

Probing Academia Barriers to Accommodation

Recorder Notes *(submitted by Peter Smith)*

Betty opened the session by describing the role of a social worker, especially one who taught at the college level. She set the tone by describing a situation she had encountered with a totally deaf student who needed two interpreters to come to class with him. She found that the rhythm of an interactive class was disrupted. Some students became angry because they felt they were not getting the education they expected. Presentations were taking too long.

She then split the session attendees into small groups and asked them to come up with definitions of the terms accommodations, inclusion, physical limitations, and equity. The groups reported back as follows:

Accommodations: Teaching supports and services a student may require to successfully demonstrate learning – e.g.,

- captions on videos
- extended time or quiet atmosphere for test taking
- large screen television with the software package JAWS
- materials provided by publishing companies like audio textbooks. Note that you have to ask for these.
- device to help deaf persons take blood pressures

There are several problems that need to be faced. First of all, an instructor does not know before the semester begins what accommodations are going to be needed, so she needs to scramble to acquire them. One solution, if the LMS allows, is to email all the students before the semester and ask what accommodations they need and also to encourage students without disabilities to be prepared to accept those that have them, pointing out that it can be a great learning experience to put themselves in the shoes of a person needing accommodations.

Sometimes, safety concerns may limit accommodation. One participant had experience of a student with one arm enrolled in a culinary arts course. It was too dangerous for her to be chopping food. Also, older students may not fit into desks or may not be able to stand for periods of time.

Cultural diversity may require social or emotional accommodations. It is important to look at every student as a person and not as a disability. We want every student to learn.

Inclusion: making the learning experience available to all students. Make sure no student is isolated. Students with disabilities must by law be educated with those who are not disabled. Inclusion is about the connection between people. All students need to be physically, socially, and emotionally part of the group. Each person has some kind of disability and students should learn acceptance in Pre K or Kindergarten.

There are students who refuse to participate in group work. They claim that their learning style is one of isolation. Evidence has shown that all students can learn using all learning styles, although some learn better when their preferred learning style is engaged. Instructors should vary their classes to engage all learning styles and encourage all students to try to understand other learning styles, but no student should be allowed to isolate himself from group work. Team roles are helpful here. Betty described a “humanistic” learning style which she claimed would allow all students to bloom.

Instructors are not trained to accommodate and include students with disabilities. Every institution has a Disability Support office that can provide assistance when asked. There are also programs where you can experience what a disabled person is facing, i.e., wearing a blindfold, or blocking ones ears, or using a wheelchair.

Sometimes talkative students monopolize conversation in a group, forcing shy students to become hitch-hikers. One way to combat this is to give the shy student significant information in a problem solving activity that is not given to the rest of the group and asking her to share it quietly, so the talkative students realize the need to listen to the rest of the group.

Sometimes, the teacher has habits that detract from learning. A good way to discover these and also to discover things about the class that hinder learning is to do a mid-course assessment. It is important to ask students to be honest in their assessment and promise that you will make changes if possible. Sometimes it is best to word the assessment for the purpose of improving the course for the next time it is taught. If the teacher knows about his quirks it helps to be open about them. It is important to gain rapport with the class and listen to their input.

Sometimes it helps to have a colleague attend your class and do a peer review assessment. Faculty should collaborate more, like we have experienced during this conference. Unfortunately, some people have been burned by opening up to colleagues, and so are leery of collaboration

Physical Limitations: inability of some students to learn due to physical handicaps, such as poor eyesight or hearing, inability to move easily, to read or write well, etc.

Equity: All individuals have the right to be treated equally.

The last two topics had to be truncated due to lack of time.