Video Transcription: Maïa's Testimonial

So my experience as a student: I didn't really know I had a learning disability until I was in the second year of my undergraduate degree. Up until that point my experience had been where I had done well, I had been able to manage in classroom and during exams, but I always felt that the final grade that I would receive was not reflective of what I was actually capable of doing. And what was happening was that I was never able to complete my final exams, because it was lack of time, not enough time to process the information and finish all of the questions completely, and so I would be docked many, many marks, while I wouldn't fail to exam per say, but it would bring my overall mark much, much lower than it should be.

I still managed to pass all the classes, because if there were assignments or presentations throughout the year, I compensated knowing that I was likely going to do poorly on the final exam, and in my second year of my undergraduate degree, I recognized that it was becoming too much of a detriment. It was too difficult, and so I said I need to look and see if something is going on, because what feedback I would get was when I would write essays or short answers, I was always given the comments of "we sort of understand what you are saying, but it is not flowing, the organization isn't there. And when you write something you need to reread it to yourself, and see if it makes sense to you and ask yourself if it made sense"; and that to me was very frustrating as a comment from professors or teachers or even my parents, because to me it always made sense. It didn't occur to me that it didn't make sense to other people.

So I went and I got formally evaluated, and it was determined that I had a form of dyslexia, where specifically that was my disability – it was an inability to organize my own thoughts in a coherent enough manner, that it came across in a way that made sense to other people. The content was all there, and that was always recognized, but it was really the structure and the organization. So once that was determined, I felt really validated, because it made me feel that I had known that this was an issue, but really this was proof that there was an issue, and it was not just me saying I'm trying but I am really not getting it.

And so, I went to get the support I needed from the university, things like extra time were really helpful in exams, I was also able to use a computer, so if I was writing anything I was able to cut and paste versus having to go back and erase and reorganize my thoughts. It was much easier to just get everything done and then go back and organize things again. And then once those necessary supports were in place, I was able to do very well, and to achieve at the level that I felt was reflective of my abilities, and so you saw my grades skyrocket from being a B student to being an A student. And then it was a struggle to get my GPA back up to where I wanted it to be, but I was able to do that.

And then, I have always continued to receive those supports because they were supports that I know that I need, so I will either approach professors and or I will go to the Access Service or I will go to a Centre for Students with Disabilities and say "how can I work, what can you offer me, in terms of support?" and I have also learned, over time, to compensate for those discrepancies because I am aware of them and I have learned to develop strategies to say I need to catch myself on how I am doing this and how I am writing. So I often ask people to read my work under the pretense, knowing that the first draft is probably going to be very disorganized and say you need to give me feedback. I need to always have more time for my exams, but writing was really the major difficulty that I had, but I've overcome it

and now I am achieving at a level where I have gotten into a doctoral program, so it's going very well.

I think I have done both, I have been on the student side of it, and also as an instructor. And I think the important thing, and it is a challenge within certain subjects and certainly the size of classes make it a challenge. But I think that even little things, such as posting your slides online and making all of your documents available online in an accessible format, giving students options on assignments and providing them with alternatives, so you say you can give a presentation that is worth 25% or you can write a paper worth the same value, speaking of the same topic, just in a different way so that the student who has, for example, social anxiety, and really struggles to present in class, has the option of doing the exact same task, in a different format that they are comfortable with, through a written assignment.

I think in class, as an instructor, I've always tried to provide diversity in the way that I have taught. I understand that some students need that typical lecture format. So when I teach I tend to try give a formal type of lecture for part of my class with a PowerPoint, I expect them to have read the material ahead of time or be somewhat knowledgeable about the topic, and then I will spend another portion of the class in some sort of discussion so that the students that need to discuss, in order to learn, have the opportunity to do that. And then I try to have some sort of hands on activity or task, so that the students who need to be able to, sort of, play with the material, per say, can do that and learn through doing versus just sitting in a classroom. Because it is a challenge, but I think, like I said, there are challenges certainly with different subjects, with different types of courses, and the size of classes doesn't always make that possible.

But, I think that if there are alternatives and a certain flexibility in the approach to the instruction, I have always had an approach where I am open to my students feedback, if my students are telling me that I have given them too many things, and I look at it and say ok, yeah. I will take that feedback into consideration, maybe not for that term, but for future considerations and make modifications.

But, I am always open to trying to make it as student-centered as possible. Even when the content needs to be given in a certain way, if they want to spend more time on a particular topic it is more important to me that they have that opportunity through discussion boards, through more discussion the following class as a follow-up, that giving them different kinds of materials – video materials, audio materials, resources that they can go and look into if we don't have enough time in the classroom to actually address all of the things that they want – but I think that the flexibility is a very important thing, and just again, if you have an approach with the students where they can see you as being supportive and open to that feedback, it will reduce the amount of stress.

A lot of times, and sometimes profs say, you know, "we can't give you an alternate form of assessment but how can we work with you, or how can do this for you?" and just again that openness and that approachability makes it a lot easier for the student to say "well how can we work on this?" versus seeing it as a barrier, and seeing it as the professor said no, therefore there is no other alternative and I am put in a position where I am definitely not going to succeed. So long as students feel they are being heard, and that their feedback is being valued, and taken into consideration, it will help them tremendously.