

## UDL in 15 Minutes

### Feed Drop of Think Inclusive

#### Using AI to Support Learners with Disabilities in the Classroom

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 is my first feed drop ever and I am so excited to share the podcast Think Inclusive. Think Inclusive is hosted by Tim Villegas and produced by the Maryland Coalition for Inclusive Education.

The episode I'm sharing is one of their bonus episodes and it's titled "Using AI to Support Learners with Disabilities in the Classroom." Tim hosts DJ Nicholson, an educator and AI leader and enthusiast.

While this episode is not about UDL, everything in this podcast aligns with UDL. They start off talking about leveling text, something all educators find the need to do across all subject areas. Many educators struggle with this – the why and the how – so Tim and DJ share how AI can help. From there they talk about the challenges and opportunities of using AI and the importance of student choice.

If you don't have Think Inclusive in your podcast cycle, I encourage you to add it!

While listening, identify where you hear UDL-alignment and share that with the listening community. You can do that via the YouTube post, X, or LinkedIn. I'm easy to find. There is no one else named Loui Lord Nelson and I really do love hearing from you.

And now, Tim Villagas with Think Inclusive.

(Transcript generated by Otter.ai)

Tim Villegas:

Today is a special bonus episode, DJ Nicholson and I talk about AI to support learners with disabilities in the classroom.

Hey everyone, Tim here, it's bonus episode time. And we have DJ Nicholson from inclusive ology with us today, to talk about the article we co wrote. It's up on thinking cluesive.us right now. So without further ado, here is my chat with DJ. And after we wrap up, make sure to check the article out. It's called when does AI belong? In an IEP?

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DJ Nicholson, how's it going?

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DJ Nicholson

Awesome. Awesome. Yep, just coming off of a lovely long holiday weekend. And I'm really excited to talk about AI.

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Tim Villegas

Well, let's get into our conversation today. A few months ago, we co authored an article, and it is called I'm gonna have to pull it up now. Sorry, I would have to read does AI belong in an IEP? And we referenced it in the article, we had a discussion in February about why teachers leave the classroom. And in that conversation, it sparked some discussion around AI. It seems like AI is like everywhere in the news, it constantly is being cited in news articles. And I feel like there's a new AI tool like every minute of the day, it feels like so we decided to write this article. And we wanted to know what teachers were doing and what potentially teachers could do using AI as a tool in the classroom. So for get us started. DJ, why was a AI, especially for supporting learners with disabilities. Like why is that important? Or why was that interesting to you? Well, I

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DJ Nicholson

was thinking of AI for kids with learning differences in IEPs as a like an opportunity to have teachers use that as a way to level text make reading more accessible, using it as kind of a like a summarizing feature to make more complex text accessible for every one regarding of their regardless of their reading, difference or ability. And it's just so much using AI is so much easier than actually going through the task of leveling text, or looking around and trying to find a lower level text that would match the grade level text.

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Tim Villegas

Yeah. And is there do you know, is there like a formal process for leveling text? Because I mean, when I was a teacher, there were very few tools. I think we talked about this before, we had something called Snap and Read, which is one of like assistive one of our assistive tech, you know, consultants showed that to us. But that was like, you know, this free version, it didn't always work. And it was kind of buggy. So like, how would normally a teacher level text,

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DJ Nicholson

it would be very, very time consuming and very manual, they would they would take a text from what I've seen teachers do is they would take a text, they would read through the text, they would create a summary that was accessible for someone with a lower level reading ability. And they would go into, you know, some kind of like visual support program, and they would create the visuals to go along with it. So it was very, very, very time consuming. And so one of the conversations that I used to have with teachers, when they would sit in IEP meetings is the difference between leveling text, and like guided reading type programs, where there were text levels that were done at children's reading level. And so there was a

lot of misinformation about the difference between a text level and actually leveling text as a task that you would have to do in order to prepare a lower level text for a student to read. And so I was always saying to teachers, you know, are you going to take the time to level text? And they would say, Well, what do you mean? And I said, well, because what you're seeing and saying in this IEP meeting is that you are willing to take this higher level text and you're going to basically condense it down to make it more accessible for a student with a lower reading level, you're going to do that. And they would say, oh my gosh, I'm not going to do that. I don't know how to do that, and time to do that. And so it became something that I saw teachers take off a list of accommodations, it might be accommodation that was needed, but they're just simply you know, I hate to say but there just simply isn't enough time in the day to you know, sit down and and, and level taxed. So I think one of the things that you and I were talking about is if teachers could use AI to level tax axed, you know, and we both tried it, it's infinitely easier.

