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# Inclusive Teaching: Perspectives of Students with Disabilities

**T**HE INCLUSIVE CLASSROOM IS A PLACE WHERE STUDENTS WITH diverse needs and abilities are accommodated in all stages of their learning process; it requires our commitment, flexibility, and creativity from the earliest planning of goals and course design to the consideration of weekly activities and assignments. This article was inspired by one of our students who encouraged her instructors to embrace this pedagogical challenge and who suggested that making small but creative changes could bring positive change: "A university student with disabilities wants to learn like any other student. Learning requires a little creativity and an open mind." The benefit of inclusive teaching to our students is clear. And when students with disabilities are supported and made equal participants in our courses, they enhance the quality of the classroom experience for us, for themselves, and for their peers.

Bringing students into the conversation about inclusive teaching values their voices in creating positive change and encourages student participation in developing best practices for higher education. To underscore the value of student perspectives on learning, this article summarizes student responses from a confidential survey, a collaboration between the Centre for Teaching and Learning and Access*Ability* Services at the University of Toronto Scarborough. This survey invited students registered with Access*Ability* Services to respond to key questions about their learning and to give advice for positive teaching methods that had improved the quality of their learning or that they believed supported students with different learning styles and needs. In this article, we share the results of these surveys and then use these results to make broader suggestions to faculty and TAs beyond our university.

## Best Practices for Teaching: Students' Perspectives

In 2009, Tina, in her role as Director of Access*Ability* Services at the University of Toronto Scarborough, designed a new survey to invite registered students to talk about their learning and classroom experiences at the University of Toronto Scarborough.[1] We (Tina and Nancy) had both offered previous surveys to students registered with Access*Ability*, and we wanted this one to explicitly solicit student responses to survey and write-in questions on their learn-

1. To see this full survey, and our full results, please contact us via email Nancy Johnston < mailto:johnston@utsc.utoronto.ca >

ing environment and on inclusive teaching. We wanted to discover student priorities in learning, especially what worked for them as students with disabilities and by extension, what worked for their classmates with or without disabilities. The survey was conducted in 2009 and again in 2010, and it was answered by a much larger-than-average number of student respondents than previous surveys on similar topics. The student pool was composed of the approximately 300 students who were currently enrolled with Access*Ability* Services. Students enrolled with Access*Ability* Services do not represent all students at UTSC who have disabilities, only those formerly seeking accommodation and other services.

Interestingly, 91 % of the survey group self-identified as having "invisible disabilities." Indeed, the majority of students seeking accommodation at Access*Ability* Services have "invisible disabilities." These may include students who have a learning disability, Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), mental health disability, Acquired Brain Injury, Aspergers (on the autism spectrum), chronic health conditions (e.g. bowel diseases, cardiac disorder, cancer, MS, epilepsy), mobility/functional disabilities (e.g., arthritis, back injuries), hearing loss and/or low vision. To varying degrees and depending on individual learning, students may experience difficulties in the speed in processing information, concentration, memory function, attention, and energy levels.

## The "Inclusive Teaching: Perspectives of Students with Disabilities" Survey

With our survey, we wanted students to reflect on their classroom experiences, answer questions about typical classroom accommodations, and describe what they considered to be successful inclusive teaching practices. Students were also asked for input on teaching strategies that they believed fostered positive change and to encourage a welcoming environment for students with disabilities. We discovered in our survey that a majority of students believed that their instructors had accommodated them above their expectations and beyond formal requests or institutional standards.

Our students suggested that improved communication and accountability were foundations to improved learning environments. They suggested relatively easy-to-implement strategies that might be introduced in planning stages or during the regular teaching of a course. Speaking mostly from positive learning experiences, these students offered teaching strategies that they believed would benefit all students. By identifying the best practices among their instructors, students were advising all instructors to adopt these strategies.

The following sections will expand on their perspectives and explore these and other suggestions.

## Providing a Descriptive Syllabus

"A clear, logical, linked manner is the best way of presenting material for me."

