

UDL Research in 15 Minutes  
With Jenna Gravel

LOUI: Hello and welcome to UDL Research in 15 minutes where researchers share their findings about implementation, the impact and their introspective investigations of the UDL framework. I'm Loui Lord Nelson, UDL author and leader, and today I'm talking with Jenna Gravel, who is the Director of Research and Curriculum for Professional Learning at CAST. And Jenna and I are going to talk about research she reported in her article titled, "Going deep: Leveraging universal design for learning to engage all learners in rich disciplinary thinking in ELA". Hi Jenna, how are you?

JENNA: Hi Loui! Thank you so much for having me.

LOUI: Oh....

JENNA: I was so excited to learn that you started this new podcast focused specifically on UDL research, and I've enjoyed your first three episodes so I am very excited to be a part of this and really be contributing to this podcast, this is great.

LOUI: Oh, that's awesome. Thank you so much. Thank you. So, we'll just get started. Can you share a little bit about your education background?

JENNA: Sure! So, I can kind of start at the very beginning and let you know that both of my parents actually worked in the field of special education and inclusive education. So, my sister and I really grew up with a deep respect for individual differences and a real commitment to inclusive education. So, I think I was kind of like destined to work in education. But my first job out of college I worked at the Federation for Children with Special Needs, which is an advocacy group for parents of kids with disabilities. From there I went on to get my master's at Harvard at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. And I focused on inclusive education I got to work with Tom Hehir and learn about kind of the theory and practice behind inclusive education and then this is also

where I took my very first course on UDL and got to work with David Rose. And after I finished my master's, I went into teaching. So, I worked as a middle school special education teacher and I co taught with social studies and English Language Arts general educators. And this, my very first year teaching, was actually the district's first year moving to a full inclusion co teaching model. So it was a really valuable really important learning experience for me during that time. And then I started working after teaching, I started working full time at CAST, in 2007, and then I went back to get my doctorate in 2010, and I've been back at CAST ever since I graduated from my doctoral program in 2017.

LOUI: I didn't realize that we had in common, so I was a collaborative special educator, teacher, eighth grade, middle school. I covered all subjects, but I didn't realize we had that in common.

JENNA: Yeah! That's cool! Me neither!

LOUI: [overtalking] laughter. So, just as you mentioned, you were at CAST and then you went to do your doctoral program and then you came back and I missed you. I was right in that little that little spot where you were off doing your doctoral work so I've always been kind of bummed I didn't get to work right with you but, ah...

JENNA: I feel the very same way! We just missed each other!

LOUI: I know! But, let everybody knows some stuff about your tenure there because I know that's been, that's been a it's been a big part of your life.

JENNA: It really has! Yeah, I started interning a CAST now more than 15 years ago which is really amazing. But it kind of, in between finishing my master's degree and then going off to start teaching I had kind of that summer in between, and I had just taken David Rose's UDL course. So, I just asked David, you know if CAST happen to have any internships that summer. And David mentioned, you know, this small kind of

summer program or summer project that he was thinking about to develop guidelines for UDL. So that was in, like I said, 2005,...

LOUI: [laughter]

JENNA: ...and our, the first version of the guidelines didn't come out for another three years until 2008, so it definitely was not a little small summer project after all. But that summer we really started digging into the research and just kind of reading together and it really was an amazing opportunity for me, and because it was such like a CAST wide effort. It was wonderful for me to get to work with other colleagues across CAST and really to get that really wonderful mentorship from David. So, I started as an intern and then when I went back to teaching I always just kind of stayed on as a consultant for CAST continuing to work on that first version 1.0. So, I would go back to CAST maybe one day a week after teaching and then go back during the summertime. And then I went back to CAST full time to start thinking about, start helping to develop version 2.0 of the guidelines which came out in 2011. And then as soon as I you know as I was working on my dissertation and thinking about kind of life after my doctoral program, I knew I would just love to go back to CAST. So, I was so glad that it all worked out so I've been back at CAST now since 2017. And like you said now I'm the Director of Research and Curriculum for Professional Learning. So, most of my research there really focuses on supporting educators to apply UDL to their practice, and also to kind of see what happens to student thinking into student learning when teachers are designing through a UDL lens.

LOUI: Nice. Well that really dovetails beautifully with the research that you did for your doctorate. And if I'm right, the article that we're going to talk about actually comes from your dissertation, right? Or...

JENNA: Actually it was from my qualifying study. Yeah, so it actually served as like really wonderful like a great launching point for me into my dissertation. So yeah, this was kind of the precursor to the dissertation work.

LOUI: Okay. So then in that in the article we're talking about the research we're talking about you are really focusing on how, if at all teachers working within the school that explicitly promoted the UDL framework, how did they use UDL to prompt their students' disciplinary thinking about English Language Arts, and I loved how you clarified the disciplinary thinking. And to set that up, you had like 33 instructional days you were in the classroom with co teachers and you were taking this incredibly close look at that intersection between what you identified as four Language Arts disciplinary themes and then the UDL guidelines, and how that intersection benefited student outcomes. So, can you go a little bit more into setting up the methods that you use to look for that intersection?

