Inclusive Teaching for Students with Disabilities and Special Learning Needs

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Diversity and Ability in the Classroom

Disability is a physical or mental characteristic that changes one or more major life activities, such as moving, sensing, interacting, or learning. For many students, disability is something they consider every day in and out of the classroom because they need different things than their peers in order to study, to focus, to participate in class, to take tests, to read, and to live daily life. Accessibility measures to make a classroom more inclusive are shown to make the classroom more conducive to learning for all students. To ensure a constructive and inclusive classroom for all abilities, it is important for faculty to holistically evaluate the learning environments they create and to thoughtfully consider the flexibility of their pedagogy. Disability is one of many aspects of diversity, and especially at a college with such a diverse student body, considering accessibility is crucial to all students' success.

Helping All Students Learn Through a Universal Design for Learning Approach

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is an approach in which faculty intentionally develop curricula and classes to be as inclusive of all abilities and learning needs as possible, rather than responding if and when a student with a known disability enters the class. The underlying principle of universal design is that interventions and adaptations which support learning for specific disabilities almost always also support students with other learning needs or styles. Universal design promotes flexibility in the way information is presented and in ways, students are able to interact with course material and demonstrate their knowledge. Most fundamentally, courses taught according to UDL assume a high variety of student experience and ability and therefore give students multiple means and vehicles to:

- Access course material

- Engage with the professor and peers

- Learn course content

- Develop course skills

- Express and assess what they have learned

The analogy most often drawn from universal design in architecture and urban planning is curb cuts – the curved area in a sidewalk which goes down to the street level. These curb cuts were primarily introduced to help people in wheelchairs get from the sidewalk to the street, but they also help people in crutches, parents pushing strollers, toddlers on training bikes, elderly people using walkers, delivery workers pushing trollies with packages across the street, and so on. Similarly, providing a combination of verbal and visual presentation of information in your classes might help students with poor hearing, but would also help students who have low vision, who are less familiar with spoken English, who need a bit more time to process information received verbally, or who are still acclimating to your accent.

Rather than waiting to incorporate an adjustment or accommodation until receiving a mandated accommodation, what Universal Design for Learning (UDL) encourages professors to do is to proactively incorporate strategies which support learning for students with different abilities and needs before they even have students with those needs in their classes. Take some time to think about the universe of people who might take your class, and their varying abilities and learning needs. In the context of your learning goals, are

there general steps you can take to make access to your information and learning outcomes more available to more students? Universal design benefits the entire class, and according to practitioners, "offers a way out of the normal vs. needy framework. Universal design doesn't wait for documentation of a disability before taking action, just as no curb cut requires a wheelchair user — or pedestrian carrying a heavy load, or parent pushing a stroller, or musician wheeling a double bass — to present a license before entering the sidewalk. Like the philosophy behind the curb cut, universal design presumes a range of users, and — this is important — it presumes competence on the part of all students, no matter their learning style. "[1] This approach has the added benefit of saving faculty from having to design ad hoc for specific students in a last-minute context.

If you want to adopt UDL in your pedagogy, there are some core principles to consider:[2]

- Provide Multiple Means of Representation and Perception by Professors
- Provide Multiple Means for Action and Expression of Knowledge by Students
- Provide Multiple Means for Engagement by Students

More specific practices to incorporate into your teaching include the following:[3]

1. *Give Pre-Course Surveys*

Consider a pre-course survey that seeks to understand students' perceived strengths and challenges, and includes the question, "What is something that would positively contribute to your learning experience or ability to do well?" This opens the door for all students to communicate their accessibility needs at the start of the course. Though you cannot give specific accommodations (e.g. extra time to complete assignments) to individual students without a formal University Health Centre recommendation, knowing your students learning needs can help you structure your classes and think about how you design activities and assignments for the entire class.

