INTRODUCTION TO ACCESSIBLE EDUCATION

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Do students learn as much as they can from your teaching?

Accessible Education\(^1\) is the process of designing courses and developing a teaching style to meet the needs of people from a variety of backgrounds, abilities and learning styles. Just as there is no single way to teach, people learn in a variety of ways; using different instructional methods will help meet the needs of the greatest number of learners\(^2\).

The Educators' Accessibility Toolkit provides guidelines and tips on how to make your courses and your teaching more accessible to students. These tips are in line with research on best practices in teaching and learning\(^3\).

What are the characteristics of Accessible Education?

- Takes into account a variety of student characteristics, including ethnic background, race, abilities, disabilities, age, gender, language abilities and preferred learning style.
- Does not compromise academic rigour.
- Is a proactive and inclusive way of teaching and designing courses and curricula.
- Removes barriers to learning before they can affect anyone.
- Reduces the need for specialized accommodations.
- Identifies and clearly expresses the essential course content, while recognizing that students can express understanding of essential course content in multiple ways.
- Is consistent with universally recognized principles of good teachingiv.
- Is consistent with the spirit of the Accessibility of Ontarians with Disabilities Act, 2005.

**Advantages for educators**

- Often improves student learning.
- Reduces the work associated with arranging individual and specialized accommodations.
- May improve student engagement as it reaches a broader audience, which could lead to improved course evaluations.

**Advantages for students**

- Less time spent on figuring out individual accommodations and more time focusing on course content. Greater inclusion of students from a variety of backgrounds and abilities, which could lead to increased student retention.
- Students are not singled out for being different.

Accessible Education is based on the social model of disability, as opposed to the medical modelv.
Medical model versus the social model of disability

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Medical model</th>
<th>Social model</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Disability is a deficiency or abnormality.</td>
<td>Disability is a difference.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being disabled is negative.</td>
<td>Being disabled, in itself, is neutral.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disability resides in the individual.</td>
<td>Disability arises from interactions between the individual and society.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The remedy for disability-related problems is cure or normalization of the individual.</td>
<td>The remedy for disability-related problems is a change in the interactions between the individual and society.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The agent of remedy is the professional who affects the arrangements between the individual and society.</td>
<td>The agent of remedy can be the individual, an advocate, or anyone who affects the arrangements between the individual and society.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As an educator, you have no responsibility to ensure accessibility; that is the job of the experts.</td>
<td>As an educator, you are responsible for creating an accessible environment where all your students can learn.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Accessible Education aims to reduce dependence on the accommodation approach and move toward inclusion⁷.

Accommodation approach versus Accessible Education approach

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Accommodation</th>
<th>Accessible Education</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Access is a problem for the individual and should be addressed by that person and the disability service program.</td>
<td>Access issues stem from poorly designed environments and should be addressed by the designer.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access is achieved through special accommodation and/or retrofitting existing requirements.</td>
<td>As much as possible, the system or environment is designed to be used by all.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access is reactive.</td>
<td>Access is proactive.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access is often provided in a separate location or through special treatment.</td>
<td>Access is inclusive.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access must be reconsidered each time a new individual uses the system, i.e. is consumable.</td>
<td>Access, as part of the course design and curriculum, is sustainable.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
More resources on Accessible Education:

Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST): http://www.cast.org
Disabilities, Opportunities, Internetworking, and Technology (DO-IT Centre):
http://www.washington.edu/doit/
National Center on Universal Design for Learning: http://www.udlcenter.org
University of Guelph, Teaching Support Services, Centre for Open Learning and
Educational Support, Universal Instructional Design Project:
http://www.tss.uoguelph.ca/uid/
UDL-Universe: http://enact.sonoma.edu/udl

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i The term Accessible Education has been adopted to capture the value of two frameworks in improving
the accessibility of university education: Universal Instructional Design (UID) and Universal Design for
Learning (UDL). Both were informed by the architectural concept of Universal Design, which 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.” (Center for Universal Design, The Principles of Universal
Design).

“UID is not just about accessibility for persons with a disability – it’s about truly universal thinking –
maximizing learning for students of all backgrounds and learner preferences while minimizing the need
for special accommodations.” (University of Guelph, UID Implementation Guide).

“UDL is a set of principles for curriculum development that give all individuals equal opportunities to learn.
UDL provides a blueprint for creating instructional goals, methods, materials, and assessments that work
for everyone – not a single, one-size-fits-all solution but rather flexible approaches that can be
customized and adjusted for individual needs.” (Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST), Universal
Design for Learning).

ii Nilson, Linda B. (2010). Teaching at Its Best: A Research-Based Resource for College Instructors (3rd

iii University of Guelph, UID Project, and the National Centre on UDL, Research Evidence.

iv Chickering and Gamson (1987). Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education.

v Table is adapted from Gill, C. (1994). Two Models of Disability. Chicago Institute of Disability, University
of Chicago, cited in University of Ottawa, Access Service – Student Academic Success Service. (no date)
A guide for professors: Minimizing the impact of learning obstacles.

vi Ibid.