JENNA: Yeah! I love, thinking about methodology so this part will be fun. But for this project I just felt like it was really important for me to kind of embed myself in the classroom, in order to get a really thorough understanding of the ways in which these seasoned co teachers were really leveraging UDL for these disciplinary aims. So, this was a fifth grade co taught inclusive classroom. And like I said it was two co teachers, and they were really seasoned UDL teachers, so I used a purposive sampling strategy and kind of sought them out because I knew that, you know, they wouldn't call themselves experts because I think they were always in the mindset of kind of honing their UDL practice, but they definitely were seasoned UDL educators. And they, so they co taught a classroom of 21 students, and eight of those students were students identified as having disabilities. And six of those eight students were students labeled as having significant intellectual disabilities just to kind of set the stage for you. And like you said that a study occurred over 33 instructional days so this was actually one unit that the co teachers had developed. It was a 10-week ELA unit, and it kind of, it was a really interesting unit because it wove together all these interesting strands. One strand focused on poetry, another on fables and parables, and then a third strand on the Maasai community, which is a community in Kenya, in northern Tanzania. And this is a region where, the school where the teachers are, they have a partner school in this location in, in Kenya in northern Tanzania. So it's just kind of a neat connection and the

teachers had actually visited that region. So they were really eager to kind of lead that into this unit. So along those 33 days I think I collected maybe 60 hours' worth of video footage, it was a lot of video.

LOUI: [laughter]

JENNA: And like I said it was just really important to me to understand like what kinds of student thinking was generated in the classroom when the teachers were leveraging UDL in this really intentional way. So, I collected, you know, more than 300 pieces of student work over the course of the lesson. And I also was able to engage the teachers in three different interviews as well. So, I interviewed them before the unit even started. And then, while the unit was taking place maybe like five weeks in, and then after the unit had ended. And for the interviews that took place during and after the, the unit I used an approach called stimulated recall, and this is when you can bring kind of video footage into an interview situation. So I would take some of the clips that I had from videotaping the unit and share those with the teachers and it would just be you know like a five or so like a short, a short clip, but to kind of share that, because I think sometimes when you're observing for UDL so much of it is in the design and what the teacher is thinking. And so, it was really great to have those clips and we could sit down the three of us and say, "Okay in this moment, can you tell me a little bit more about like what was your thinking here? It seems like you're applying this particular guideline. Was that intentional or did you kind of do it spontaneously?" So that approach has stimulated recall really was a wonderful way into kind of understanding the teachers' approach as designers, I think, and also just a really under an interesting approach for me as a growing researcher and it was something that I carried with me into my dissertation as well. It just felt like a very valuable way to kind of gain that insight that you might not necessarily observe in the classroom while everything is kind of happening.

LOUI: Yeah. That's brilliant. So, I'm gonna have us jump really quickly to kind of results a discussion. And we'd have a few minutes to talk through that, so what are kind of the big things that came out of this because there was so much?

JENNA: I know where do we start! But I think, you know, I have these, these hours and hours of observation and across all of these observations I found tons of moments where the teachers were engaging students with and without disabilities in the really rich disciplinary practices of ELA, so I got to kind of observe what I was hoping to find going in just kind of seeing the ways that these expert teachers were very intentional about the design of their practice. And I think you kind of alluded to those four themes that I was looking for, but kind of what it means to engage in the disciplinary practices of ELA is a little, can feel a little vague. I think some of, you know, the hard sciences, we can look to NGSS or something for a more concrete kind of a more concrete kind of articulation of what it means to engage in those disciplinary practices and habits of mind, but it wasn't as clear with ELA, so before I even did this study I did a literature review to kind of unearth what are those practices that I really was looking for. And so, it was this idea of supporting students to read for meaning, was one of the themes. So kind of supporting students to move beyond basic comprehension and really work to construct meaning from text and to contribute to their background knowledge and assimilate new knowledge. Then this notion of reading like a writer was another theme that emerged. So kind of supporting students to explore author's craft and think about what are those, like, techniques that authors use to evoke meaning and to guide readers reactions. And then, once you're kind of thinking about kind of reading like a writer, how might you transfer those same techniques into your own writing? And so, this theme of writing like a writer kind of emerged, too. And then the fourth theme was this notion of supporting students to identify as a writer and supporting students to really see themselves as capable writers. And for my dissertation I actually added a fifth theme that we could talk about another time. This idea of identifying as a reader but that wasn't involved in the study because it was so focused on, on writing. But across all the observations I really saw, you know, students with and without disabilities engaging in these four themes. And with my data analysis I was trying to figure out, so how did the teachers do this? You know, how did they get this classroom of students engaged in these sophisticated practices? So I kind of organized it into three kind of buckets. And the first bucket I thought about was I had lots of evidence of the teachers using specific UDL guidelines, but they were using them in like a particular kind of way. It was almost