2. *Signal Your Approachability and Interest in Accessibility for All*

If students feel you care about them as people, they will be more likely to disclose struggles they may be having and barriers to learning they are encountering in your course. You will then have the ability to counsel them to get appropriate medical/psychological intervention and outside learning support, or to adjust your practice to make it more accessible to their needs. You can signal approachability by learning students names, holding regular office hours and strongly encouraging attendance at office hours especially early in the semester, and noting your desire to know their learning needs and barriers if any, both in the syllabus and on the first day of class.

3. *Include Accessibility Statements*

You can also include a clause about learning accommodation resources and accessibility in your course syllabus and mention it out loud on the first day of class to open channels of communication. Including a statement about accessibility and learning accommodations in your syllabus does not just act as a resource for students, but also welcomes discussion and communication, signals that you value diversity and inclusive learning, and normalizes disability and the accommodations process as a part of being a student and as a part of the course.

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[1] For a first-hand perspective from a professor who incorporates UDL see Elizabeth Hamilton, Universal Design and the Architecture of Teaching, Center for Teaching Innovation and Excellence, Oberlin College, October 10, 2016. http://languages.oberlin.edu/blogs/ctie/2016/10/09/universal-design-and-the-architecture-of-teaching/ . Also see Steve Volk, Help One, Help All: Universal Design in the Classroom, Center for Teachign Innocation and Excellence, Oberlin College, September 18, 2017; http://languages.oberlin.edu/blogs/ctie/2017/09/17/help-one-help-all-universal-design-in-the-classroom/

[2] CAST (2011). *Universal Design for Learning Guidelines version 2.0.* Wakefield, MA: Author; "UDL Guidelines" and "Educators Worksheet" from National Centre on Universal Design for Learning, www.udlcenter.org/aboutudl/udlguidelines/downloads; Liat Ben-Moche et. al. eds, "Building Pedagogical Curb Cuts: Incorporating Disability into the University Classroom and Curriculum" Syracuse University Graduate School, 2005.

[3] Adapted from Sheryl Burgstahler, "Equal Access/ Universal Design of Instruction" University of Washington DOIT Center; https://www.washington.edu/doit/equal-access-universal-design-instruction

It is a good idea to repeat your statement aloud in the first class to further normalize accessibility and lower the barrier for students to talk about it too. Yale-NUS' learning accommodations policies and protocols are available at the CTL Website: https://teaching.yale-nus.edu.sg/learning-accommodations/.

4.   *Help Student Plan Ahead*

Give all assignments and course expectations in both written and verbal form at the beginning of the course. Time management is an essential ingredient for students with certain disabilities, as well as those who may be working to support themselves in college and others for many reasons. Students with slow reading rates will have difficulty adding a new reading to their to-do list at the last minute, as will students with vision impairments who need to have documents translated into audio-files. Setting clear expectations for the whole class in advance will make it easier for students of all abilities to plan ahead and to evaluate priorities throughout the semester more effectively. If assignment changes occur after the course has begun, they should be made as far in advance of the deadline as possible. If assignment changes cannot be made far in advance, then try to be flexible in terms of deadline, format, or quality of student work.

5.   *Diversify Formats of Information and Representation*

Consider what barriers might exist for different types of learners in accessing and processing information in your class. If your primary content delivery method is visual, consider complementing that with audio or text-based information. For example, while presenting pictures, graphs, and charts to communicate information or illustrate concepts, also have students describe in words and in writing what they see and what it conveys. Then have students share those descriptions with the class. This has a specific benefit to students with visual and auditory impairments but serves the entire class by developing all students' visual and verbal acuity. Conversely, if you often transmit information in lecture format, consider sharing the transcript of your lecture or using voice to text technology (available from ERT) so that students who may struggle to integrate verbal information can take in the information in an alternate format. This would help students with low hearing or auditory processing disorders, but also those who may be unaccustomed to your accent or to English-based instruction.

