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A Welcoming Classroom



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By James M. Lang | SEPTEMBER 27, 2017

In 1945 a disabled World War II veteran named Jack Fisher petitioned the city of Kalamazoo, Mich., to make cuts in the street curbs in order to allow him and other wheelchair users to navigate the city more easily. Fortunately for Fisher, the son of Kalamazoo's city manager also used a wheelchair, and so Fisher's arguments found a sympathetic audience. Curb cuts were introduced around the city, and thus was born what has become a ubiquitous feature of our built environment today.

In the decades that followed Fisher's advocacy, as curb cuts became more commonplace, it became clear they were not just for wheelchair users. They proved a welcoming feature of the environment for parents wheeling children about in strollers, for senior citizens who had trouble with stairs and steps, for people temporarily on crutches, for bike riders and skateboarders and more.

What began as an accommodation for people with disabilities became a design strategy that had almost universal appeal.

The trajectory of curb cuts — from specific accommodation to omnipresent design feature — is an oft-told story in the literature of Universal Design (UD), which seeks to create and modify physical spaces in ways that take into account the diversity of human bodies and minds. The educational equivalent of that theory is Universal Design for Learning (UDL), which likewise argues that faculty members should take the diversity of learners into consideration up front as we design our courses. And if we do, we will need to make fewer accommodations at the request of specific students, because inclusive design practices help all learners succeed.

For example, if you use videos in your flipped classroom, you should of course provide captioning and transcripts for hearing-impaired students. But it turns out that nearly all students benefit from captioning and transcripts, which allow students to read, search within, and take notes on the video content after they have watched it. According to a national survey of 2,124 students, more than 70 percent of those without hearing impairments used the captioning, mostly as a learning aid.

The college where I teach has seen a steadily increasing number of students requesting accommodations for cognitive, emotional, and physical challenges — a trend that has kept our heroic office of accessibility services working full time on both advocating for those students and helping faculty members understand how to meet the needs.

When a college admits students with disabilities, it has a legal obligation to accommodate their needs. But we should also consider our moral obligation: We owe it to the students we've admitted to make sure they can learn successfully in our courses.

With that in mind, the teaching center I direct teamed up with our office of accessibility services to host an event earlier this fall for faculty. The idea was to invite students who have received accommodations to share their experiences — what helped and what didn't — with professors.

Most of us learn about a student's accommodation request when we receive a very formal-looking letter just before the start of the semester. The letters say students will contact us to discuss their specific needs, but my own experience has taught me that many of them never do. I have received my share of accommodation letters but have had very few students come to me to discuss their needs.

We wanted to introduce our faculty members to the human beings behind those letters. So we put together a panel of students with a mix of disabilities. One student had a visual impairment; a second had a processing issue that made retrieving information from her long-term memory difficult; a third student, who was on the autism spectrum, had challenges that included ADHD, anxiety, and depression.

Happily, a large group of professors showed up, in part because the student speakers had issued personal invitations to some of their instructors. We had perhaps a third of our full-time faculty members in the room when the hourlong discussion started — quite the turnout for a teaching-focused talk in the middle of a Thursday. (Providing lunch helped, of course.)

Each of the students talked a little bit about themselves and their specific challenges before identifying the most helpful teaching practices used by their instructors.

The student with a visual impairment, for example, noted as particularly beneficial for her something all of us would probably recognize as a good teaching practice: writing in black marker on the white board, and doing so in large and legible letters. She said she found herself shut out of a course whenever a faculty member wrote hastily in crabbed script all over the board, or used green markers that were barely legible, even to the fully sighted students.

She explained further that the layout of presentation slides could significantly help — or hinder — her learning. Slides with a massive amount of small text were impossible for her to read and process. She appreciated slides which — like writing in black marker on a white board — had large lettering surrounded by plenty of blank space. It was also helpful for her to have copies of presentation slides beforehand, or made available to her after class, so she could take the time to read and process the material.

In example after example, she and the other students described teaching practices that would have universal benefit in the classroom and that could be adopted without putting a spotlight on students with disabilities.

So if I take a little more time and effort to make my writing large, legible, and organized on the white board, I am going to help the student with visual impairments — but I'm also going to help everyone in the room take better notes on our discussion. If I take the time to create slides with a minimal amount of text or images — and then encourage students to take their own notes by filling in the examples and ideas from the lecture or discussion — I'm helping everyone push beyond simply copying down lecture notes and regurgitating the course content.

Our panelists that day offered some great practical suggestions, and I saw many of my colleagues taking vigorous notes and nodding along thoughtfully. I picked up several new ideas myself for a course I am teaching this semester, and for future courses.

But the most important lesson I took from those students came from a deeper place than any specific teaching practice. The moderator asked them to explain what they most wanted faculty members to know about how to help students with disabilities. A student who had described her need for accommodations in response to multiple challenging conditions explained that what she really wanted was for her instructors to see her as a valued member of the course.

"What we don't want," she said, "is to be made to feel like we are a burden to you because we have requested accommodations. Many of us already have this feeling that we're burdening you, and it really helps if you can treat us like you want us to be in your course. We're not asking for accommodations to make your life difficult, or because we're trying to get away with something. We want to be in your course. We just need your help learning the best we can."

I was glad to be sitting in the front row when she finished speaking, so I could hide the tears that sprung to my eyes after hearing her impassioned plea. Although I like to believe that I work hard to make my classroom a welcoming place for all students, I had never fully considered the burdens of a lifetime spent making requests for accommodations, and how that might weigh on their understanding of themselves and their sense of self-worth.

The theory of universal design for learning does not have universal appeal among college faculty members, as one can see from the debate over the recent case of a prominent scientist who refused to provide electronic lecture notes to accommodate a student in his course.

UDL can seem like one more buzzword to college faculty members who already have an earful of them. And the case for its positive effects can also be overstated: Not every design principle has a positive impact on every learner. We can argue about those cases that seem to create conflicts between the needs of the individual and the welfare of the group.

But I hope we can agree — as a universal principle in the creation of college courses — that we want all students to feel welcomed and to have equal opportunities to succeed in our courses. If we begin our course design with that simple plea in mind, and keep it at the forefront of our deliberations and debates about accessibility, we can help lift the weight of requesting accommodations from the backs of students who already have been asked to bear significant burdens in the pursuit of learning. In so doing, we are more likely to help all students succeed.

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Collegiality and Disability

By Katie Rose Guest Pryal

Accessibility is not a zero-sum game.