UDL Research in 15 Minutes Transcript
With Anya Evmenova

LOUI: Hello and welcome to UDL Research in 15 minutes, where researchers share their findings about the implementation, impact, and their introspective investigations of UDL. I'm Loui Lord Nelson, UDL author and leader, and today I'm talking with Anya Evmenova, who is an associate professor at George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia. And today, Anya and I are going to talk about her research that she did and reported in the article titled, "Preparing teachers to use Universal Design for Learning to support diverse learners". Hi Anya How are you?

ANYA: I'm good, thank you so much.

LOUI: Oh good, that's wonderful. So, can you share a little bit about your teaching background?

ANYA: Sure! Not sure it will be a little bit, but I originally came from Russia to work on my master's degree at East Carolina University, and that was a part of the collaborative brand between the two universities. Now, back in Russia I studied teaching English as a second language. So, I didn't have any experience in special education. And in fact, the Department of Special Education at that time in my home university was called Defectology. So, there was not a lot of special education happening. And so, when I came to study this Caroline University I was just shocked and didn't have anything to share. So, I started to visit a school that I could walk to just to get some experiences and it was a self-contained classroom for kids with significant disabilities. And that's where I saw, the first time ever, how a girl meaningfully and actively participated in the general education classroom literacy class by using a very simple, four cell, go talk communication device. And that's when my career in assistive technology was determined, and I, after finishing my master's I worked in North Carolina for a few years as a special ed teacher, and then came to do my PhD at George Mason University in assistive technology.

LOIU: Wow, that's a great story. I mean that's just, that's a true story of passion! To see that and be like, this is it! Right here!

ANYA: Yeah, it was quite serendipitous.

LOUI: So then when did your passion for UDL emerge.

ANYA: Well, interestingly enough, you know, I came from Russia, I started attending classes, and I really struggled with in-class group discussions. I hated them. First of all, I had nothing to contribute. I had very different background, did not have the same experiences, and plus I really wasn't confident in my speaking skills. I knew English but not really well. So, it was a torture. And the only time when I was able to sort of blossom was when my instructors allowed a Blackboard discussions or discussions, the asynchronous discussions. So I would sit down with my dictionary for hours crafting carefully, my responses, but at least I was able to participate and I felt good about it. So that's when I sort of really realized the power of options, choices, and at the time I didn't know it was, it had a name. But with time, I really sort of that, that personal feeling of struggle and being very grateful for some of those options is what kind of pushed me towards UDL for my own students, both in K 12, and now in higher ed.

LOUI: Wow. That is some significant tenacity and it also, but also that, that experience that you had as an English learner, someone who was came to English as a second language, but your experiences in expressing them here I really appreciate that. And I think help, again, further helping people understand that we need to provide all these different options and opportunities. But even within those options and opportunities, our students are going to still need to have that, what you experienced which was your tenacity and we still need to provide, provide additional supports to them.

ANYA: Absolutely.

LOUI: So, great, thank you!

ANYA: You're very welcome!

LOUI: So, the topic of blended learning is key to this article, so I wondered if you would give a little bit of a description of that so that people have that context.

ANYA: Sure, and I think it's actually quite unfortunate that there is so many different definitions of blended learning, I feel like we cannot agree on things, and it's so hard for practitioners to find this information because we'll use slightly different terms. But for me, the important component is really that blend of multiple formats. So, for example, having an online component when students sort of control the pace, the place, the content, the time with a more traditional, for example, face-to -ace format. So in the

course that we will be discussing, the word two levels of blended learning. One was that the course was primarily asynchronous, but we did have synchronous, optional synchronous discussions and chats. So, so that allowed for some of that sort of interaction. And then also, the students had to observe a lesson or a learning situation session in a face-to-face format. This was pretty COVID, so it could be, it had to be done in a face to face format. It could be a K 12 classroom of different ,any grade, any subject, it could be a higher education classroom, but it had to be a face-to-face, traditional environment. So that's where that blended learning came into play in this in this piece.

LOUI: Got it, got it. Okay, so let's give a little bit more context for your article. So, this was research that had a learning component with it, and everybody benefited from that same information. So, talk a little bit about those modules that you created and who participated in them.

ANYA: Sure, and without going into too many details, this was a graduate level course about universal design for learning so that was the title of the course, and it was actually offered to students from two different universities: George Mason University and University of Connecticut, Connecticut, and we were all in this asynchronous online environment learning together. And in this particular study, my participants were the 70 educators, and the vast majority of them were actually in-service, general education teachers, special education teachers, or related service providers. So, I had only couple who were full time students, but the rest were actually in the trenches doing the work. In the classes. So the course at that time was designed across 11 modules. Right now, in the current form it's actually across eight modules, but the, the gist didn't, didn't change. And the idea was to introduce students to Universal Design for Learning. So, we started with some basics, foundations, and then went deeper into each of the principles and sort of the guidelines and checkpoints within the principles. And then finally, we focused on sort of designing the UDL curriculum. So, it was just spread out across the modules but, but that, that was the main focus of the course. And then it was super important for me to also incorporate Universal Design for Learning in the course about Universal Design for Learning. So I embedded quite a few strategies and and, and practices across the three principles. And I do list them in the article, and it's probably too much

information to go into detail now, but it was highly packed with, with multiple means of engagement, representation, and action and expression.

