

How Making My Teaching Accessible Made My Teaching Better

Last year in this newsletter, I addressed the topic of disability in higher education when I suggested that we approach [trigger warnings as a disability issue](#). Here, I'm continuing the topic, taking on accessible teaching strategies.

Disability studies was my field of research for nearly a decade. But it wasn't until I had a visually impaired student in my classroom that my teaching finally became accessible. And the remarkable outcome of the changes I made to my teaching was this: making my teaching accessible made my teaching better—for all of my students.

Accessibility vs. Accommodation

As a teacher, it can be easy to feel put upon to have to accommodate the needs of a student with a disability. You have your way of teaching, and it works for you. You're good at your job. Then, suddenly, a student shows up who is hearing impaired, visually impaired, cognitively impaired, or what have you, and suddenly, you must accommodate that student's impairment.

At least, that's what it seems like from the outside.

In reality, you have students with disabilities in your classes all the time. Many students elect not to seek official accommodations. Many students do seek accommodations through student services, but they elect not to tell their professors out of fear of engendering bad feelings. Contrary to the "special-snowflake" theory of "the kids these days," it's unusual for a student with a disability to want special treatment. They just want to be able to get by, just like everyone else.

The difference between "special treatment" and getting by like everyone else is the difference between "accommodations" and "accessibility." As I explained in a [previous piece](#), "'Accommodation' shifts the burden to the person with disabilities. Accommodation requires a person with a disability to interact with a gatekeeper, to ask for something extra, and often to prove that she deserves accommodation in the first place—that she is 'disabled enough.'" The very word, "accommodate," implies that the world is basically doing a favor for the student with a disability. Or worse, doing something required by mandate.

Accessibility, [as I explained](#), "means that 'accommodations' are integrated into a space and are not particularized to an individual—but rather created for our society as a whole." Accessibility should be our goal as teachers, not accommodation. Accessibility requires a change in mindset—and a change in teaching tactics.

Universal Design

The goal, in our courses, is what is called "universal design." The North Carolina State University [Center for Universal Design](#) has great resources on the topic. Uni-

versal design, according to the concept's founder Ron Mace, "is the design of products and environments to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design."

Universal design is the goal of accessibility. As NCSU's center explains, "Universal design benefits people of all ages and abilities"—not just people with disabilities, although it benefits them too.

How My Teaching Changed—For the Better

After my visually impaired student let me know about her disability, I asked her to tell me what sorts of things I could do to help her have a better experience in my class. For a moment, she stood there in silence. Apparently, professors rarely asked her for her wish list.

She told me that because she couldn't see the whiteboard, describing what I was writing on it would be helpful. Even better would be having access to my lecture notes. She would need handouts in PDF form rather than printed out on paper, and ideally in advance of class, so she could read them using her laptop. These requests seemed so eminently reasonable to me. And they also got me thinking about ways I could integrate her requests into my teaching. I mean, wouldn't everyone do better if they could read the handouts before class? Wouldn't everyone prefer to have a PDF copy they could access whenever they needed to, rather than having to keep up with a paper copy?

I considered her whiteboard request. What happens to all of that information that I sketch on the whiteboard during class? I've had more than one student come up with a cell phone to photograph the board to reference later, preserving the graphical representation of our class discussion. I wondered, was there an alternative to the whiteboard that would allow for our class discussions to happen in real time, but be preserved afterward in a more useful fashion than a photograph? Better yet, could this alternative be accessible?

A Universal Design Alternative to the Whiteboard

The first day of class, I projected a blank document from my laptop onto the room's projection screen. At the top of the document, I'd typed the class meeting date and the name of the class. I told the class that this document would be our "Class Record." I told them that for the rest of the semester, at the end of each class meeting, I would review the Class Record for errors and completeness, and then post it as a PDF to our course management system for all to have.

Our class discussion began, and I proceeded to type. I couldn't draw diagrams, so I had to get more creative with my use of words. Also, it was hard at first, typing while running a class discussion. But it wasn't any harder

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That's accessibility—integrating the needs of all students into your teaching, including the students whose disabilities you will never know about.

Jones Pilots Today's World of Religious Scholars, *continued from page 6*

religion. There are many female members, and Jones says they possess great excitement about academic careers in areas that intersect with religion—noting women are spiritually open to change.