—Student Comment

Perhaps not surprisingly, students wanted to know learning goals, course expectations, and requirements as soon as possible. They preferred a course syllabus that communicated what they should expect in terms of learning goals, and how they should prepare and plan for their discipline-based learning. Several students read the syllabus before the first day in order to review key information, such as our course goals, the required texts, and weekly assignments. A well-organized syllabus, rather than an exhaustive one, foregrounds key learning goals, assignments, and outline expectations. This can alleviate stress and also stimulate student interest in our courses.

Students also praised a syllabus that communicated specific course goals because this encouraged students to make advance arrangements to have other alternative formats for required texts and to read material early or review past course material. They were also more likely to seek advice from advising and access offices or to ask questions in advance. By determining for themselves whether the course is right for them, they gain an added sense of autonomy and independence.

## Creating a Welcoming Environment

"Open invitations to speak with them in their office tells you that they are supportive of your needs."

"When instructors include Access*Ability* Services information on the syllabus, I feel that it reminds me as well as other students that some people need more help than others and that it is okay to ask for help."

"When an instructor is approachable, and provides a friendly learning environment for the students, anyone is able to feel comfortable."

—Student Comments

A majority of students surveyed stated that an accommodation statement signaled a welcoming environment. These students agreed that a positive foundation was created simply by adding a statement about supporting students with disabilities or by an oral invitation to come and talk to the instructor. When instructors paused to read a statement made on the first day or pointed it out in a syllabus, it allayed student fears about discussing their accommodation requests. A statement opens an opportunity for dialogue with students. It also signals our acceptance of the students' rights and helps set a positive tone for the entire class.

We are telling all our students that everyone, including their peers with disabilities, have the right to be respected.

## Inclusive Language

> "Hopefully via being more open about it, we can reduce stigma which makes everyone feel more comfortable."

<div align="right">—Student Comment</div>

Students appreciated an instructor's sensitivity with language about disability and pointed out how negative and colloquial language about disabilities could contribute to their feelings of exclusion and damage their self-esteem. They objected to language by instructors and fellow students that described acquiring disabilities as a "tragedy," and others were offended by the use of unnecessarily colloquial language about mental illness. Access*Ability* Services and other student support offices recommend that instructors avoid using colloquial language about disability and mental health issues, understand that terminology may change, and refer to students first, and their disabilities second (e.g., a student with low vision).

## Breaks and Moderate Pace

> "I have a slower processing speed, so the extra 'silent time' in between comments allowed me to gather my thoughts and formulate what I wanted to say. I felt left out when discussions were held at a fast pace."

> "I've had professors who didn't answer for students when they took too long to answer. They waited patiently and encouraged students to speak up."

<div align="right">—Student Comments</div>

The number one request by students involved formal breaks and a moderate pace. These practices allowed students to preview course concepts and questions and allotted them more time to process during class. Students wrote that a break was an opportunity to consider new ideas, find their place in their notes, review an outline, or ask questions. The common teaching practice of taking a democratic vote in class on whether to take a break or "end a class early," while well-meaning, can backfire when many students, especially students with disabilities, medical conditions, may not want to risk inconveniencing others. One student recommended breaks, which allow the "professors [to] catch their breath" as well.

Students in our survey also praised instructors who used a moderate pace in their lectures, and slowed to repeat key points or add emphasis. Students wanted time to think about questions and by implication, wanted to participate. They praised instructors who waited for all student responses and those who did not react impatiently when students gathered their thoughts.

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# Posting Lectures and Other Material Electronically

> "The majority of my professors have been very understanding and patient with me throughout the semester. I have even had professors print off the lecture notes for me before class just in case I forgot to print them off myself."

> "Lecture notes and slides posted a few days before class [allowed] more time for a student to read them before class. [This] makes you pay attention more and learn."

> "Having visual powerpoints or lecture slides made it much easier to follow material that was discussed in class."

