Creating an Accessible Learning Environment

I. Introduction

There are a number of simple steps that faculty can take to create an accessible and inclusive learning environment for all students. Implementing a few of these small changes in your course can significantly improve the learning of all students, not only those with disabilities. They can also reduce the need for individual accommodations on assignments or adjustments to the course structure. Included in this tip sheet are (1) simple inclusive practices that can be implemented without significantly impacting the syllabus design; and (2) more in-depth inclusive practices to consider when designing or revising a course syllabus. All of the suggestions are informed by the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and the framework of anti-oppressive pedagogy.

The foundational premise of UDL is that one of the primary barriers to learning is an inflexible, one-size-fits-all curriculum. While disabled students are most visibly impacted by this approach, all learners are affected. No single mode of representation, expression, or engagement will provide equal access to all learners. Therefore, UDL guidelines for best practice suggest that faculty offer a variety of methods for (1) representation of course content (lecture, web, text, audio); (2) engagement with students (discussions, reflections, presentation, activities); and (3) expression of student knowledge (e.g. give the options of: a timed exam, a take-home exam, or a research paper).

Anti-oppressive pedagogy addresses how forms of social marginalization act as major barriers to learning. A student’s learning is significantly inhibited if they do not feel safe, seen, and valued in a learning environment. Faculty can use their position of power to foster a supportive learning space for students by actively working against norms, values, and stereotypes that might marginalize or exclude certain students. This means holding oneself and others accountable for honouring and respecting the diverse identities and experiences of all students in the broader course materials and in everyday class interactions.

It is useful to remember that creating a safe and accessible learning environment is an ongoing commitment and learning process. Below are a few places to start.

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1 The idea of accessibility is informed by a social model of disability, which sees disability as emerging not from the individual body, but from the body’s interaction with a system that was not built for it. In this framework, it is not a person’s body or mind that needs to be “fixed” or “accommodated,” but a social and political environment that serves as a barrier to full participation, justice, and equality. For example, steps and curbs are mobility barriers for a wheelchair user, not the wheelchair user’s body.

2 For more information, visit: University of Ohio “Fast Facts for Faculty” and University of Vermont “Examples of UDL in Practice.”
II. Easy Steps You Can Take Now to Create a More Accessible Course

Physical Accessibility

1. Wheelchair accessibility. Clear pathways in the classroom and your office so students with wheelchairs, canes, or crutches can easily navigate the space. If you are in a large lecture hall with steps, make yourself easily available to students for whom steps are a barrier.

2. Scent-reduced and nut-free policy. Notify your class ahead of time and include guidelines in your syllabus on having a scent-reduced and nut-free classroom. This benefits students with allergies, autism, and chemical sensitivities to name only a few. Here is a brief description of scent-reduction you can use: “Please refrain from wearing perfume, cologne, hairspray, or anything scented. While bathing, please do not use scented soap. If you smoke, please brush your teeth, wash your hands, and ideally change your clothes before coming to class. Please do not wear clothes that have been cleaned with scented detergent or dryer sheets. For more tips, please read this great link about why and how to be scent-free.”

3. Disability and mental health resources. Include information on the syllabus about available campus resources for disability and mental health. SFU also has materials for faculty on how to support students who may be in distress.

4. Lecture slides. Share the lecture slides (and notes) before class. This helps students with vision impairments access the materials through translation software, as well as others such as EAL students. You might also consider recording the lectures.

5. Fonts and colors. In lecture slides and class materials, work to make the materials dyslexic-friendly by using a dark text color, sans-serif font (like Arial, Tahoma, or Calibri) of at least 12-14 points for handouts and 24 points for slides, and a lightly colored background (not white, green, or red, but off-white is fine). Use bolding, boxes, or bullet-points for emphasis instead of italics or underlining. Avoid block capitals.

6. Captions. Include closed captions with video clips. This benefits students who are deaf or hard of hearing, have learning disabilities, or are EAL speakers.

7. Multiple formats. Make course content available in multiple formats (such as in multiple languages; as a reading and a video; an image and an audio description).

8. Schedule frequent breaks in the lecture/seminar.

9. Flexible office hours. Give students the option to meet in person, via skype, canvas chat, group conferencing, or by phone.
Social Accessibility

1. **Territory acknowledgement.** Respectfully acknowledge that SFU is on unceded Coast Salish territories, and work to support indigenous students and knowledges. This means that non-indigenous instructors must actively confront their own place in these lands and in relation to indigenous peoples. For an excellent examination of how and why this is critical, read this piece from âpihtawikosisân.

