

# Case-Based Teaching: Supporting Educators' Understanding of UDL

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## Abstract

*How might we support educators to learn about UDL through experiences that are more interactive and learner-centered? The Professional Learning Team at CAST is exploring this question through a pilot study that examines the potential of a case-based teaching approach. Participants in the study explore a case of an elementary school wrestling with dilemmas associated with supporting diverse learners and building an inclusive school community. Participants assume active roles and immerse themselves in the real-life challenges presented in the case. In this session, we will collaboratively explore initial findings that reveal how participants experienced our case-based approach. We will consider how this approach supports participants to 1) make authentic connections to their own school and classroom contexts, 2) wrestle with their values and beliefs about teaching and learning, and 3) reflect on the conditions that support educators to apply UDL to practice. We will also reflect on the features of case-based teaching that participants reported as being particularly useful or not useful in supporting their learning. We share the refinements that we are making to our case-based approach based on this feedback. Finally, we will explore the implications of our findings, encouraging participants to consider the potential of a case-based teaching approach in their own contexts.*

## Keywords

Teacher learning, case-based teaching, learner-centered approaches.

## INTRODUCTION

Case-based teaching is widely viewed as an approach to create active, engaging learning experiences (Harrington & Garrison, 1992; Gravett, de Beer, Odendaal-Kroon & Merseeth, 2017). This method draws on learners' experiences and emotions as they participate in case discussion (Merseeth & Lacey, 1993), providing opportunities for educators to link theory and practice in education (Levin, 2002) and to foster critical thinking skills (Gravett et al., 2017). Given the potential of case-based teaching, researchers from the CAST Professional Learning team are currently conducting a pilot study to explore how this approach might be used to support educators' understanding and application of UDL. We developed "The Case of Mountain View Elementary," a case that describes an elementary school wrestling with dilemmas associated with supporting diverse learners, and we are exploring the following research questions: 1) How did participants experience the case-based teaching approach? 2) In what ways,

if at all, did participants believe that their understanding of UDL developed? and 3) What aspects of the case-based approach, if any, did participants report as being particularly useful in supported their learning? Which did they feel were less useful? Why?

## METHODS

The CAST PL team has been recruiting groups of approximately 6 to 30 participants to engage in our case-based session over the past eight months. These groups are made up of k-12 teachers, administrators, and/or higher education faculty who have some initial background in UDL and who are interested in experiencing a case-based approach. Thus far, we have facilitated three different sessions, and we hope to facilitate another five sessions over the course of the next year.

## The Case-Based Session

Each case-based session follows a similar structure and offers participants the opportunity to assume an active role in diving into the real-life challenges presented in the case. Sessions typically run approximately 90 minutes. We begin with an introduction and overview of the session goals. Participants then read a paper or digital version of "The Case of Mountain View Elementary," which includes the case and several other accompanying materials such as the school's mission, state assessment data, a history of the school's professional development initiatives, and a professional development calendar for the current school year. As a group, we discuss the foundations of the case together: the main players, the "serious problem" they are facing, and the culture of the school. Then, participants break into teams to explore the complexities and challenges presented in the case, collaborating to surface tensions, identify priorities, and formulate next steps. We ask participants to consider prompts such as: "What should the principal do in the next 3 months?" "In the next year?" "What are the risks inherent in this effort?" and "What's the most pressing priority for this school?" Participants are offered a graphic organizer and a conversation organizer as options to structure their discussion around these prompts. We then ask participants to create a visual representation of three action steps that they think the school should take. After creating their visuals, participants come back together as a group to share their visuals and discuss the similarities and differences between their ideas. Finally, we save fifteen minutes at the end of the session to seek participants' feedback on the usefulness of the session in terms of how this case-based teaching approach supported their learning of UDL. We have a group

discussion and consider prompts such as: “*What was this experience like for you?*” and “*Did exploring this case help to deepen your thinking about UDL?*” Each participant also responds to an individual reflection survey (available in a paper-based format or a digital format) that includes prompts such as “*What are your thoughts on the case and the associated artifacts? (What’s missing? What was useful? What was not useful?)*.”

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

The CAST PL team has been documenting the learning and experiences of study participants in each session through a range of data collection methods: 1) video-recorded and audio-recorded observation, 2) field notes, and 3) collection of participants’ work including graphic organizers, discussion frameworks, action plans, reflection surveys, and any other artifacts generated during the session.

This range of data allows us to conduct a rigorous examination of our research questions. In order to analyze our first research question—“*How did participants experience the case-based teaching approach?*”—we are using an emic approach to code field notes, video, and artifacts from the sessions. In order to analyze our second and third research questions—“*In what ways, if at all, did participants believe that their understanding UDL developed?*” and “*What aspects of the case-based approach, if any, did participants self-report as being particularly useful in supported their learning?*” “*Which did they feel were less useful?*” “*Why?*” —we are coding the reflective conversation with participants at the end of each session as well as participants’ reflective surveys.

### **FINDINGS**

We collaboratively analyzed the initial findings that reveal how participants experienced our case-based approach.

First, we explored how the case-based approach supported participants to make authentic connections to their own schools and classrooms, prompting them to reflect on UDL implementation in their own contexts. For example, while formulating action steps for Mountain View, one team reflected on their own journey of building their school’s culture around UDL. One team member stated, “I feel like one of the huge problems in this case study—and then just also feels familiar—is just the [school] culture. And I’m wondering if *that’s* a piece that we can think of something—like an action step for, like, culture.” Her team member replied, “I think we all feel like culture has improved in our school. What do we think has improved it?” The team then spent time reflecting on their principal’s commitment to UDL and the time built into their school day for collaboration around instruction.

Second, we explored how the case study prompted participants to wrestle with their values and beliefs toward teaching and learning. For example, when crafting action steps, one team discussed how Mountain View’s assistant principal believed it was necessary to address students’ chal-

lenging behavior before focusing on developing students’ literacy. The team also reflected on how Mountain View’s literacy coach felt students needed to master basic foundational skills before moving onto more rigorous literacy tasks. The group considered the limitations of this “mind set of we need to do this before we can do this” and how these beliefs might be impacting student learning in the case.

Third, we considered how the case-based approach encouraged participants to reflect on the conditions that support educators to apply UDL to practice. For example, one participant noted, “I have been stuck in thinking about UDL at a classroom level...but I think it is really important to also think about it from an administrative building-wide level. Our whole school and the way that it is run really needs to reflect a UDL model in order to have teachers buy into what the initiative is.”

Finally, we explored the features of our case-based approach that participants reported as being particularly useful or not useful in supporting their learning. For example, several participants reflected on their high engagement during the session and how they appreciated the “freedom” built into this kind of experience. In contrast, others reported that there was too much “openness” in the case and how it was “a little hard to see the connection to UDL.” In the following section, we share our ideas for refinements to the case based on participants’ feedback.

### **IMPLICATIONS AND CONNECTIONS TO CONFERENCE PARTICIPANTS’ OWN CONTEXTS**

We believe these findings have important implications not only for our work as a Professional Learning team at CAST, but for the field more broadly. Identifying specific features and conditions that successfully facilitate teacher growth with regard to UDL will allow us to design learning experiences that support educators to develop a rich understanding of the framework.

At the end of the conference session, we will encourage participants to consider the promise of a case-based teaching approach in their own contexts. Conference participants will work in teams to investigate potential benefits. They will then examine and refine the case-based teaching plan used in our study, adapting it to meet their own needs and goals.

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