

Easy ways to incorporate insights from disabled university students to enhance accessibility for all students

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In summer 2022, I led a research team that explored the access experiences of students with disabilities at Western via a survey that gathered 83 responses supplemented by 15 open-ended interviews. While we did not aim for a representative sample, we did get survey responses from every Faculty on campus and every level of study. Students shared rich experiential accounts of their access experiences inside and outside the classroom. For those who want to learn more, we published two short overviews of our research findings as [How accessibility for disabled university students can benefit all students](#) (in The Conversation) and [Engaging anthropology to understand the experiences of disabled university students](#) (in the Canadian Anthropology Society's newsletter).

Here I draw on what we learned from student voices to propose some easy ways to make teaching more accessible. These practices were selected because students with disabilities highlighted their positive impact, many other students could also benefit from their use, and several of them can be adopted without a significant impact on instructor workload. I start with the easiest and finish with a few suggestions that take some additional effort (although they may not be as difficult as they seem).

Note that the purpose of this document is to suggest ways to deepen accessibility and inclusion in teaching by encouraging instructors to start anywhere, with any practice that seems feasible in the context of their own circumstances. Many instructors are already using some of these practices but may be interested in learning what these practices mean to students.

Simple ways to enhance access in teaching

1. Provide information (like instructions) in multiple formats

It is a common practice to post assignment instructions (for example) on the course website, but then to elaborate on them in class, providing additional guidance for those present. Why might you consider posting this additional guidance in a document or short video? Disabled student research participants told us:

“Sitting in a classroom I cannot listen well because I cannot stim, and it is sensory assault, so I miss half of everything anyways.”

“My ADHD leads to me looking distracted when I'm paying attention; in smaller classes it can be harder to focus if I'm too busy trying to look like I'm paying attention.”

“I try my best to make it to class, but sometimes it just isn't physically possible.”

Students highlighted the importance of having access to information in another format even when they are present in class. Students whose first language is not the language of instruction also benefit from being able to go back over the instructor's explanation—in fact, probably all students do.

2. Provide lecture slides to facilitate notetaking

Posting lecture slides before class allows students to follow along more easily and organize their notetaking. Even providing a simple outline that allows students to identify when the instructor is moving on to a major new point or section of the lecture can help. Students told us:

“Some of my professors don't provide slides, and that makes it a lot harder to follow along/find my place if I get distracted. The professors that do have slides are very helpful. They don't know about my diagnosis, but I think it makes a big difference to me.”

“I struggle with dexterity and writing; if you are going to speed through the slides, please post them... as I likely could not keep up with my notetaking. If you refuse to post the slides, then please make sure you proceed at a pace that allows me to write my notes.”

As with many of these suggestions, this also helps students who are learning in a second language.

3. Use accessible formatting for documents and websites

Students using screen readers—who are not just students with visual impairments—benefit from incorporating basic accessibility features in documents and course websites. Students also highlighted the accessibility barriers when this is overlooked. For instance, inaccessible practices include:

“If the PowerPoints are not posted online or if the contrast is not sharp enough for me to read.”

“Posting slides as PDFs (PowerPoints allow me to export the text directly, PDFs do not).”

Simple accessibility features like using headings, providing descriptive text to link to websites (rather than “click here”), and providing image descriptions can enhance accessibility considerably. To see if your document headings generate a legible outline, open “View” and then click “Navigation Pane” in Microsoft Word (this can also help in ensuring a logical flow of topics when composing the document). Be aware that accessible formatting is erased when you convert a document to PDF by using the “print to PDF” function but is retained if you “save a copy” in PDF format. Use the accessibility checker in Microsoft Word to identify inaccessible features of a document. Turn on transcription in Zoom. In video recordings, add edited captions.

4. Use a microphone for in-person classes

Students reminded us that the microphone is not for the instructor's benefit (although it may help to avoid vocal strain)—it is for the students. Where a microphone is available, please use it without asking if students need you to do so, something they may be reluctant to disclose.

Amplifying your voice can help students who are D/deaf or hard of hearing, those with attention issues, those who have classmates who are making noise around them, and those whose first language is not the language of instruction, among others. In addition, students who are registered with Accessible Education can access the code to connect assistive devices or headphones to the classroom microphone. In other words, if you see a student wearing headphones in your lecture, they may be using them to hear you—not to avoid hearing you.

5. Always provide a break in classes longer than one hour

Students shared all kinds of reasons they might need a break during a long class, whether it is an in-person class or a lecture on Zoom. They might need to stretch, use the washroom, check their insulin, get a snack, refresh their vision, get some fresh air. All of these helped them refocus on learning after the break. Some students also emphasized the importance of predictable timing of breaks so they could pace themselves and their attention.

Next steps: Accessible practices that involve more effort

Some of the following practices that enhance access may be manageable for some instructors, in some kinds of classes. Enrollments, instructor workload, teaching assistant support, and the kinds of assignments in the course will shape the viability of adopting these practices.

6. Multiple ways to demonstrate learning and to participate

Students highlighted the benefit of having more than one way to demonstrate their learning. One emphasized how much they appreciated “Flexible opportunities for participation, i.e., equally allowing students to write a reflection, send an email, speak in class, speak privately to the instructor.” Some instructors are also using a “choose your adventure” format for assignments, offering students choices in how they can demonstrate they have met the learning outcomes—for instance, by writing an essay, doing a presentation, recording a podcast, or in some other format.

Our disabled student research participants also highlighted the difficulties they faced when participation was assessed based on the *appearance* of paying attention. Students with ADHD or autistic students, as well as those with social anxiety, felt especially disadvantaged by these practices.