2. **Preferred names.** Do not verbally read attendance off of your list of registered students provided by the university. There may be sensitive reasons why a student might go by a different name from the one on your class list. For example, a student may be trans or gender non-conforming, have a preferred English name, or a safety concern. Instead of calling roll, have all of the students fill out an index card to be handed to you with their preferred first name and given last name. You can check this against your class list later.

3. **Gender pronouns.** One way to create a safe and inclusive environment is to ensure that correct pronouns are being used and respected, and no one – including yourself – is making assumptions about gender. Tell the class your gender pronouns (e.g. “My pronouns are she/her/hers or they/them/theirs”) to set an example. Then, on the same index cards, have the students write out their pronouns. Then, when everyone introduces themselves, give them the option of sharing their gender pronouns, but do not make it mandatory.

4. **Check-ins.** Use simple check-in activities to create a sense of support and community. A short example can be found here.

5. **Community guidelines.** Work with the class to come up with guidelines for engagement to foster a safe and supportive learning environment. Here is a sample set of guidelines by SFU faculty member Sheri Fabian.

6. **Diverse voices.** Incorporate course materials and engage in teaching practices that cite, center, and support diverse authors and perspectives (race, gender, class, sexuality, culture, and ability). This includes working to contextualize and de-center dominant Western systems of knowledge and belief. You actually can do this in the sciences with great results!

7. **Actively support systemically marginalized students.** Acknowledge and interrogate your own social location (nationality, race, gender, class, sexuality, etc) and actively work to foster a safe space for marginalized students to communicate their concerns and experiences. Encourage critical thinking, generous communication, and reflection on everyone’s complex relation to social and political dynamics. Setting community guidelines helps to facilitate this, as does intervening and having a dialogue when other students make racist or homophobic remarks. Do not put the burden on minoritarian students to do the difficult work of making these interventions themselves or educating you or the class about anti-oppression. Do not ask any students to speak on behalf of a group of people. For other suggestions on other ways to support minoritarian students in the classroom, read this excellent piece by Ellie Ade Kur from University of Toronto.
Assignment Accessibility

1. **Multiple formats for assignments.** Provide format options for each assignment [e.g. a critical reflection essay can be a text, a video, or an audio recording]. This encourages more active, engaged, and diverse approaches to learning and opportunities for success. (It also breaks up the monotony of marking!)

2. **Make-up opportunities.** Give students the opportunity to drop the lowest grade, make up or revise an assignment, and/or make up for an absence whenever possible.

3. **Flexible deadlines.** Many students have good weeks and bad weeks. Offer students flexible deadlines. This could be a two-day to one-week window for handing in assignments, rolling deadlines, or a contract in which students come up with their own deadlines for the semester.

III. Next Steps for Designing an Accessible Class

1. **Fewer weighted assignments.** Offer more assignments that are not weighted heavily. Avoid making any single assignment worth more than 30% of the grade. Do not rely to heavily on a student’s performance on a single day [e.g. exam or presentation].

2. **Diversify types of assessment.** Assessments should draw from a range of modes of expression [e.g. writing, speaking, drawing, making, presenting] to demonstrate the learning of course content. Provide a range of different modes of assessment in the course [e.g. presentations, group projects, videos, essays, podcasts, quizzes, etc.] none of which is worth more than 30%. For each assessment, offer multiple formats [e.g. a timed exam, a take-home exam, or a research paper; a presentation, a video, or a podcast].

3. **Participation and attendance.** Offer multiple options to demonstrate participation beyond showing up and speaking out. Some options for participation include: volunteer note-takers, small group work, coming to/calling into office hours, online posts during class [like todaysmeet.com], or discussion questions.

4. **Electronic texts.** Work to assign course texts that are available electronically, and ideally that are available electronically through the library. This eliminates financial, visual, and other barriers to accessing the course materials.

5. **Modifications.** Check in with the class and make modifications to the syllabus based on student feedback during the course [e.g. adjusting readings, deadlines, assignments, or topics to reflect the students’ needs or interests]. If students raise concerns about materials or assignments that advance or reinforce oppressive ideas, do not be dismissive or defensive. Work to engage with, understand, and address their concerns.

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