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Tim Villegas

And so one of the first things that I tried when I was playing around with chat, GBT is I don't remember what got me down this row. But I think I was thinking, Well, I've heard Chet GPT can generate, you know, text on any topic. So let's just say like, okay, right 400 word essay on the causes of the Civil War. And it generated a and, you know, a nicely formed essay. And I was like, Okay, this is fine. But then I was thinking about a previous student of mine, and in one of my classes, and he loved wrestling, like he was, you know, he would watch like WWE II, or I'm not sure if I'm getting those acronyms correctly, he would watch like, the smackdown ones. And he would always come in and, you know, mimic these wrestlers, how they talked, and you know, you know, their names and, and like, their attitude. And so I was like, well, the only wrestler I know, is the rock, like, on top of mine, like, what if I asked Chet GPT to rewrite this essay, in the voice and style of the rock. And so it just took, I just put in the prompt, and a few seconds later, it, it completely rewrote the essay in in the voice of a wrestler, and I'm like, Oh, my gosh, and I think I even sent it to you is what I did I it was right after a conversation. That's what it was. And I was like, DJ, look at this, this is absolutely phenomenal.

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DJ Nicholson

Well, and I think, you know, that just spurred my own creativity and thinking about, Okay, well, if it's gonna do it in the voice of the rock, who, what other voice could could we use? And I think we even tried, you know, like SpongeBob SquarePants, or one of the, you know, one of his friends, but I think, you know, whether it's a wrestler or cartoon character, that's a fantastic way to get kids engaged. Right, right. So

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Tim Villegas

that was one of the things when I was a classroom teacher that I struggled with, because a lot of times, especially for students who had very specific, you know, interests, it was hard to find content that was related to their interests, that was also aligned either to, you know, grade level standards, or grade level content. So this seemed like a great opportunity for an educator to be like, Okay, we're going to talk about the solar system, but I'm going to create the content or modify the content so that it's engaging for a particular student, you know, and you know, we like whether it's the stylist written in or, you know, bringing in references that the student would find interesting. So then our conversation went to Well, I wonder who is already doing this right now, because all we're hearing is the negative and the cons of using AI. I wonder if there's anybody out there that have has achieved any sort of success using AI in the classroom. So I was not able to find any of my, you know, educator friends, to be able to talk to you but I did talk with Dr. Greg Van Den, Heim my saying that Vander Heiden. Okay, I'm gonna say it again, I did, I didn't have a chance to talk with Greg Vanderheiden, of the University of Maryland, at the trace center. And he shared with me, you know, he's been doing he's been working in assistive technology for many, many, many years. And we had a conversation about AI. And he was so excited to talk to me because he really sees a lot of parallels between the AI tools that are available now. And in some of the early technology that made you know, people's lives easier, like calculators. And so we had a conversation and basic his basic message behind why educators should take a chance on AI is because, you know, back when tools like the calculator first came out, it was like, Well, no, you can't have people use calculators, because then they they won't actually do math. They won't learn math. But as you can see, here we are, you know, decades later, people still learn math, and it's still valuable. It's just we get we get to the place where we want to go a lot easier and a lot faster. So what are some other things? I don't know if you had a chance to reflect on what Dr. Van Vanderheiden said, Is there anything that comes to mind from that conversation?

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DJ Nicholson

Absolutely. Yeah, I think you know, we live in an age where, you know, technology is vast and expansive. And we even as you know, typically functioning adults, we use technology all the time and we use technology to make our lives easier to support We're doing and to make things accessible. So even, you know, iPhones, Apple came out with an entirely new accessibility line. Google has just updated all of their accessibility tools. So to me, you know, in thinking about what he said, You know, it's a matter of it's we're just moving forward in this technological world. And so if we can use it as a support, and not a hinderance, then I think I mean, I think it's definitely worth a try. I think it's worth a try when it comes to supporting kids with differences.

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Tim Villegas

And so you had a chance to talk with some educators who were trying AI out? What were what were those conversations like?