6.   *Share Class Notes*

Consider having an assigned note-taker or two for each class session with the responsibility for taking and posting notes for the whole class. This will be useful for students who, due to an attention deficit or processing disorder, find it difficult to take notes while also listening and participating in class. In addition to increasing access to course material for students with certain disabilities, this note-taker system also has the benefit of giving you a means of teaching all students good note-taking skills, which is a key academic success strategy. Additionally, this note-taker system benefits students without diagnosed disabilities but maybe having difficulty following the class for other reasons, such as students unfamiliar with English or who were not taught strong note-taking skills in secondary school. Creating a structured system whereby students share high-quality class notes also promotes diversity of experience as students can see differences in what their peers saw as most central or interesting in a given class.

7.   *Consider Recording and Summary Mechanisms*

Consider diverse recording options, such as video or audio recording lectures, writing key terms on the board, starting the class with an overview of topics to cover, providing lecture outlines, or repeating a student's question aloud for the group before you answer. Providing multiple means of engagement during and after class time is helpful for students who learn in different ways, who may not have heard or seen something crucial to the course that came up in passing, owho may have had to miss some or all of class.

8.   *Allow for Physical Movement*

When possible, give all students permission and even encouragement to do what is needed to succeed during

class. For example, a student with gastrointestinal health problems may need to leave the room once or twice a class. Students with anxiety or attention deficit issues may benefit from occasionally getting up and moving around the room. This can also benefit students with muscular discomfort. Some students may not be able to process information visually and aurally at the same time and need to plug their ears while looking at a graph or artwork under discussion. A student getting up and walking around the room might be distracting the first week or two of the semester, but over time becomes the norm for the entire class. If you are worried about distraction or students missing course information, build-in a break time during the class to give students the chance to get up, stretch, and rest their minds if needed, especially if the class is longer than 1.5 hours.

9. *Don't make assumptions from non-normative eye contact and communications styles.*

You might assume that lack of eye contact or verbal communication by a student implies a lack of interest or engagement with course material. But those students might be highly engaged, and simply have other reasons for exhibiting those behaviours. A student might be avoiding eye contact due to autism-spectrum disorder, or keeping quiet to conceal a speech impediment. If a student is not participating, you might consider asking to meet with them and inviting them to help you brainstorm ways of participating more actively in class. Other mechanisms of participation can include online discussion boards or written reflective essays, if preferable given their needs and your learning goals.

10. *Explicit and Clear Assignments*

Be explicit and clear when giving assignments, explaining what you expect from students, why the assignment is designed the way it is, and how it will be assessed. Without making these implicit elements obvious to all, you risk privileging students from more well-resourced educational backgrounds over students who have not previously had exposure to higher education culture. Communicate assignments verbally and in writing to students.

11. *Consider Untimed Exams*

Two of the most common learning accommodations our students receive are extra time on exams and the ability to take exams in private rooms. Consider whether having exams be timed is important to your learning goals. If not, consider letting all students take their exam with the amount of time they need to complete the work. In some cases, time is a central feature of our discipline or course design. However, for many of us we give timed exams for our own convenience, so we do not need to proctor long exams or find a time all students can be in a room together for an extended period. It, therefore, may be worth considering whether your students could be trusted to take the exam independently, at their own pace. This has the added benefit of not using up valuable in-class time on testing. If you worry about academic integrity, you can have students sign a declaration of integrity and/or assign rotating peer-proctors from within the class.

12. *Allow for Flexibility in How Students Convey Knowledge*

Unless you are dedicating time to teaching students particular modes of communication, you could even give students the option of how they want to present their work – through oral presentations, written essays, or visual representations – or to give students the option to complement traditional essays or exams with more personalized submissions as well.

13. *Give Yourself Multiple Ways of Assessing Student Learning*

To help students progress you need to know how well they are understanding course material. Combining different modes of learning and interaction can help you gauge a wider range of student learning and, of course, help students learn. Try integrating lectures, discussion, small group activities, paired and individual projects, formal debates and presentations with more unstructured assignments, poster and visual presentations, etc.

14. *Prioritize Confidentiality*

Respect the student's privacy and anonymity when they share with you about their disability, or when you know what accommodations they require. Always ask the student's permission before sharing any private details with anyone else. Never mention the student's disability or need for accommodations in class or to other class members without the student's permission. If hosting a guest instructor, inform them of necessary classroom accessibility measures while maintaining students' privacy.