> —Student Comments

The second most frequent request was for instructors to provide electronic copies of lectures and other materials. Students who had difficulties with processing and organizing said they benefitted by previewing lecture outlines or reviewing posted slides. Others used them as an aid for organizing their notes. Most students, especially second language learners, can benefit from previewing definitions, main points, or lecture and class outlines. However, instructors sometimes hesitate to provide electronic materials such as lectures because they are concerned that their students will stop attending class or become passive learners.

One alternative to posting or video-taping complete lectures is to post outlines of upcoming lectures (with key questions or readings highlighted) or to post only a selection of slides in advance or after the lecture was delivered. Students surveyed preferred to read posted lectures or outlines before class as a guide to their learning or to help ground their learning process. Students described how using pre-posted lectures helped them prepare answers or to formulate their questions in lectures, or even to participate in small discussion groups.

# Supporting Class Activities and Scaffolding Assignments

Students praised instructors who used a variety of teaching methods and activities to include a breadth of learning styles and abilities. Best practices for active learning are means to accommodate diverse learning styles and to foreground opportunities for developing higher analytical skills and research methods. All students can benefit from understanding the learning process and breaking down explicitly the steps involved in larger assignments. Similarly, students praised instructors who offered sequenced or scaffolded assignments rather than one heavily weighted large assignment. Each piece builds on the previous foundation. This allows students to take inventory of their knowledge and skills gained in previous assignments and to break larger projects into more manageable chunks. Students described how this method reduced their stress.

# Active Learning in Groups, Field Trips, and Labs

In our second survey in 2010, we added questions about active learning, especially student participation in discussion groups, peer review, and so on, because these activities often require higher peer-interaction or special skills that can generate anxiety for students. These concerns may be based on negative experiences in their past. Students with disabilities may need time to arrange their accommodations and may appreciate developing an action-plan to prepare for activities and assignments.

The following is a summary of student ideas about active learning and additional advice we give to faculty and teaching assistants. Advice from The Washington University Do-It site was especially valuable and is highly recommended for accommodation advice.

| Activity | Inclusive Teaching Practice |
|---|---|
| **Tutorials and Seminars** | Ask for volunteer student note-takers in small tutorials and groups. |
| | Create permanent breakout groups to smooth transitions between activities. |
| | Evaluate the physical class environment for barriers: location of exits, accessible tables, position of furniture, and noise levels (such as fans). |
| | Establish guidelines about participation and state alternatives to in-class writing (after-class responses or posts) |
| | Break down the class task with advice on time needed to complete: for answering questions, for writing or presenting, for group discussion. |
| **In-Class Writing** | Use in-class writing to encourage skills development and practice. |
| | Consider allowing all students to submit some informal writing or discussion points within a set time frame after class. |
| | Allow students to use computers in-class for writing tasks. |
| **Group Work and Presentations** | Outline expectations for participation for all members to ensure ideas are respected and included. |
| | Allow some time in class for student planning, especially defining group roles. |
| | Encourage on-campus or in-class group preparation. |
| | Create online forums for small group discussion and planning. |
| | Investigate library and other space for group meetings. |
| **Field Trip, Fieldwork and Off-Campus Activities** | Communication is key for successful participation of students. |
| | Post early any instructions for future trips and activities. |
| | Review instructions in advance and in alternative formats. |
| | Break down tasks orally and in writing: e.g. suggest time expected for tasks, traveling time, etc. |
| | Seek support from access services to discuss accessibility for off-campus and alternatives to this work when necessary. |
| | Review access to locations: physical access, parking availability, travel accommodations, etc. |
| | Invite students to give feedback or suggestions for future participation. |

# Achieving Success in Higher Education

> "By taking the time to show me different ways of approaching work, instructors have reduced my stress levels and made me feel more capable of achieving success at university."

<div align="right">—Student Comment</div>

We undertook our research to discover what students with disabilities had to contribute to inclusive teaching practices. We also wanted to offer students a forum to critique current teaching practices and to help us articulate concrete strategies for best practices in university teaching. Student perspectives add credibility and weight to our discussions when advising faculty and TAs about how to improve their teaching. Listening to student voices is an essential step to help us all become more responsive to the complexity of student learning needs and to empower students to participate in improving learning.

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