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DJ Nicholson

So I initially reached out to see if any of my educator friends were using AI, like we had talked about, and they were not. So I actually was able to get two teachers to try it. And it was very interesting. The one of the teachers that I spoke with, she was all about it, and she was a special education teacher, but the her her Co Co teacher in this inclusive setting, was not receptive, really not receptive. And I don't know if that came from a place of, you know, I don't know anything about this. So I don't want to try it, or that's not something that I do here, or did it come from a place of Well, I have to make sure that, you know, I run it by my building principle, my administrator, whoever it is, and we have to have permission, rather than looking at it as something that we just trial that then maybe could be implemented in the IP. So she, that was not necessarily a successful situation, because it caused a lot of friction between, you know, the two teachers, and then the administrator got involved. And so that kind of kind of fell apart, for lack of a better word to use. But then in the other situation, you know, it was, it was nice to have some kind of collaboration and cooperative conversations between the special ed teacher and the gen ed teacher, and thinking that, you know, this, this is something that could be really beneficial. So, students in this situation were pulled out for learning. And so the special educator did use AI, she did level some text down, and she found it really helpful. And so, you know, when she brought it back to the gen ed teacher, it opened up conversation, not necessarily for use in the classroom yet, but I feel like it started a conversation about what can we use as supports for kids learning that we're not doing right now. And honestly, that was a little bit of the other situation as well, while that was a much more negative, you know, view of AI in general, it's still sparked conversation of like, in the first scenario, like, Yeah, I think, you know, we do need something, it might not be AI, but we need something. So that conversation was started there, you know, on the IEP team, but in this, you know, the later situation where, you know, there was some success, and the teacher was able to level down, just those conversations to kind of move things forward to find supports for kids, because, you know, ultimately, what we want is we want want kids to be reading independently, we don't want to have, you know, an adult hovering over their shoulder, we don't always want to have to, like, you know, have that like not learned helplessness per se, but that enabling of like, you know, oh, I don't know how to read this, can someone else read this for me? Or can someone support me in this because it builds builds independence. So I think, you know, in both situations, there was some positive that came out of it. And the positive really was in both scenarios, is to have those conversations about whether it's chat GPT AI, or some other form of, you know, assistive or artificial intelligence, because we use it, we do and I think, you know, in the educational space, we're just at the very beginning of having having those conversations.

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Tim Villegas

Yeah, exactly. I've been reflecting about how much I'm using AI now, like, just in my own in my work right now is as a communications director, I have to come up with a lot of copy so text and I'm writing scripts and there are so many more tools for me to use that I can utilize that can help me be more efficient. And so I'm just thinking of like, if we think of it as an efficiency issue and not like a like that you're cheating you know, like right because because that's the thing is I guess you could look at you know if I'm having AI or having an AI tool help me brainstorm subject line ideas, you know, for an email campaign or you know, Tyler ideas for an article or for a podcast episode? Is that me cheating? Or is that me being efficient so that I don't have to expend so much brainpower coming up with all that on my own? You know, I guess you could look at it both ways. Right? Right.

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DJ Nicholson

Right. Well, and just another example of you know, how I use it as a time saver, you know, I was writing, copy, you know, something, a script to share with someone. And I realized I finished, you know, typing it all up all my own ideas and everything. And I realized, oh, my gosh, I really want to put this in first person. So I put it into chat GPT. And I asked it to just take this information and turn it into first person language, and, you know, it's about the work was still mine.

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Tim Villegas

Yeah, exactly. Know, exactly. You know, but

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DJ Nicholson

with kids, though, you know, when we, when we develop, you know, present levels, and we have goals, and all of that, that supports the learning to me to use to use AI is just a natural step, because it's something that's it's supportive, it's not replacing, it's not like you said, it's not cheating. But if we're helping, you know, at the end of the day, we want kids to access their learning, and we want them to do it independently, if they can't, so it's, you know, like, going back to what you said initially about, you know, that piece about the Civil War and Dwayne Johnson, if you can take, you know, like a, say, like a seventh grade level text about the Civil War, and condense it down to, you know, a basic reading level and take out all the complex vocabulary, but hold on to, you know, the crux of the piece and make it accessible, so then that student can then be engaged in conversation and can can can fully participate in, in what everyone is doing and feel confident about it rather than Yeah, with a grade level text that is not accessible, you know? Yeah, exactly.

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Tim Villegas

I think that is probably one of the things that I'm most excited about. If I were in, if I were still in the classroom, about how I could make things just more interesting and more individualized, you know, take existing content that may be just really dry, and then just rearrange that content, so that it, it matches the interest of the learner. Because that's, I mean, that's a lot of what I think teachers do anyways, you know, you have a textbook, you know, you typically don't just read the textbook in front of a classroom to deliver content, you have to, you know, and digest the content, figure out how to rearrange it, and, and expose and deliver the content in a way that is engaging, like thinking about Universal Design for Learning, you know, principles in how you are the multiple means of presentation, I hope I'm saying or representation, maybe that I think that's the right word. You know, you use video, you use audio, you use text, use hands on experiences, those are all things that that you can do, and AI can help you brainstorm ideas on how to deliver the content. I mean, so I think there's a lot of a lot of room for where educators can take it.

