

UDL in 15 Minutes
With Rhonda Laswell and Tina Greene
The 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. This episode is part of a special series about UDL implementation at Bartholomew Consolidated School Corporation in Columbus, Indiana. Today, I'm talking with Rhonda Laswell and Tina Greene, the UDL coordinators for BCSC. Rhonda and Tina are going to talk about how their roles as the district UDL Coordinators have evolved. Hi Rhonda and Tina, welcome!

RHONDA: Hi Loui! Thank you so much for having us.

TINA: Hey, Loui. We're so excited to be with you today!

LOUI: Oh thanks, thanks! I'm excited to have you guys here, too. So can you share a bit about your own individual backgrounds and education and how you came to know UDL?

RHONDA: Absolutely, this is Rhonda and I'll just go first. I was actually a middle school science teacher. If you had told me ten to fifteen years ago I would be sitting where I'm sitting now in this role I really would have thought you were crazy. It really ended up being a very natural fit for me because of the science background. I think I fell in love with UDL and I was asked, it would have been going on eleven years ago now, to be a part of a grant through the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation alongside of CAST the Center for Applied Special Technologies. After being involved in that and going out to CAST and really seeing things from both sides of the fence, it was like this is so amazing and awesome and that was that.

LOUI: That's cool. That's cool, and Tina what about you?

TINA: When UDL was introduced to our school district, I was teaching first grade and we were learning about the principals. I was just looking at the different principles and how I could intentionally be implementing them in my first-grade classroom. Those experiences and having that opportunity when UDL came to the district was awesome. Then I was also a part of a book study. I believe it was UDL and the Digital Age, and I think Loui, you might have been the person who was leading that book study for us, so kind of come full circle with you.

LOUI: Yeah, that's true. It's true. So Rhonda, you stepped into the coordinator role in 2012, and then Tina you shifted from coordinating another initiative at BCSC into coordinating UDL in 2013. So, what did those roles look like at the beginning at that time? So, Rhonda, we'll just start with you.

RHONDA: So very different from now and I do have to say and point out that Louie was my predecessor and they were big shoes to fill.

LOUI: Oh gosh.

RHONDA: But as I transitioned into the role, we were also bringing on board our new teacher evaluation system and that new system was also 50% of the entire evaluation, which evaluated teachers in their implementation of Universal Design for Learning. So, there was a lot going on and there were a lot of requests for professional development. So I started keeping track of that and at the time I, 1 person, 700 certified staff, was getting asked to go out and do staff meetings, grade level meetings, department meetings, department chair meetings, to really begin to bring people up to a very quick speed as the evaluation rubric was going to be coming on board. And so I know there were hundreds and hundreds of touches at that time with professional development. And that also included individuals who would just reach out to me with an email and say, "hey, I enjoyed what you did today in the staff meeting, could you also come work with me personally?", "sure not a problem." However, with 700 certified staff it became

pretty apparent after the end of that first year that we were going to have to make some sort of shift or movement at some point to really help support staff in the implementation of UDL.

LOUI: Yeah, and Tina your shift was interesting because, like I said, you were coordinating another initiative and then you shifted into coordinating UDL. So how did that work? What did you bring with it, and what did that look like in 2013?

TINA: Well, my first coordination piece was working with Instructional Consultation and Teaming (ICT) and that looked like a problem-solving process where each building had an ICT team and an ICT facilitator. So, I was also facilitating a team at my elementary building and then working with the other ICT facilitators and coordinating them. Because it was a problem-solving process and we were really looking at strategies and interventions with classroom teachers, when they just maybe needed some additional support with their instruction, or just trying to make an instructional match with students. And then all the things that Rhonda was working on and trying to support as many people that she was trying to support, I believe it just was an aha moment. I think some of the things we're trying to do ICT facilitators and myself, and what Rhonda was trying to do, we were all really working in the same direction and so that's when our role merged and we came together. I became a UDL coordinator and then our ICT facilitators became UDL facilitators in the buildings, because our overall goals were really to support staff and work to make learning accessible for students.

LOUI: Nice and there's been a lot of growth there with the use of the UDL framework since 2012. What do you guys think has driven that growth? What are things that you've done in your roles and the district has done to help you grow? So, there's kind of 2 questions in there but I know you can handle it.

RHONDA: Well, I think to start with one of the things that I would think that this particular office would be most proud of would be the UDL Summer Institute.

LOUI: Yeah.

RHONDA: And I think that's done a lot to help support our staff. We just finished our tenth one this past summer. The last 3 have been virtual, obviously. That changed the face of it because initially it was a week-long summer institute and then it went down to like three days and then it went virtual. So, what that has really done has allowed us to, during the break in the summer where we're all kind of shutting down for a little while and relaxing, to bring in specialists and the UDL rock stars from all over the country to work with our staff. But then we were also able to bring in our UDL facilitators during that time and our new teachers. So, with it happening at the very end of July, then most of the time most of our staff is hired. And so, we were able to match and pair them with their new facilitators and then walk them through what our problem-solving process is, what our process is for requesting assistance, and really bring them up to speed fairly quickly. And then what's amazing over the course of you know the last ten years, what's really happened and how I know that development has occurred so deeply here, is that while we still invite our very dear friends from all over the country to help support our work here, this year we had so many of our very own classroom teachers respond and want to participate as presenters. So, we not only had our UDL facilitators, and our good friends from all over the country, and our specialists, but we had the largest number of our own classroom teachers that we've ever had this past summer. And I think that really testifies to the depth of, I guess capacity we have now, that our own staff are feeling comfortable enough to really share what they're doing and want to share what they're doing with their colleagues. I think that's a powerful statement because you know that's hard. A lot of times teachers like to teach kids and students but they don't always want to step up and do that for adults because they just feel like that's not really their forte and when they step into that role, as a colleague, it is so powerful.

