

Melanie Smith  
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 Melanie Smith who is a kindergarten teacher at Golden Charter Academy in Fresno, California. Melanie is going to share how UDL empowered her to meet the needs of her kindergartners when face-to-face instruction began again. Hi Melanie, how are you?

MELANIE: I'm great. How are you?

LOUI: Oh, I'm good. Thank you so much. It's so nice to meet you. So let us know a bit about you. What's been your journey in education and with UDL?

MELANIE: I started teaching about a decade ago and I taught kindergarten for five years at a charter school and then I took about 5 years off to stay home when my first child was born. And then this last year was my first year back in the classroom and I'd learned about UDL before, but this was my first year really teaching UDL in the classroom. I discovered this school because I'd signed my son up for T-K and as I learned more about this new charter school that was opening in Fresno, I started to just get really excited about what they were doing and UDL was one of the things that really drew me to this school and the more I learned I just knew like deep in my soul I have to apply to this school. I just have to go back to teaching and teach at this school. And so, I applied and got a job teaching kindergarten again and so this has been my first year back in the classroom since staying home with my kids.

LOUI: Ah, okay, so then tell us a little bit more about Golden Charter Academy.

MELANIE: So Golden Charter Academy is a school really centered on environmental education. We partner with our local zoo and take our kids actually to the zoo once a week and um, connect learning about science and language arts and math all connected to the zoo and just other local places being out in nature. So there's a huge emphasis on being outside and being in nature. We are a part of place-based learning so all the things we learned we really connect it back to the places that we live in the places that we are. And also, our school has a huge foundation of stewardship equity and access. Our school is about 78% African American and 97% free reduced lunch.

LOUI: Ok. Is it a K-6, a K-8?

MELANIE: Right now, we're T-K through 3<sup>rd</sup> grade. We're about to add 4<sup>th</sup> grade. We'll grow up to 8<sup>th</sup> grade.

LOUI: Got it. So, is it like a grade per year it grows, then?

MELANIE: Yes, yes.

LOUI: So, you're 3<sup>rd</sup>. So next year's going to be T-K – 4<sup>th</sup> and then okay, nice.

MELANIE: Mm-hmm

LOUI: Ah, okay, and like you said you learned about UDL before the pandemic but this year was really your first year to implement it. So, what were some of the UDL driven practices you just like started off with. You adopted them and you just went with them right off the bat?

MELANIE: Yes, I think some of the things I adopted early on was figuring out how do I minimize distraction in the classroom and how do I really recruit buy in and interest from the students and really looking at where they were at and what they needed.

LOUI: Yeah, um, because you're in a state that just adopted the universal prekindergarten and then the transitional prekindergarten, but when your students came back to face to face. They hadn't had access to that. So, yeah. They had that whole Covid related change and all came with that. Oh My gosh. So here you are with a classroom with students who have had any practice with collaboration or community or communication and so what did that look like and what did you do?

MELANIE: I realized really quickly within those first few days that I really had to rethink everything. That most of these kids could not access the academic content because of they had such intense social emotional needs that had to be met first if we were going to access learning and learn letters and sounds and science and numbers and all of these different things, I needed to none meet these social emotional needs in a way that I couldn't have imagined before I met those students. And I had students literally running around my classroom. I had groups of students just trying to snuggle each other on the carpet because there had been so little physical contact. I had students crying all the time. The first few days, I mean I bet we didn't go a few minutes without someone crying. There were kids throwing things, licking things, hitting each other, and I just had this moment where I was trying to teach them and I was trying to move forward with the plan that I had had and I realized looking at these students, "Oh they have the social emotional level of three-year-old's. I really need to adjust some things to meet them

where they're at." And I could also tell that they were really curious about what we were learning that they wanted to learn and they wanted to do these things but couldn't access it in the way that I was doing and using books, and classroom discussions, and working with partners, and talking with partners, and doing all these different things they didn't have the skills the social-emotional skill set to access that learning and so I needed to rethink things and I really needed to focus on collaboration. How are we kind to one another? How do we respect ourselves? How do we respect each other? How do we develop self-regulation? How do we develop coping skills when we are having big feelings? How do we express those feelings to others and those are really essential skills that they needed to learn? And I began to really look at the academic pieces more as a vessel to teach these essential life skills and doing that really became instrumental in creating a safe learning environment for these students and I began a journey with them of learning and figuring out where we needed to go together.

