UDL Research in 15 Minutes
With Tara Courchaine
The Transcript

LOUI: Hello, and welcome to UDL research in 15 minutes where researchers share their findings about the implementation, impact, and their innovative introspections about the UDL framework. I'm Loui Lord Nelson, the UDL author and leader. Today, I'm talking with Tara Courchaine who is the Chief Research and Development Officer at CAST. Today, Dr. Courchaine is going to share with us two Office of Special Education Programs, that's OSEP, they're funded projects at CAST and some research related to one of them. Hello, Dr. Courchaine. How are you?

TARA: Thank you so much for having me today. I'm great. How are you doing?

LOUI: I'm great. Thank you so much. So, can I call you Tara?

TARA: Yes, please. And should I call you Loui?

LOUI: Yeah. It's great.

TARA: Great.

LOUI: So, before we get started talking about CAST, could you tell us a little bit about yourself, you know, how did you come into the field of UDL?

TARA: Sure. So, it was kind of interesting, but really a natural journey. It was never really what I planned, but I think it's definitely where I'm supposed to be. I started working with kids as a swim coach and quickly found that everyone learns a little bit differently, and requires different supports or entry points for access, engagement and motivation. I even learned Cued Speech to communicate with a swimmer who was deaf. And as a sister of someone with a disability who grew up in an institution, I was always interested in finding new ways to support communication, understanding, and belonging. In college that included using the Lovaas method with a little boy who was diagnosed with autism and using total physical response to teach students English in Costa Rica. Something I took with me from my undergraduate research was that kids have to be affectively available to learn, and often they face significant obstacles and barriers before they even walk into a classroom. After college, I became a Head Start teacher and work with many English language learners and children at risk for

disabilities. They learn to play music and exploration. And my goal was always to keep them excited about new experiences. It was then that I decided to pursue my master's in bilingual special education and I moved on to work with preschool students with disabilities. Jumping ahead, in 2008, I decided to pursue my doctorate. My dissertation work was focused on whether the Response to Intervention framework was effective for culturally and linguistically diverse students with disabilities. But my biggest takeaways was that it tied really closely with some of the core tenants of universal design for learning. We cannot wait for children to fail before providing them with the support that they need. My doctoral work led me to the George Washington University to serve as an adjunct professor and program coordinator in the bilingual special education program, and then on to serve as a project officer for discretionary grants in the Office of Special Education Programs. I learned about the universal design framework during my time as a master's and doctoral student, but my first opportunity to work closely with CAST was at OSEP when I became committed to meeting the accessibility and learning needs of all students by intentionally designing for students on the margin. When the position for Chief Research and Development Officer became available, I was honored to be offered the position. I am fully invested in doing everything I can to support improved learner outcomes using the universal design for learning framework through efforts at CAST and beyond. And I am thrilled that I get to highlight these two centers today. I think accessibility is the baseline of a universally designed framework. It cannot sit as an afterthought or a separate goal. If instruction and technology is not designed to be accessible from the start, then it cannot possibly reduce the barriers and roadblocks, roadblocks we are trying so hard to overcome. However, accessibility in itself is not sufficient and accessible materials and technologies are not a means to the end themselves.

LOUI: Nice. Well, thank you. That's a great overview! You've had a journey that you can see how everything has informed and led you to where you are. So, I'm excited that you are where you are and all that's going to influence your work there at CAST. I think everybody's going to benefit from that. Thank you. So, let's get started with the AEM Center. So that was, so for those of you who aren't familiar with that acronym, so AEM stands for Accessible Educational Materials. So, I know that CAST has supported the

AEM Center for a long time, but what's been AEM Center's evolution and how does it currently support educators?