In synchronous online learning, students appreciated being able to participate with or without their camera on, and to choose to contribute using their microphone or in the written chat. Given the recent finding that [some kinds of students feel more comfortable participating via text-based chat than in person](#), you might even consider opening a Zoom call during an in-person class to facilitate a participation option for those in the classroom (see also item 8 below).

7. Flexible deadlines

One of the top-rated accessibility practices in our survey was flexible deadlines. There are a wide range of ways to incorporate some flexibility in deadlines and assignments, which may work for specific kinds (and enrollment sizes) of courses and particular kinds of assignments. They are more difficult to incorporate into large enrollment courses where the assessments are primarily exams. However, if we can build in some more flexibility to courses where they are an easier fit, this could ease the pressure on students as well as on the Academic Counselling staff.

To incorporate some flexibility in submission deadlines for assignments, instructors might consider adding a no-penalty grace period of a day or two that all students can draw on as needed. I have also had success with a “late days bank” for writing assignments (with a few late days “deposited” at the start of term) that all students can “withdraw” from by reporting this on a Microsoft Form with no need for explanation or documentation. This mechanism has the advantage of generating an excel sheet with the information all in one place, unlike the more

cumbersome Self-Reported Absence system that involved multiple emails and require effort to track. (In other words, this decreased my workload rather than increasing it.) Students appreciated the opportunity to have more autonomy in managing their time and learning.

A relatively easy and common way to incorporate flexibility in assignment completion requirements is to drop the lowest grade(s) among a group of small exercises or brief quizzes.

In thinking about how to operationalize what we learned from our research with disabled students, I found lots to think about in an article on [Implementing Flexible Deadlines to Improve Student Learning Experience](#), which may of interest to others.

It is worth keeping in mind, however, that there is a risk of access friction in incorporating flexibility. What makes a course more accessible to some students (say, with episodic disabilities that can flare up unpredictably) may make it less accessible to others (say, with ADHD). Unlimited flexibility may be difficult to manage for instructors and students alike.

8. Hybrid course delivery (in-person ++)

By hybrid delivery I mean incorporating additional options to access the learning materials when students cannot attend an in-person course.

The pivot to online teaching in some periods of the pandemic involved rapid development of our skills in and familiarity with teaching with technology. One of the motivations for our research project was to find out from students with disabilities what their experience of the pandemic pivot had been, and what practices they would like to see continue into the future. We were very struck by the student who told us: “My grades improved so much during the pandemic primarily due to it being the first time I had real access to all of my course material, and not just the classes I was able to make it to.”

Students were very grateful when they had opportunities to keep up with learning even when they couldn’t attend class in person. One student said “Sometimes I have an unexpectedly bad day and can’t come to class; on those days it was really nice to be able to attend lecture from home, even just live streaming the lecture really helped me and made me feel less stressed. It is stressful not be able to make it to class one day and then miss the entire lesson.” Another told us that “The option to Zoom in from home on a chronic pain flare day was awesome.”

We learned from our research that even students who attended lectures in person benefited from being able to go back over a posted recording of the lecture to reinforce their learning. A student with severe social anxiety found they had difficulty focusing during class, so preferred other ways of accessing course material when possible. Another student told us: “The ability to rewind & relisten has saved me... so much trouble.”

We also learned that students with ADHD may struggle with the slow pace of in-person lectures (where instructors often proceed slowly to ensure everyone is keeping up, and often repeat themselves), which does not match the processing speeds of these students. When they had access to a recorded version of the lecture, they might relisten to it at 1.5 or 2 times the normal speed, which helped them stay focused on it.

While hybrid delivery sounds onerous, some of our colleagues are finding relatively easy ways to incorporate this into their teaching. One way is to turn on audio record when they start a PowerPoint presentation, to record their voice over the presentation for subsequent posting. Others are turning on Zoom when they start their lecture, to allow students to join remotely and/or to record and post the lecture after class. For the latter, it is important to request permission [to record to the cloud rather than to the local computer](#), so that you don't have to wait at the end of class session for the recording to be processed.

Western now also has a group of technology-equipped classrooms to enable what the Centre for Teaching and Learning is calling STIO—Simultaneous Teaching In-person and Online. Incorporating truly high-flex course delivery takes some additional preparation both to learn to use the technology and to design active learning exercises that can be completed by students regardless of their mode of joining the class session.¹ (Note that there are also many other resources on the [Centre for Teaching and Learning website](#) to enhance accessibility in teaching.)

One important take-away from our project is that most of our student research participants have non-apparent (invisible) disabilities, so we may not realize which students in our courses are disabled. This is a good reason to deepen accessibility in a general way, rather than to focus on individual accommodations. Another reason is that, while we learned about the importance of these teaching practices from students with disabilities, many of these practices make our teaching more accessible for a wide range of students, including second-language students and those combining study with family responsibilities. The pandemic made many of us more aware of the whole student, in their often-complex circumstances—another insight to hold on to as we move forward. The specific practices outlined in this document were also selected with instructor workload front and centre alongside student access needs.

Thanks to the 83 students with disabilities from across Western who participated in our research; the research team members (USRI students Kate Mahoney, Sam Schneider and Anika Sebudde, and project co-lead Andrew Walsh); and Social Science Assistant Dean (Student Experience) Wolfgang Lehmann, for his feedback.

¹ . I was the only instructor from the Faculty of Social Science who participated in the first CTL instructional skills course on STIO in spring 2023 and would be happy to share what I learned with anyone who would like to chat about the possibilities.