LOUI: I loved that phrase that the academics became the vessel to help them learn these social emotional skills. That's awesome because um I know from my time in the classroom and every single teacher especially gosh since Covid, the worry is, Oh my gosh! I have to take so much time to help these kids gain these social emotional skills that we're going to lose out on the academics. We are not going to get forward!" And the fact that you, you flipped it and you said, "Okay, academic is going to become the vessel that's gonna help me help these kids gain these social emotional skills. So you have like a specific ah unit that you started with right or that you were working with yeah so ah, share that.

MELANIE: Yes, yes, okay. So, we have this beautiful unit that I was so excited about that we start the year with focusing on the needs of plants and animals and the whole unit is really designed around the students being the scientists and looking at this problem of why there aren't Monarch caterpillars anymore and why there aren't Monarch butterflies anymore in this particular garden. And they had to explore why that was and discover what it what needs of these Monarch butterflies [and] Monarch caterpillars wasn't being met and how could that be fixed to meet the needs of both the humans in that community as well as the plants and the animals. And as I was sharing this unit and opening up this unit with my students I could tell they were, they were really curious but they couldn't sit still for 30 seconds to do, to do the instruction the way that I had always done it and had planned it and I had this beautiful plan for how we were going to you know do this unit and tie in language arts and tie in math and do all of these things and UDL really helped me look at that in a new way. And I had to accept in a whole new way that UDL really teaches us to let go of our own plans and expectations. That having plans is wonderful and very important, but it's also equally important to be able to let that go when you realize something isn't working for your

students because it's not about me as the teacher, it's about them. And so, as I really began to realize that in a whole new way looking at these like twenty-four beautiful little children and asking myself, "How can I meet their needs? How can I reshape my instruction? How can I reshape really our whole day to care for them well? To take care of their social emotional needs? To really create a safe place of healing in my classroom where kids could really begin to heal and express their feelings in healthy ways and learn to work together and grow a classroom family. And how could I also meet their diverse needs while still teaching our grade level standards? While still having some high expectations for our learning and fostering their beautiful curiosity, and providing opportunities for them to express their knowledge about those standards. And how could I also create a greater sense of freedom for them, and movement in the classroom, and expression of their learning, create more autonomy for them. And I have this idea about art. What if I used art? Art is something that is healing. It's calming. It's relaxing. It's a place for self-expression. And I thought, "What if I took these art projects and instead of having students do them individually, what if I had them do them together and have to work together so that now they're figuring out, "How do I share? How do I negotiate and solve problems together and figure out how to express what I need? How to ask and think about another person's needs?" And so, I created these art projects where they had to design animal habitats. So, we started first with the Monarch butterfly and they worked in groups of 3 to 4 students with these large like two-to-three-foot pieces of cardboard and created this habitat. And they each got to paint their own animals and then they had to build it together and work together and I let them move anywhere they wanted around the classroom. So, I had students laying all over the floor in the classroom. And they had to figure out, you know, how to share the glue how to share the paint how to create their plants together and share their ideas and work through how to do that. And they began to create these animal habitats and they had to think about how can I create this art piece and show in this art piece together how these butterflies are getting what they need from their habitat. So, there was also all these standards tied into these art pieces and I watched something just incredible happen as these students were laying all over my classroom, I watched them start to really work together. And I watched them learn to be able to say what they needed and learn to ask. And I watched them learn to work together and I watched this peace come over the classroom as these students were able to collaborate and work together and I was able then to walk around the classroom and meet with the different groups, talk to students individually, and ask them standards-based questions. And I watch these students, with great detail, be able to articulate their understanding and their learning of these things as they were talking about their art and how the needs of plants and animals were being met in these different habitats and this experience truly changed me forever and changed me as an educator.

LOUI:

That's awesome. That's such a great story. There are so many parts of this that stick out, but giving kids that much freedom, I think there are a lot of people who are hesitant to do that when children are so young and you gave them freedom within structure and the other thing I was reflecting on was that you had done some deep, deep planning for this and even though you kind of had to toss out part of that, there were core pieces and because you had done such in-depth thinking about the unit, I think you were able to be flexible with it because you knew what the goal was but you said, "Okay, I've got to use different methods and materials to help the kids get there than what I originally thought."

MELANIE: Yes, yes, yes. Absolutely, yes!

LOUI: Yeah, and so that's where you were really empowered and I see a really strong alignment with UDL there too. So, this was just great Melanie. Thank you so much for being a guest and sharing this story I really appreciate it.

MELANIE: Yes! You're welcome! Of course!

LOUI: Oh awesome. 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 <http://www.theUDLproach.com/media>. And finally, if you have a story to share about UDL implementation for UDL in 15 minutes you can contact me through <http://www.theUDLproach.com>. And thanks to everyone for your work in revolutionizing education through UDL and making it our goal to develop expert learners.