TARA: Well the national AIM Center has actually been providing TA to state since 2007. The center was originally funded in response to the 2004 Reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Act, and the call for instructional materials to be accessible for students were visually impaired. But since that time, the AEM Center originally designed to support TA around the new IDEA requirements has changed and grown as learning materials shifted from primarily print based books to digital learning materials and tools. So, since the inception of the AEM Center, they've provided intensive TA to 29 separate states with seven in their current cohort. The AEM Center makes Universal TA available through their website, AEM.CAST.org to all interested stakeholders.

LOUI: Yeah. So that website is so well organized. Anyone who's going to go to is going to find what they need. I've just spent the last three days working on creating ePubs and although I did have to contact Luis Perez a couple of times with some additional questions, you know I watched three other webinars and it totally set me up for what I needed to do, what I needed to know, what were the right things to download, so I wasn't off in some internet land. It was just it was really, really valuable. So, I've been all over the AIM Center website, but for people who haven't been there before, what are one or two sections that you would recommend?

TARA: So we recently published a four part video series on accessible learning across the lifespan. In addition, we have our own podcast which is called The Accessible Learning Experience. And we started those episodes back in October of 2021. On the site you can also find an online learning series that can help you select, create, and acquire accessible learning materials and technologies and how to design materials and resources that are Perceivable, Operable, Understandable, and Robust, which we finally call POUR. So, while the primary recipients of the intensive AEM Center ta are state education agencies supporting K-12 learning, the current Center has expanded to support early childhood, institutes of higher education and workforce development. And you can learn more by checking out the AEM website and reviewing the AEM quality indicators for the provision of accessible educational materials and technologies.

LOUI: Yeah, yeah, you and I'm gonna stick in here, we hadn't even talked about this but I think people I think people get stuck kind of thinking, accessible materials reading, right? But there's stuff there's math stuff in there. There's, it's, there's a lot of things that are discussed around accessibility around several areas. So, I encourage people to go to that website. So then Okay, let's move to CITES, C, I, T, E, S. CITES is the Center on Inclusive Technology and Education systems. So again, a lovely and accessible site, and there's a lot packed in there. So what would you headline or highlight there?

TARA: Sure. So first of all, CAST was so excited when the request for proposals was published in the spring of 2018 because it was such a great opportunity to extend, build on, and learn from some of the great work the AEM center was doing at the state level. And now they had an opportunity to apply it at the district level. So, CITES was funded with the goal of strengthening collaboration, communication, and efforts between assistive technology, educational technology, and information or infrastructure technology teams at the district level. So, CITES developed a phased implementation that began with knowledge development, followed by an iterative framework development process, with the goal of scaling and disseminating the framework universally. So the CITES website is designed to help districts implement the framework, which is broken up into five buckets. Those are leadership, infrastructure, learning, and assessment. The buckets are loosely based on the topics found in the National Education Technology Plan. And when the framework is implemented successfully, all child learning needs are considered in the design of instruction and the procurement or creation of materials.

LOUI: Nice. So, okay. Let's talk about the research parts of this because this is a UDL Research in 15 Minutes, so could you describe some of the current research that's going on related to CITES

TARA: Absolutely, and I am really excited to share about that research that's going on. So, when COVID hit CITES was just starting into its second year of the project and we really had to pivot quickly to consider and respond to the needs of students and children who are learning remotely. OSEP saw this as an opportunity to learn more about instruction in virtual schools and some of the practices that were in place for students with disabilities. So, the CITES conducted hour-long interviews with administrators from