Here are some **additional considerations** to keep in mind for making your classroom inclusive to students of diverse abilities:

Disability is not necessarily a limitation. Though disability can be limiting and may require learning accommodations, assuming a student is more limited than they are can actually be harmful to a student with a disability. All of our bodies work differently, so what is a limitation for one could be a strength for another. And some disabilities lead students to become particularly strong in other areas. For example, a visually impaired student might have cultivated a keen ear for music, and be particularly adept in a ethno-musicology class. A student with dyslexia may pay greater attention than most to words and their structures, making them a particular asset in a linguistics course. There is much stigma and shame associated with having a disability, so it is important to accept students for who they are without assuming what they can or cannot do. Asking, not assuming, is almost always the best course of action. And in fact, asking all students about their strengths and potential limitations can help you maximize their learning experience.

Assume there will be many invisible disabilities in your classroom. Not all disabilities are visible. These may include mental illness, learning disability, cognitive impairment, low vision, poor hearing, or chronic illness. With invisible disability, often a student can appear completely healthy and engaged, but actually be struggling to keep up. Just because someone looks well does not mean that they are. Professors therefore may want to teach as though there are a range of different types of disability in their classes, for example by incorporating visual and auditory material, offering opportunities for review, and reminding students of college resources and policies regarding Medical Certificates and Assistant Dean Notes for those with illness and other challenges and directing students to the Centre for Teaching and Learning if they suspect they have learning disabilities.

Expect new disabilities or accommodations to emerge mid-way through the semester. Disabilities are not permanent features. Disability status can change over time and not all disabilities are diagnosed or developed at birth. Some develop during a person's lifetime due to accident, illness, environmental factors, or age. Mental health disorders are particularly likely to pop up during the college years. If a student reports or invokes a disability or medical issue mid-way through the semester, that does not mean they are making up an excuse to get out of coursework. It is more likely that a new condition has emerged that was not previously present. Additionally, it is common that the same student's accommodations may change over their college career.

Not all students with disabilities or special needs will ask for help. Like other types of diversity, disability is intersectional. This means that the way that disability appears and is perceived depends on cultural context and one's background and other identities. Race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, nationality, and all other categories of identity intersect and overlap with disability in different ways. Some students may have different experiences asking for help, communicating with authority, and claiming accommodations as a necessary accessibility measure. For example, someone from a culture where learning disabilities like dyslexia are not commonly diagnosed or addressed might be less comfortable talking about their condition with faculty than a student from an educational system where many of their classmates received some kind of accommodation. You can make it easier for students to seek your advice, and get appropriate learning assistance, by talking about diversity of ability in positive ways.

If a student is getting medical help, they will still need academic accommodations. Sometimes it is not the disability or illness itself that causes someone to need extra support, but the treatment, including hospital visits, medication side effects, and therapy appointments. We expect students to be responsible for balancing their health and their work, but we can also be mindful regarding students' treatment needs. Especially if a

student is undergoing highly specialized care, it can sometimes be difficult to schedule appointments that do not conflict with academic schedules.

You can help de-stigmatize disability. Talking about disability as one of many dimensions of human diversity, rather than necessarily limiting and unfortunate features of certain individuals, can help de-stigmatize disabilities and make students with disabilities feel included in your classroom and at Yale-NUS. Language can signal your level of inclusivity in important ways. Therefore, try to avoid using disability terms as slurs or negatives, such as "that's retarded," or "stop acting so schizo." When students use these derogatory terms, it will make potentially hurt students feel less alienated if you can pause to gently acknowledge that this language is offensive, and then move on.

Incorporating these accessibility measures in your pedagogy, classroom, and syllabus will positively contribute to all students' learning. With every accessibility measure or flexible pedagogy, all students should be held to the same standard to maintain fairness. Students are responsible for notifying their professors for any unexcused absences, for example, and are expected to complete any make-up work. Accessibility removes the barrier for student learning, but not at the cost of academic rigour or accountability.