

Kindness in the Writing Classroom: "Accommodations" for all Students

Before I begin I'd like to say that I am not an expert in special education or working with students with learning disabilities, although I have worked with many such students over the years. I'd also like to say that my ideas are probably not mind-blowing, but I haven't found too much written on writing-classroom accommodations for all students.

A September 12, 2015, article in *The New York Times* "Sunday Review" addressed the notion of whether the lecture format was unfair. The writer, Annie Murphy Paul, showed that certain students who sit in lecture-based versus "active learning" classes are discriminated against and thus perform less well than other students (Paul). She pointed out that "minority, low-income, and first-generation students face a[nother] barrier in traditional lecture courses: a high-pressure atmosphere that may discourage them from volunteering to answer questions, or impair their performance if they are called on" (Paul).

This article might just as well have been describing the experiences of students with physical, learning, or emotional disabilities; they are often similarly silenced. I would like to suggest that the typical WAC/WID classroom is actually the perfect model for how "active learning" can and should take place. This presentation seeks to answer the question, "What interdisciplinary approaches to teaching writing promote inclusivity, for differently abled – and all – students?"

Being inclusive means creating assignments that give everyone a chance to succeed. Does it matter what "abilities" students have or don't have, as long as everyone is treated fairly, is given extra time when requested, and is allowed to use a computer, for example? This benefits everyone and singles out no one. So why not "accommodate" all of our students in these ways?

This presentation will examine inclusive writing-pedagogy approaches in the context of six students' academic experiences – to what extent have active learning; universal design; or simply patient, thoughtful teaching affected their experiences? Can't we just teach in a more friendly and humane way?

It was this article as well as my discussions about college with a new friend (who ended up becoming one of my survey "subjects") that started me thinking about these matters. I met this young woman, I'll call her "Donna," in my exercise class. As I got to know her, I learned that she was in her

early '30s and had taken dozens of classes at two local community colleges over a period of several years in an attempt to earn her associates degree. She explained that she had multiple learning and anxiety issues, and she had trouble focusing and participating in the classroom, taking notes, reading effectively, writing coherently, among other challenges. She had spent her high school and college career struggling, being called "stupid," feeling like a failure, and having zero confidence in herself academically and otherwise. Somehow, she persevered and had gotten almost to the point of achieving her goal, but she said there was only one course that stood between her and the degree. Her nemesis was Comp 2. She had taken it multiple times and had either dropped it or outright failed it.

At the same time, we had discussed how our mutual exercise class was helping with some of her focus issues, and at one point, I innocently asked, "Why don't you try Comp 2 again?" Long story short, she did. She ended up in a class with a kind and patient instructor who was in tune with students with disabilities like Donna's – not to mention that the professor understood how to work with the accommodations that were legally due to her – and Donna passed Comp 2 and got her associates degree this past May. Her confidence has soared, she is taking additional classes (including Math, another nemesis, and even creative writing courses), and she is now enrolled in the local four-year college to pursue her bachelor's degree.

Donna's story reminded me of some of the stories of my own students, and I realized that the reasons for these students' successes focused on the students' persistence and their professors' abilities to support them. It also occurred to me that many of the so-called "accommodations" that we are asked to provide for our students by them and our Disability Support Services offices are so simple and easy that we might consider whether they could be afforded to all students, in some ways.

In my subsequent research, I learned that what I have been thinking about is called Universal Design for Learning (UDL) or Universal Design for Instruction (UDI), or, simply, Universal Design. While these concepts were designed with learning disabled (or differently abled) students in mind, Danielle Nelson, in her article on UDL and first-year composition in *The CEA Forum*, points out that "As a praxis, ... UDL attempts to address all students' needs, not just those with disabilities, and suggests that rather than focusing on specific disabilities and interventions, teachers should ensure information is accessible in many different ways" (6). This makes sense to me, and it's what I wanted to study further.

