I need you to look at everything as a moment for the show. It's a learning opportunity and it's a moment. Record your classes. Start teaching the lesson and record everything and send me the videos because I will pull out from there student performances. Engage the students with a number of different sources. Use all different avenues to reach the students to

get them to talk about the topics. Again, once they start talking, record it. Have it done in audio format, video format. Have them write in their journals. Have them draw pictures. If they draw a picture and you don't even know what the picture is, sit the child down and tell them explain the picture to you and still record that because we're getting all this information and we're getting everything from them. And what we want to do is we want to give me a big pot of information that I can then make this, you know, theatrical soup from. What ended up happening was exactly that. [laughter] I was like, "Oh my! That question was like, am I in over my head?" [laughter] I had everything. I had stories. I had monologues. I had videos of students creating dances because they were listening to Billie Holiday and the teacher said, "Okay, just get up and start dancing to Billie Holiday." And so, I had all of this stuff. And I even had one student who wrote this beautiful monologue about George Washington Carver because they were allowed to pick a hero, a Black History hero and talk about why they connected to that. And he was very much into nature. And he brought out that he loved George Washington Carver because he was known as plant man, and he loved that idea. And he wrote this beautiful monologue about being friends with nature and being proud of that because of what George Washington Carver accomplished by being friends with nature. And he wasn't capable to really write the monologue. And so, what I said was, "Well that's okay. Tell me the monologue. Tell me." And he sat there and he told me and I recorded everything. And then I went and I wrote this beautiful, one-page monologue, all from his words. And just the moment, I can't explain the beautiful moment that we get every time when we do the read through of the play, and the students look and they point and they say, "I said that in class!" "I wrote that!" Or, "I drew that picture." Or, "This move that he just showed us from the dance, that was my dance response to, you know, dancing the Billie Holiday!" **Every child gets to look at that play and see themselves in it and see what they contributed to it. And it all happens because they all get to contribute in a way that is uniquely empowering to them.**

LOUI: You know, you're definitely utilizing the framework to guide how you're interacting with the students, but then you're also using the framework to guide the suggestions that you're giving to the teachers. Have those teachers received training in UDL? Are you guiding those teachers in this process?

DONZELL: Exactly. I'm guiding the teachers in the process and the teachers have a beautiful pedagogical background, as well. I don't know specifically if it is or is not UDL. They don't mention that it is UDL, but because they are open to collaboration, when I say like this is what we're doing, and this is why we're doing it and I mention UDL, everyone's like, "Oh, we're on board with that! Oh, we like that! Oh, this is wonderful!" And just also the excitement in the teachers' eyes because some of them had never seen that level of engagement. And they were getting down with it!

LOUI: Yeah, yeah.

DONZELL: They were bananas for a long time! I would get email updates from teachers. And then there will be moments when I would get text messages and they were like, Hey, I just we just had this great moment in class! And we just pulled in the, the sources from here and they responded like this. And here's a text message of the photos and audio! And I was like, "Oh my!" Like, "I got to make sure I keep this organized!" They were getting such great engagement and emotional engagement at that, that that you know, even they were impressed and excited to see how alive the students came because essentially what happened is, we created so many different avenues for everyone to participate that no one felt left out. No one felt that they couldn't do anything. And no one felt that they were in competition with anyone, everyone felt like they were equal participants because they were.

LOUI: Alright, so one last question.

DONZELL: Yeah, let's go that way.!

LOUI: So, we know that you know the framework the ultimate goal is to help our learners gain those skills/traits toward becoming expert learners. Right? So, the purposeful and motivated, the

resourceful and knowledgeable, and strategic and goal directed, and so when I think about this process, and not having been fully in it, but based on your description, I mean, definitely the purposeful and motivated that's, that's there. And you know, they're really they're definitely learning how to be strategic and goal directed in the creation of this play, it sounds like. And also the process of learning it and performing it. And then, you know, they're gaining their knowledge and these topics. So how would you say that they're becoming more resourceful through the process of this whole STEAM project, and maybe even specifically in the arts part?

DONZELL: That's a great question. I would say because they have learned, and the students have been with me for a few years already know this, and the students who come in and they're younger they learned very quickly, that one of my classroom philosophies is don't ask me for the permission to be creative and creative. And so, here's the task, how you respond and how you create your work, I want it to be unique to you, and what excites you. And so, what ends up happening is the students know that they have that permission to go and learn what they need to learn and present in a way that they are empowered to present as opposed to feeling locked into this box of how they should learn it, and what the results of the learning should look like. Within one class or within one rehearsal process, students say, "Alright, this is what we came up with our group, and our group decided to write a commercial." I've had that happen, where they are doing a story and you know, they may have to go and figure out how to present the story and break down the story, the elements of the story, and that students just completely say, "Well, we got the story. Now, we went away and we created a story, a commercial about the story, and we're going to show you a commercial." And then I've had students say and within that same class, "Well, we didn't do that Mr. Donzell. But what we did is we drew this picture, and we want to break this down." And I've had other students say, "Well, we didn't do that Mr. Donzell, but we wrote a poem." So there's no restrictions on how they get to present the information which I think is the beauty of the process and the beauty of becoming a true expert learner, right, is that we get to go and source the information, and then we get to find the best

way that we want to put that information out there. Because it's not always formulaic. It's not always within a box.

LOUI: Yep, that's excellent example. An excellent example. Oh, my gosh, Donzell, this was wonderful. I really appreciate you taking your time to chat with me. Thank you so much!

DONZELL: Oh, my gosh, thank you! This was so great to speak with you and to be aware of this beautiful community of UDL educators and researchers. And I love your podcast series and all of the work that you're doing and the resource that you are us. And I think it's just great to know that there are so many educators across the country and across the globe that are all in this to make sure that the children that we encounter become the best learners and the best people that they can be, and that they walk away from our classrooms knowing that they are capable and that yes, they can.

LOUI: Yes! So well spoken! So well spoken!

DONZELL: Thank you!!

LOUI: 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 www.theudlapproach.com/podcasts. 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.