LOUI: I totally agree. You know we've always had folks involved and so I get to do this every year. I keep waiting for you guys to kick me off the list but I get to come and I love it. Because like George said, it's like UDL summer camp.

RHONDA: Yes.

LOUI: But every year we do this and we think oh well, we'd love to get some more teacher involvement and it was so exciting to see this year how many staff from BCSC were on that list. I know from the get go it's been, "Hey would you like to come share what you were doing in your classroom because it's so awesome to see and so many people would demure." So, it's very exciting. It's just awesome. It's awesome. So Tina from your perspective, what about this idea of growth and the things that you've done in your role with the district?

TINA: Well, I want to touch back on what Rhonda was saying about having so many teachers interested in participating in presenting at the Summer Institute. This year, I think the best part was we had so many people reaching out to us, asking "I'm interested in doing a session on this. Can I have that opportunity?" And so, that just even instills the growth I feel like that we're also seeing with UDL. But also, a couple more things that I feel like we could add to that with the growth is, having the UDL facilitators in our buildings. They are the number 1 resource for teachers to be able to reach out. We have something called the request for educational planning that they could ask for support, with their implementation. So, having that grow our UDL and I also believe that we have a strategic plan and our UDL is embedded within that strategic plan. So, it just helps everyone see that this is something that has come to our district but it's not something that's going to be leaving anytime soon. And so that's why I think we keep working.

LOUI: Yeah.

TINA: To grow and provide opportunities to better ourselves within that framework.

RHONDA: You know I wanted to say too that I think, this is really powerful as well. So as a district, the perspective I want to take here is we oftentimes in education really look at how we professionally develop our certified staff. And that's extremely important obviously, but I think 1 thing that's a little different here that Tina and I's role has really allowed us to do, is to work with support staff. So for example, some of the things that

we've done and we continue to do every summer, our i-CARE, which is our before care and after care staff meet with us and we do some basics in Universal Design for Learning and PBIS. Which here at BCSC that's Positive Behavior Instructional Supports. We've worked with our book buddies, who are volunteers that work with and read with our elementary students. TA support is huge. You know our teaching assistants are so important to the success of our students and help support our classroom teachers. And so, we do a lot of professional development with our teaching assistants as well. And then alongside, even our OT's and our PT's, really just making sure that anybody who works with a kiddo has access to professional development resources.

LOUI: Yeah, that's just extraordinary because like you said the development of staff and providing opportunities for that is just rampant everywhere but the ability to reach out to all of the other support systems that are within a district, and helping them even understand an introductory level of UDL, that's so crucial. And it's so key that you guys are doing that. Well, I think in these last few seconds that we have because we don't have a lot. There are some documents, Rhonda, that I know you shared and I'm going to make available with this podcast. So one of them, and then Tina I think you did too, but the problem solving process I believe you guys are sharing and then just kind of helping staff understand this cross between PBIS and UDL and Bloom's taxonomy am I correct?

RHONDA: Yes.

LOUI: What are the documents you guys shared and talk a little bit about those really quickly.

RHONDA: So the one that crosses between Blooms and Maslow's and UDL is really that whole idea that when we're working with a kiddo right? The brain is multifaceted and so we really have to tend to the student on all those levels. And we really see PBIS as part of that whole bottom level of Maslow's but we also see that really connecting

well to the why of learning. And that's so important to the affect network. And so if we want our students to feel safe and ready to learn, we have to attend to all of those pieces that come before really where we get to Blooms. It's important to know that when you're attending to students' needs on that basic level, that you're really attending to the brain at the same time. It might not look like it but you really are.

LOUI: Excellent, excellent and then the other part was that problem solving process. I don't know if I'm saying it right.

TINA: Well, we just want there to be a process to where if somebody does request educational planning, that there's a process to how we look at that. So you know we start with a teacher submitting the request for educational planning. And then the facilitator works with them and starts by taking a look at the learning environment, the physical environment to see how things are working, how the different principles are being implemented within the environment. And let's say maybe there's a couple of areas that may not have as many opportunities that other areas are full of, that students are really able to engage or really able to have some options and choices. And maybe we need to look at our, we're not so high in the areas of how the different ways that students might be able to respond or engage. So let's work there, and let's come up with some strategies to design. And then we just want to see if we've met a goal in how things are going when teachers implement those strategies. We want to make sure what we're doing and the support we're providing is working and that our teachers are happy and feel supported.

LOUI: Awesome! Awesome! Well, and I will repeat, so anybody who's listening you know that those resources are going to be available at the website where the podcasts are held at theudlapproach.com. And then I'll also put those in the notes of the YouTube photo montage that goes along with this. So, thank you very, very much Rhonda and Tina. I really appreciated this. We had to kind of go back and forth to find our time but we found it and I'm so excited to share this podcast.

RHONDA: Thank you! It was our pleasure to be here.

TINA: Yes, Louis, thank you. It's always great working with you.

LOUI: Oh well thank you so much. All right, 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.