My particular interest is not simply in what we as teachers of writing across the disciplines could do – we are certainly in charge of our own pedagogy, and much of what we do naturally follows UD principles. I also wondered what students involved in such classrooms might think of it. In particular, I wondered what students with diagnosed disabilities would think about allowing all students to have accommodations that were designed with differently abled students in mind, especially accommodations that the students might have worked hard to secure for themselves. I also wondered how students without diagnosed disabilities would feel about being afforded certain accommodations. It just seems to me that we need to ask the students.

Before we get to that, I'd like to mention briefly what "accommodations" we're really talking about. In his book, *Universal Design in Education: Teaching Nontraditional Students*, Frank Bowe reminds us that "universal design challenges us to think again about who should be responsible for accessibility... Universal design asks us to look at courses, texts, schedules, and other aspects of education: Is it really necessary for teachers to present the great bulk of our instruction via speech? Isn't there a way, or aren't there several ways, for us to offer much of the same material visually...? Of course, the obverse obtains as well: Must we assign only printed materials for student reading? Can't we find audible (spoken) versions, too, and make those available for people who need or prefer them?" (p. 2, Intro/Exec Summary).

Bowe (and others) describe seven (or nine or 10 – it varies across theories and practices) principles for Universal Design, but they basically boil down to a few simple ideas: "present information in multiple ways... offer multiple ways for students to interact and respond to curricula and materials... provide multiple ways for students to find meaning in the material and thus motivate themselves ... make good use of ... course web pages..." (p. 2-3, Chapter 1). His book was written in 2000 – today, of course, this means accessible course management systems and other digital technologies.

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Several years later, a study was conducted by McGuire and Scott with focus groups "to explore the validity of UDI as a new construct ... Instructional methods described by the student participants that make up a 'good' college course included: clear expectations, organizational materials such as course outlines and study guides, information presented in multiple formats (e.g., lecture with visuals), affirmative classroom experiences, associating information with aspects of real life, frequent formative feedback, supportive

of diverse learning needs, and effective assessment strategies ... The authors noted that participant reports regarding attributes of high quality college courses ... parallel the guiding principles of UDI" (9.)

How might these ideas translate into the writing classroom? In a perfect academic world, here's a partial list:

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Offer all students the ability to have a laptop or other typing device in the classroom for informal writing as well as for in-class tests (if you really must have the latter), provide extensions on both in-class and out-of-class writing assignments when requested, minimize lecture in the classroom, offer extended time on essay tests, provide feedback on essay assignments, provide clear/written out essay assignments, furnish teacher-provided class notes (when relevant). As I mentioned previously, these are generally agreed-upon best practices in writing classes. I am sure that those in this room have many more to share.

So, now, back to the students. I am in the process of conducting a survey-based study, but because of my own confusion with my university Institutional Review Board's semantics (I think the term "expedited review" should be changed), my study has not been completed. But I do have some preliminary material to share. The study will formally survey 6 students, with varying degrees of learning disabilities – or not – who have experience in writing classrooms in high school and college. They are all people whom I know personally, so while I have not been able to formally administer the survey yet (this should happen next week), I have had informal conversations with all of them about these issues. Thus, I can share some general ideas, but not direct quotes.

Generally speaking, the students seem to have no real problems with making so-called accommodations available to all students. While the logistics of some of these accommodations could be difficult (one student describes that perhaps not every student can get preferential classroom seating or alternate-site testing), the idea of creating academic situations in which students can do better on their writing assignments makes sense to them.

Interestingly, the students' concerns seemed to focus on the ways that non-learning-disabled students might take advantage of some of these accommodations. The most common concern is that, if all students were allowed to have laptops in the classroom, they could take advantage of the opportunity to, for example, look up answers to questions that they should

know from the reading that they should have done, or engage in even less productive work, like scrolling their social media sites or engaging in online shopping or checking their fantasy sports teams. I do have an answer to that one, which I could share later if time permits.