like it had like a disciplinary kind of twist on it, or kind of through a disciplinary lens. And I think a good example would be thinking about the ways that they leveraged UDL guideline nine, the idea of developing self-assessment. And at the end of the unit the teachers really wanted to carve out space for the students to think about, you know, they've been on this 10 week journey. They wanted to carve out space for them to reflect, but instead of having kind of just like a general prompt, the teachers had very specific prompts with this again, like kind of disciplinary twist on it to really support students to be thinking about their emerging identities as writers. So they weren't kind of reflecting generally, but they were taking time to think about, like, how they were feeling as a writer and, you know, where they were kind of in their process. And it was just so neat to see some of the students reflections, really thinking about their process from beginning to end and starting with that brainstorming phase in the drafting phase and then to see how it, you know, what it felt like to see their work published and kind of the pride that really came out in the reflections. And one student, which I loved, he wrote, he, he kind of worked on a fable for a part of his work, and in his reflection he shared that, "I feel like the new Aesop", which I just felt like was so great, but I think it was a really nice example that kind of like a, a general reflection prompt might not have evoked kind of that, that same real work that they did to think about themselves as writers and what it felt like to identify as a writer.

LOUI: Yeah, yeah. Oh, I agree. It put out so much. So we are at the end.

JENNA: Uh-oh! It was fast!

LOUI: [laughter] It does! It goes so fast, but you were saying there were three buckets, I think you were just talking about the first one, right?

JENNA: Yeah! So that was how they were kind of using existing guidelines through this disciplinary lens.

LOUI: Um-hm.

JENNA: And then, I also saw how the teachers were using the guidelines in really new kind of ways, and I can be fast but thinking about, you know we talked about providing options for comprehension and the guidelines. And one of the checkpoints is this idea of guiding information processing. And what I was seeing is the teachers were kind of going more for more than just information processing. They were really supporting students to kind of go past the notion of comprehension or information processing and really dig into those sophisticated disciplinary practices. Another example would be that our checkpoint of highlighting critical features and things like that. I think sometimes that's almost thought of as a job for the teacher. That the teacher needs to do this work of highlighting critical features, and in this classroom, that was the job of the student, right? They were doing the active meaning-making and really kind of highlighting patterns and critical features for themselves. And then the last one actually was great for me as a researcher who is interested in, you know, further development of our UDL guidelines, but I found some approaches that really aren't explicitly suggested in the guidelines. And one that became really clear to me was just this real protected space that the teachers had for students to just kind of like tinker and explore and create this kind of creative space for them to really generate their own understandings and make meaning. And I think that could be like implied in some of the guidelines or maybe the specific checkpoints, but it's not super explicit. And having that space really protected for students to really kind of do their own thing and kind of make their own meaning really stood out to me. And it's interesting when, as we think about kind of future iterations of the guidelines.

LOUI: Yeah, because the guidelines are written for what we're gonna do, how we're going to design the learning environment for our learners. And you've identified where the teachers are... yeah, that creating that environment to allow for that tinkering, allow for that space, so we really don't have anything in there. I'm thinking about engagement, right? We don't even have if anything that's in there that explicitly gets to that. Yeah, exactly. The other thing that I was thinking about and reflecting on was that such a powerful statement for people to say in the field is what does UDL look like, right? And this is what we're all just constantly working on, but I feel like that in this study, and the

work you continue to do, that right now we do have kind of, it's a quasi-answer for people which is look at your discipline, do a deep dive into your discipline, understand what your discipline is seeking for your learners, and then look at that intersectionality, because it gives us a clearer pathway, I think, to understanding what UDL looks like. But you have to understand the discipline in, in conjunction with understanding the framework. And I think that's such a valuable contribution that you made. It's incredible. Thank you so much.

JENNA: Oh, thank you! And that definitely was a goal for this piece was really trying to articulate and share what UDL can look like in a classroom and I think sometimes the notion of expert learning feels a little vague and big, but like he was saying, that to think about that intersection of maybe expert learning through this disciplinary lens, then it starts to come to life to teachers and recognize like oh so you know I'm an ELA teacher, you know, those practices and habits of mind and commitments. I see that connection now with expert learning.

LOUI: Right

Janna: So...

LOUI: Brilliant, brilliant. Well, thank you so much, Jenna. I really appreciate your time. Thank you so much!

JENNA: Thank you, Loui! This was really fun. Thank you for inviting me.

LOUI: You're welcome, you're welcome. So, for those listening to this podcast, you can find supplemental materials like a recorded video of the interview with closed captioning and a transcript at my website which is the [www.theUDLApproach.com/podcasts](http://www.theUDLApproach.com/podcasts). The citation for this article that we discussed and anything else that we referenced can also be found below the video representation of this podcast, which is a UDL Research in 15 minutes which is the YouTube channel. And finally, if you are a UDL researcher or you

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