LOUI: Nice, nice. So, then you are setting up your research to look at how well the, those educators both the pre service and in service could identify UDL when they were in the environment and implementing UDL, and whether they could apply that new knowledge to a lesson. And so, like you were just saying, you know, UDL has its nine guidelines and 31 checkpoints and that's a lot to examine. So, the data collection, I think that would be key to talk about since we're really focusing in on a research articles to talk about that.

ANYA: Right. So, I mean, as I said, we went through learning about the guidelines and checkpoints. They sort of organized by the principle, really getting in depth into the research behind them as well as the practical application examples. So, students' progress throughout the semester from just being able to recognize things to then matching the guidelines and the checkpoints to specific learner characteristics and sort of using them to remove the barriers within the specific learning goals. So that was, that was what they did. And, and the data, the major data force in this article was around this final assignment that they had to do in which they, as I said, observed the face-to-face lesson. And then they have their choice so the, the level the content, the grade, the age, anything was up for them to, to decide, and they've identified the student characteristics within that environment, so they went into sort of the analysis of the characteristics and potential barriers within the learning outcome that, that, that, teachers, or whoever was leading the session the learning session, were trying to achieve. Then they recognize something that looked like a UDL checkpoint and guideline and this is where it was so fascinating, because you know a lot of people struggle between, "Oh I'm already doing UDL because I I have bells and whistles in my teaching," and it's that intentionality that's so important to make it truly UDL versus just good teaching. So, it was very interesting that at the point of identifying and recognizing they also identified quite a few unintentional barriers that were still there. And they kept reflecting on it and saying, they were doing such a wonderful job they using this technology or this, this strategy and yet, there are still barriers to their learners. So the most important component was for them to design, sort of an updated, so take the same lesson and revise it, and, and prepare a

lesson plan or a plan, instructional plan, that would really match the, the, the goal of the lesson with the characteristics of the learners, and with the intentional use of UDL guidelines and checkpoints. And then they also have to do a video demonstration, and a reflection within the, the assignment, but this sort of this development of the, of the plan was the most important component. And the only thing that was unfortunate and missing, and should definitely be the direction of future research, was that we didn't get a chance to implement it. Some people took the initiative and did it, but it wasn't their requirement. And if they already observed something in February, on persuasive writing, well, they, they moved on and it's a whole different topic, so we weren't able to actually implement it, but I think my future studies will definitely focus on that.

LOUI: Yeah. Oh, this is brilliant. I know we've, we've come up against, we're going to come up against our 15 minutes here close, but, I just, what was going through my head as you were talking about the students reflecting on the unintentional, unintended barriers that they saw, and wow these people did such a great job of, of using the framework with intentionality, but they still had these barriers, they're still in their instructional environment. And what's going on in my head is that reminder that there is no perfection. We've got so much variability, and there is so much variability and there will always be so much variability, that we're all just doing our best to get, to lessen as many of those barriers as possible. And how do we as practitioners and implementers and researchers also give that message of grace, without saying you're off the hook, you know. There's that, we still want that that hook of intentionality, and that purpose, but we also don't want our educators to get hung up on perfection.

ANYA: Right. Right.

LOUI: And wow, wow. Finding that space.

ANYA: Yeah, yeah, yeah. And a lot of my participants reflected on that actually on that continuous cycle of, of trying, implementing, adapting, revising and they actually appreciated it. It's scary at the beginning that, "Oh my god I have to do this all over again!" You know, you kind of want to have that printout and just go by it and be done, but it's also liberating that you. It's not, it doesn't have to be perfect because there's, there's always going to be another cycle, and another opportunity.

LOUI: Yeah, yeah, it just speaks to what daily life is and for us to ever think that a classroom would be separate from that is bad and wrong. So, okay, oh my gosh, Anya, this was wonderful. Thank you so so much for being a guest I really appreciate it.

ANYA: Absolutely. No problem. Thank you for having me.

LOUI: Oh you're…

ANYA: Happy to chat with you!

LOUI: Well, you're very welcome You're very welcome. So, for those of you 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 www.theUDLapproach.com/podcasts. The citation for this article that we discussed will be found below the video representation of this podcast on my UDL research in 15 minutes YouTube channel. And finally, if you are a researcher or know of UDL research you'd like to hear about contact me through my website, www.theUDLapproach.com. I'd love to hear from you. And thanks to everyone for your work in revolutionizing education through UDL, and making it our goal to develop expert learners.