Another concern that one student had centered on the notion of leveling the playing field. He questions whether the “level playing field” that some accommodations are designed to provide would, indeed, still be level if everyone got the accommodations. Even with his physical disability, when he uses the computer, he types slowly – it’s part of his fine-motor-skills problem. If others without that disability are also allowed to use the computer, they would potentially type faster than he or others do and thus could write more in the same amount of time. If essay length were valued by teachers or scorers, that would then give the non-disabled student a further advantage. But then perhaps he could get more time.

Yet another concern focused on the notion of extensions. One non-LD-diagnosed student wondered whether blanket extensions are always helpful. To explain, she pointed out that extensions that are given a day or two before an essay is due because several people asked the professor for an extension are offputting. In her case, she gauges her other work according to assignment due dates. If she has worked on that paper because it’s due Friday and then finds out Thursday she has more time on it, that can be upsetting if, for example, she found she had given less attention to another class or another assignment because she had the Friday due date on the essay. If she had known earlier that she would have had more time, then she might have been able to give better time to other projects or assignments or meetings or clubs or whatever her other commitments are. I have a feeling there is a good answer to this concern, but I’m not sure what it is.

On the other hand, the students who had been diagnosed with one or more learning or other disability said they liked the idea that, if everyone were given accommodations, it might be less obvious that they were the few in the class with the so-called disabilities. A few of them described feeling embarrassed, at first, by being highlighted (either intentionally or unintentionally) by a teacher endeavoring to make their accommodations available to them.

I will be very interested to see what the students type (or hand-write – I’ve had one of my prospective respondents ask me if she can hand-write her answers) in response to my open-ended questions about their experiences with accommodations and LD students in writing classes.

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I also consulted the literature for the student perspective – most of what I found was from LD students who were commenting on their experiences. I was particularly struck by Nick, an LD student who, when asked about dos and don'ts for teachers, pointed out the following:

“I guess there's numerous dos and don'ts [for writing teachers], but probably the number one don't would be to look at [students with learning disabilities] differently – because a student usually is uncomfortable with their disability anyway, and any time a teacher almost looks down upon them and says, 'You don't have to do this quality of work because you have a disability,' that, in my mind, says that they don't think that we can do the work, so therefore they're not making us do the work. Therefore, they set a lower standard, and that perpetuates a continuously low quality of work. I see that happen continuously in high school as well as college...” (149) From *Learning Differences: The Perspective of LD College Students*, by Patricia A. Dunn, found in *Disability and the Teaching of Writing: A Critical Sourcebook*, Lewiecki-Wilson, Brueggemann, Dolmage, eds.

This is a very important perspective, and one that should make us pause and think about how we deal with our expectations of all of our students in the writing classroom.

And this is how I'd like to end. I'd like to suggest that there are ways of making accommodations available to all students that are still deferential to differently abled students. And they might even help the non-diagnosed LD student, which could be an excellent unintended outcome. My ideas are based on a few important premises, though, and I realize that not all of us are in the same places in our teaching careers, in our programs, and in our institutions. This is also something we can discuss.

These ideas require that: **[SLIDE]**

- 1) WAC/WID/writing classes are small (no more than 20 people).
- 2) Most students have laptops or other mobile devices – or access to them.
- 3) Many students are comfortable with technology.
- 4) We, as teachers, are aware of our own disabilities, biases, pet peeves, hang-ups, and are willing to work with them – or let them go, if appropriate.
- 5) We value kindness – we are willing to help students learn and succeed rather than expecting them to do it alone.

- 6) We want to reflect and improve.
- 7) we want to reach more students.

I have learned just through the process of this research that I must re-think some of my so-called accommodations. I thought they were so great, but maybe they're not.

Finally, I would like to suggest that if we can be kind, inclusive, and understanding – while still challenging our students – we can help our students learn through writing. And we will become better teachers in the process.