Some UTS students had a bad experience with church prior to attending UTS, but within the welcoming environment find a new sense of faith, which they then bring into their communities. There is quite an interest in chaplaincy—in hospitals, schools, agencies and prisons. That is one of the purposes behind the programs in Buddhism and Islam, because hospital chaplains need a degree in divinity to be certified.

Some students become teachers—everything from elementary to higher education—and others take leadership roles in nonprofit organizations. There are, of course, activists, many of whom work in social justice organizations.

“The sky is the limit,” says Jones. “You can even become president of a seminary.”

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than learning how to write on a blackboard or whiteboard. Honestly, after a few classes, it got easy. After all, I don't have to look at the keyboard to type.

And my students really got into it. “Put that on the Class Record!” they would request when I said something they found particularly helpful during class. They would take their own notes, and then supplement those notes with the record.

I started using the record to prepare my lectures. I would type up an outline of the class that I'd prepared in advance, and then fill in the blanks as we went through class. And at the end of every class, I'd review, fix typos, explain a few things that needed further information and then post the PDF. And if I forgot to post that PDF, I'd receive no fewer than five emails from students politely requesting I do so. In short, all of my students loved the Class Record.

Better still, the Class Record cut way down on follow-up questions. Students knew to check the Class Record first. Most of the time, a question about class was answered in the record. Students who missed class knew they needed to get notes from classmates and download the Class Record. In the end, the Class Record actually decreased my workload as a teacher.

I'd made the ephemeral, messy whiteboard into a readable, accessible, reproducible document, and all of my students benefited—including the ones with disabilities who'd never told me about their disabilities and never will. After that semester, the Class Record became an integral part of my teaching.

That's accessibility—integrating the needs of all students into your teaching, including the students whose disabilities you will never know about.

—KRGP

Women on the Move, *continued from page 10*

at Richard J. Daley College IL to associate director of athletics/senior woman administrator at Hamilton College NY.

- **Kimberly Morris** moves from director of financial aid at Southern Crescent Technical College GA to director of financial aid at Fort Valley State University GA.

- **Sherri Mylott** moves from VP of university advancement at Mary Baldwin University VA to VP of university advancement at the University of La Verne CA.

- **Dr. Kelly Oaks** moves from associate vice chancellor for student affairs and dean of students at the University of Hawaii at Hilo to assistant VP in the Office for Equity and Accessibility at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University.

- **Dr. Hari M. Osofsky, JD**, becomes dean of Penn State Law and the School of International Affairs, beginning July 1.

- **Dr. Susan L. Parish** becomes dean of the Bouvé College of Health Sciences at Northeastern University MA, beginning March 15.

- **Dr. Heather L. Petcovic** becomes interim associate dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Western Michigan University in addition to her duties as an associate professor of geosciences.

- **Julie Peterson** becomes chief business officer at Kennesaw State University GA.

- **Megan Pierson, JD**, moves from senior associate provost and senior university counsel to chief of staff for the president of Stanford University CA.

- **Dr. Polly Prewitt-Freilino** moves from director of institutional research and assessment at Wheaton College MA to director of institutional research and effectiveness at Mount Holyoke College MA.

- **Dr. Kaye E. Reed** becomes director of the School of Human Evolution and Social Change at Arizona State University.

- **Dr. Lisa Lewis Schaeffer** becomes vice chancellor for student affairs at the University of North Carolina at Pembroke.

- **Julie Seppala** becomes new VP for finance at Michigan Technological University in addition to her duties as treasurer for the board of trustees at the school.

- **Dr. Christine Spencer** becomes dean of the Yale Gordon College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Baltimore MD.

- **Denise Stephens** moves from university librarian at the University of California, Santa Barbara to vice provost and university librarian at Washington University in St. Louis MO, beginning July 1.

- **Tiffany Turley** moves from manager of women's services and resources to Title IX coordinator at Brigham Young University UT.

- **Dr. Kimberly White-Smith** moves from associate dean of the College of Educational Studies at Chapman University CA to dean of the LaFetra College of Education at the University of La Verne CA.

- **Dr. Mary Julia Wornat** becomes dean of the College of Engineering at Louisiana State University.

- **Xiaojing Zu** moves from associate director for user and access services to director of the New York University Shanghai Library.