five different virtual schools. All five of the sites were virtual public schools or virtual public charter schools. I was a member of the three-person coding team that helped to look at the themes across the five sites. So, before we started the coding process, we had sort of pre-selected some codes that we thought would work based on the primary themes of the AEM Center, I'm sorry, the CITES Center and the CITES framework. However, once we began reviewing interviews, we really quickly realized we needed to add an additional code, and that code was UDL. So, there were a few things that struck us as we looked at the schools that were doing the best job with instruction for all students, including students with disabilities, and the number one item in our initial analysis was flexibility. The staff at those sites were committed, passionate and intentional, intentional being really key about providing learners with flexible ways to access instruction. And then some of the other themes that we saw at those sites were great leadership, professional development, streamlined technology, they would have single log ons, they would have courses that could run hybrid in person at the same time, strong communication both with staff and families, family engagement was critical, hybrid models of instruction so students could learn online or in person, sometimes there were different opportunities. There was an awareness of the IEP, students who had IEPs and their assistive technology needs and they were put in place. And then there was real intentionality about content and curriculum development. A lot of the schools are a few of the schools actually did train their teachers and did the content development on their own. And so, one member of our team is currently working to compile a summary of the results, but I really wanted to highlight a few of the strengths. The full report will include those strengths and continued barriers for meeting the needs of all students. And we are really excited for it to publish in the next few months.

LOUI: Awesome. So now that we've kind of whet the appetite for folks, so when something like this is published, is that out for the public, are we talking about a publication within research journals, what are we talking about here?

TARA: So, in this particular case, it will start out just as something that's published publicly on our CITES website, and it will be I'm sure made available through CAST and then depending it may be something we, we put in for submission in a research journal, or we may use the information to share at a conference presentation. Because we really

do want to highlight some of the things that other schools could use to be able to create a more universally designed framework and really be responsive to the needs of all students.

LOUI: Yeah, yeah. So I don't think we've said it yet. The website for CITES is that…

TARA: It's CITES.CAST.org. [Overtalking] Just like the AEM Center website

LOUI: Very, very easy. Very nice. Well, this has been a fabulous conversation. I really appreciate it. Is there other research that you wanted to tap on? Or was this that was the main one that we were going to talk about today? Right?

TARA: That was the main one for today. Yeah.

LOUI: Okay. That's what I thought that's what I thought. But I think other people, other people, I think people are always interested in kind of that bigger picture of CAST. So, there is a research tab on the CAST website, correct? And people can just tap on that. And what would you say not like specific content, but what kind of things are people going to see , kind of information are they going to get?

TARA: So they would learn about some of the different CAST projects that are going on and some of the research that occurred through those projects. For example, I know one on a project called Snoodle, which is a science notebook tool that helps students to access science and organize their science through that technology and they recently published to show how that tool was helpful in supporting universal design. And so that would be one example of something you might find there.

LOUI: Yeah. And then if, if anybody listening is like, well, we want to participate in something with CAST because they do things and their research is really organized (I'm trying to sell it here [laughter]), how would they do that? How would they become part of, you know, if they were an eligible group, that kind of thing?

TARA: We would love for them to reach out. There are, I believe on the main site there's places for that but also, I know directly through our centers. I know the AEM Center, CITES, CISL which is another one of our centers, ask for interest. And they can always email me as well. And I would be happy to make that connection because we are always looking for people to work with us.

LOUI: Yeah, yeah. We all need to… it's that educator researcher marriage, right? And we want to succeed and that's the only way that research can be beneficial to the field is

if we have more educators participate then and I think that really research has evolved. Gosh, it's evolved in my life. And it's, it is more beneficial to teachers. It used to be you know, the drop in model and now it's the collaborative model. And that's everything that I see from CAST is always the collaborative model. So, I would really hope that people would say, yes, we want to participate.

TARA: Yeah, we do a lot of co-design work, and we're really committed right now to figuring out the "why" so that teachers know why they should use the universal design framework and how it's going to support student outcomes. So…

LOUI: Brilliant. Brilliant. Well, I really appreciate this conversation today, Tara. Thank you so much.

TARA: Thank you. This was great, and I really was thrilled with this opportunity.

LOUI: You're very welcome. For those listening to this podcast, you can find supplemental materials like a recorded video of this interview with closed captioning, and a transcript of my website, which is www.theUDLapproach.com/podcasts. The citation for the articles we discussed, as well as any other reference can be found below the video representation of this price on my UDL Research and 15 minutes YouTube channel. Finally, if you're UDL 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.