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Easy to Implement Strategies for Disabilities in the College Classroom

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The teaching process not only involves content knowledge, but also an understanding of teaching and learning principles with insights about different learning needs (note: not the same thing as “learning styles”). Instructors must understand what pedagogical strategies meet those learning needs. Chickering (1987) delineated seven “good practice” principles, many of which emphasize classroom interaction. Even when lecturing, it’s helpful to have strategies which enable comprehension of and interaction with the material. With increasing levels of classroom diversity, pedagogical strategies that are flexible and responsive to a variety of college classroom contexts and needs are necessary. For students with disabilities in particular, there are a number of easy-to-implement strategies to keep in mind—and at the same time, improve your teaching efficiency and effectiveness with all students in your classroom (not only the ones with disabilities).

Disability and Classroom Diversity

An expansive definition of diversity is one which includes intersecting differences of identity (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender identity, gender expression, sexual orientation, cultural backgrounds), experiences (e.g., socioeconomic status, urban/suburban home residence, refugee and immigrant history), and personal characteristics (e.g., disability status, physical traits, preferences in receiving and demonstrating knowledge, personality characteristics, etc.).

Typically, students with identified disabilities work with an on-campus Disability Services Office to document their disability needs. Here they develop an approved set of accommodations. This is intended to level the playing field in essence of any disability-related needs, and with respect to accessing information in the classroom and demonstrating their learning. These accommodations are shared with faculty who allow for the accommodations to happen. These accommodations do not usually require substantial pedagogical adjustment on part of the faculty, beyond providing material in another modality, making space for access services to occur in the classroom, or providing extra time on an exam. Faculty receive a copy of the approved list of accommodations, and then “allow for” these accommodations to occur. The actual approach to teaching and learning however doesn’t change much; faculty plan

lectures and/or classroom activities, facilitate them, and the course continues apace.

Impact on Active Learning Activities

However, there remain ways in which students with these accommodations have profoundly different classroom experiences. Accommodations allow for access, but with remaining inclusion barriers. With relatively small changes, faculty can improve the experience for these students, and probably for other students who don't need accommodations. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is one approach—where there are multiple options for representing the information you want students to learn, multiple means of students expressing their knowledge, and multiple ways of engaging students' interests and motivations. Tobin and Behling (2018) suggest that faculty adopt a "plus one" approach, where faculty change or add one thing to make their course more accessible and inclusive. With flexibility in mind, clear pedagogical goals (what do you want your students to learn and are there multiple pathways to get there?), and an intentional focus on the presumption of learner variability, there are a variety of ways to successfully implement inclusive learning into your own classroom.

Identify a Single "Pain Point"

First, identify "pain points" with respect to interaction and engagement in your course. Start with choosing a single interaction and inclusion challenge and ponder the barriers that individual students may confront. With that barrier in mind, I suggest three places to start experimentation with UDL principles in practice: Consider whether changes to the physical/perceptual setup of the classroom would help, consider changes to specific assignments, and consider adding the use of tools or technology.

Changes to physical/perceptual parameters of the classroom space. Are there barriers to receiving information and participating in classroom activities?

Consider options such as rearranging seating into a circle or U-shape to improve conversational interaction during discussions. Reflect on visual blocks in response to students seeing information Do you need to make necessary lighting challenges? Are there columns in the way? Attend to slowing down your pacing and not overlapping your spoken message, while also demonstrating visual or projected information (remember to pause).

Changes to assignments. Are there barriers to students participating and completing assignments based on characteristics, such as personality, disabilities, backgrounds, or other diversity areas? Are there alternatives to consider in what can increase inclusion and interaction?

Consider an end-of-term poster session rather than individual oral presentations. Consider options that help manage cognitive load. For example, rather than using a question/answer

format, ask students to first reflect silently, then share with a neighbor, and finally share with the full group. Offer flexibility in assignments and develop a well-designed rubric that focuses on a deeper recognition of the “what” that you want students to demonstrate, rather than the “how.” Add an accessibility criterion to your assignments—require that students provide captioning and transcripts if they submit videos, alt-text descriptions for images, and/or use document formats that are compatible with screen readers.

Add tools/technology. Low- and/or high-tech tools and technology may help accomplish this flexibility in teaching and learning. Consider a collaborative google doc for note-taking during class. If active discussions result in students talking over each other, add a “talking stick” – a soft hand-sized object that can be passed around where students only speak when they are holding the object. Ask student groups to use whiteboards while doing group work in class. Use apps to facilitate group communication, or to facilitate project management within teams.

Key Takeways

These examples highlight a process that starts with classroom diversity and centers on the experiences of students with disabilities, and finally, focuses on what may initially be a challenge or barrier to interaction and inclusion.

By addressing specific challenges and experimenting with small incremental changes to address the barriers, interaction and inclusion in the classroom may improve, not only for the student(s) with disabilities, but also for others. This is not meant to replace accommodations already determined as necessary and approved for the individual student. Instead, this reframes the center of faculty pedagogical responsibility. Through a process of experimenting with specific, individual changes, faculty can respond to barriers they see students experiencing in the classroom, and improve the interaction, engagement, and inclusion of experiences for all students.

Join Sara Schley on Thursday, November 7th at 1:00 p.m. for a live online seminar, **Increasing Inclusion and Interaction: Disabilities in the College Classroom.**

Bio: Sara Schley, EdD, is a professor and director at the Rochester Institute of Technology. Schley is dedicated to increasing access and inclusion of post-secondary spaces for students with disabilities and has created a website for this reason called, “Inclusive Higher Ed Pedagogy.”

References

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