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DJ Nicholson

Yeah. And I think I think there's implications for educators, and then there's, you know, implications for students, I think those would look very different. But I think, you know, from the IEP team perspective, if they can justify with with data with present levels of why this is something we should try, I think it's something that's worth trying, you know, I don't think people are a little taken aback by AI, it's overwhelming. It's an it's all over the media. And it's, it's getting kind of a negative, there's a negative spin, when it comes to education in terms of like, again, it goes back to the cheating. It's not always about cheating, but sometimes it is about being creative. And you know, for teachers generating some ideas that maybe they hadn't thought about before. And then for kids, you know, is it the difference between them sitting in front of a text that is not accessible for them that is boring and dry? Versus like, oh, my gosh, I'm going to read this funny thing that Dwayne Johnson wrote for me. Awesome. would love that,

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Tim Villegas

you know, right, right. Well, another thing that I wanted to bring up to you, especially for If learners are using AI, and something I think that Dr. Vanderheiden said, is that it's not a special accommodation, if everyone uses it. So like, for instance, if you give an assignment if a teacher was giving an assignment, and everyone had to use an AI tool to you know, make a first draft of, you know, a response to something that they learned, then everyone gets everyone gets the quote, unquote, advantage. And so it's not anything necessarily special, which I really, you know, appreciate it because it kind of goes back to that idea of that calculator. You know, everyone gets that assistance. And now depending on you know who you are, as a learner, you can take it from that, you know, that real basic level, not everyone has a first draft, and you can now, you know, build on that.

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DJ Nicholson

Right? Right. I love that idea. And I love you know, just to live in a world where everyone has access to multiple tools, and they can choose to use them or not,

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Tim Villegas

yeah, any other things, when you're looking into the future of maybe what you'd like to see, or maybe just dreaming a little bit of where we could be in the next five to 10 years,

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DJ Nicholson

I'm hoping that just in the world of, you know, accessibility that we're looking at, we're truly looking at individual needs of kids. And I know, you know, I talk a lot, you know, at workshops and conferences and with, you know, with teachers and parents that, you know, we're kind of, we still live in a world where we're directing most of the learning towards, you know, the 75% of kids that kind of fall inside the box. But that if we were if we're truly looking at individual needs of every child, then we're going to start looking at how can make it accessible through you know, in order to do that teachers have to have the training, there has to be the knowledge of all that is available. So whether it's a AI in the form of chat GPT, or other accessibility features, that there's an there's an uncomfortable knowledge and that teachers, you know, have that proverbial toolbox to pull from that they can choose to use that or kids can choose to use that or not, in order to make learning authentic, because, you know, I, that's, that's I pushed out a lot is that, that authentic learning these, so it matters, and it makes sense. And then they're able to kind of take what they learn and be able to generalize it because it means something to them

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Tim Villegas

right now. Yeah, I love this. I love what you talk about, you know, having a choice, you know, if certain tools are available to everyone, it doesn't mean everyone has to use it, it just means that everyone has the opportunity to use it. And so what I what I've been kind of learning about universal design, for learning and creating experiences for students is having these menus, like a menu of options to be able to interact with content and interact with, with Drew in own your own learning, this seems like a really great opportunity to as a as a teacher to bring in some of these tools and allow the students to choose it for themselves. You know, and, and then I think that that goes to the spirit of where education is really going in. Its learner centered. It's not it's not teacher centered. It's not, you know, I have the knowledge and I am going to impart it on you.

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DJ Nicholson

Right, right. Yeah. I mean, you know, the teacher in the role of a facilitator, rather than the governor of the classroom, I think that's just going to, you know, breed environments that are, you know, authentically centered for kids. Because at the end of the day, you know, we want to know what kids know, we want to, we want to know what kids know. And so if they need to look at and show it, they know that in a bit of a different way. So be it.

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Tim Villegas

Great. That was great. All right. So I'm it anything else you want to add before I tell everyone to read the article?

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DJ Nicholson

Oh, no, I think we covered quite a lot. Okay.

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Tim Villegas

Well, if you want to read the article that DJ and I co authored, it's on [thinking inclusive.us](http://thinkinginclusive.us) And it's called learning does AI belong in an IEP? Make sure to check it out. And we'd love to know what you think. So drop us a line either at [thinking inclusive.us](http://thinkinginclusive.us) Or check out [inclusive ology.com](http://inclusiveology.com)

DN

DJ Nicholson

[inclusive ology.com](http://inclusiveology.com) All right, great.

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Tim Villegas

And drop us a line and let us know. So thanks for listening, y'all.

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DJ Nicholson

Alright, thanks everybody.

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Tim Villegas

Oh, hey, you're still here. Amazing. Because just in case you can't get enough of TI let me give you a suggestion. Go over to [patreon.com/think inclusive](http://patreon.com/thinkinclusive) podcast and become an activist and help support MCIE As we produce even more episodes for season 11 and beyond. We are also working on a narrative podcast called inclusion stories. And you can

listen to the pilot episode of our new series right now, when you join. Thanks for your support. And you'll find this in your feed real soon.