

‘What can I do to help?’: Postsecondary students with learning disabilities’ perceptions of instructors’ classroom accommodations

Margaret M. Quinlan¹, Benjamin R. Bates² and Maureen E. Angell³

¹University of North Carolina at Charlotte, USA; ²Ohio University, USA; ³Illinois State University, USA

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This qualitative research report adopts a critical pedagogy perspective to examine the provision of classroom accommodations for postsecondary students with learning disabilities. Although instructors in the United States are bound to abide by disability rights laws, we also believe instructors can act in ways that allow students to feel comfortable in disclosing their disabilities and in requesting and accessing accommodations for these disabilities. We engaged the voices of 10 university students living with learning disabilities through a series of semi-structured interviews. These students offered a variety of statements on the ways that their disabilities were accommodated or not by their instructors. We classified these perceptions into three kinds of accommodation perceived by university students with learning disabilities: non-accommodation, formal accommodation and accommodation for all students. We discuss the implications that these types of accommodations have for pedagogy and offer recommendations for effective techniques for accommodating for all. We hope the voices of these students will serve to enhance communication between students with learning disabilities and their professors.

Accommodating students with learning disabilities is a real and growing concern in postsecondary education. The percentage of postsecondary students with learning disabilities ranges from Jarrow’s (1987) estimate of 35% of the student population to Rothstein’s (2006) more accepted estimate of one in every 11 college students. As the number of students with learning disabilities attending colleges and universities increases, it becomes increasingly important to connect services and accommodations with students with learning disabilities (Ofiesh, Hughes and Scott, 2004). Despite this need, Vogel, Leonard, Scales et al. (1998) found that only 0.7% of enrolled students with learning disabilities had

identified themselves to institutional staff. As a result of this underreporting, only a small portion of university students with learning disabilities use support services (Hartman-Hall and Haaga, 2002; Kurth and Mellard, 2006).

Although there is a clear gap between the need for services and utilisation of services, much of the literature discussing why these postsecondary students do not seek accommodations assigns responsibility to the student; students’ failure to seek assistance becomes the reason for poor performance. According to Brinckerhoff, Shaw and McGuire (1992), accommodation laws in the USA are written such that postsecondary students are responsible for disclosing their disabilities to an institutional representative before they can access services.* Indeed, American staff and faculty are proscribed from asking students if they have learning disabilities, and they cannot provide disability accommodations until students request them. Even if asked, some students may choose not to disclose. In addition to legal restrictions, advocates like Skinner (1998) and Lock and Layton (2001) insisted that university students with learning disabilities become self-advocates, assigning them the responsibilities of providing documentation, requesting accommodations and communicating with others about their disabilities. Although faculty members report willingness to accommodate postsecondary students with disabilities, many claim they lack sufficient understanding of specific learning disabilities and the ways of making appropriate accommodations (Cawthon and Cole, 2010). Although American faculty perceptions of students with learning disabilities (Griffiths, 2011; Jacklin, 2010) and of factors affecting students’ academic performance (Pearson, 2007) have been examined, US students with learning disabilities’ perspectives on postsecondary faculty are less discussed. Experiences of postsecondary students with learning disabilities in

* Our study took place in the USA; however, other countries have similar laws to protect individuals with disabilities. For example, the UK’s Special Educational Needs and Disability Act, the Australian Disability Discrimination Act, France’s Law 89–486 and similar laws across the Anglophone and Francophone states require schools, colleges and universities to make ‘reasonable provisions’ or ‘reasonable accommodation’ to ensure people with disabilities equal educational opportunities. Moreover, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities establishes disability accommodation in education as a human right, and 92 nations have signed on to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization Salamanca Statement that calls for the accommodation of special needs in education.

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Australia (French and Herrington, 2008; Ryan, 2007), Canada (Dietsche, Chambers, Drea et al., 2008), Finland (Poussu-Olli, 1999), Greece (Stampoltzis and Polychronopoulou, 2008), New Zealand (Seccombe, 2007), Scotland (Doughty and Allan, 2008), and the UK (Gorard, 2008; Jacklin, 2010) have been reported, but a similar report of US students would be a helpful supplement. To support accommodation of learning disabilities, this qualitative research report examines ways in which instructors accommodate students with learning disabilities. Although instructors are bound to abide by disability rights laws that make the choice to disclose the responsibility of the student, we believe that instructors can create environments in which students feel that seeking accommodation is a choice they can make. To support these claims, we begin by outlining a critical pedagogy that requires teachers to demonstrate and invite space for accommodating difference. Then, by engaging the voices of 10 university students with learning disabilities, we demonstrate how instructors create this kind of environment or fail to do so. After outlining methods for engaging these students, we present three types of accommodation recognised by these students. The first kind is non-accommodation. The second is formal accommodation, a type of accommodation that we will place in conversation with the law. The third type exceeds the law by enacting a classroom space that accommodates all students, not just students with disabilities. Finally, we offer some conclusions about what instructors can do in university classrooms to best afford students this latter type of accommodation.

Making space for difference

Once US students with learning disabilities are enrolled in universities or colleges, they must disclose their disabilities to their institutions to initiate support services. Unfortunately, many students with learning disabilities have trouble negotiating institutional regulations and instructor norms about disclosure. University students with disabilities seldom express satisfaction with their ability to communicate their needs and desires to staff and faculty (Hartman-Hall and Haaga, 2002). Individuals with disabilities are described as relatively unsophisticated communicators, often lacking basic social skills (Braithwaite and Thompson, 2000). Yet, even the most interpersonally competent student with a learning disability faces challenges with disclosure, such as tensions between the desire for privacy and institutional expectations of disclosure (Braithwaite, 1991), dealing with nondisabled individuals' discomfort and uncertainty (Braithwaite, 1992) and dealing with others' over-helping behaviours (Thompson, 1983).

Because the student does not know how an instructor will respond, current discussions of accommodation that make the student responsible for disclosing disability fail to account for the fact that the student takes a significant presentational risk when disclosing. In deciding to disclose, the student with a learning disability places himself or herself into a group that instructors have long looked down on and discriminated against (Greenbaum, Graham and Scale, 1995). Despite the significance of disclosure of disability as a relational event and the risk that accompanies

such disclosure, the actions and attitudes of instructors as a way to facilitate or inhibit disclosure of disability have rarely been addressed. The missing factor in much of the discussion about student disclosure of disability – and subsequent accommodation – is the instructors and how they participate in educational environments that allow or disallow seeking accommodations.

Because this choice to disclose is imbricate in a system where instructors wield power over students, yet are themselves regulated by institutional policies and laws, a turn to critical pedagogy may help us understand how instructors can enact environments of accommodation for students. In its simplest form, critical pedagogy is a teaching approach grounded in critical theory (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1999). The critical pedagogue helps students challenge domination through a process in which individuals are in a constant state of learning and unlearning, reflecting on and evaluating traditional understandings of schooling. In turn, the students' engagement with domination reveals to instructors their own participation in or resistance to power structures. Through these processes, teachers and students become aware of their own oppression and begin to strategise resistance (Nainby, Warren and Bollinger, 2003).

Although educators since Dewey (1916) have argued that 'the educational process is one of continual reorganizing, reconstructing, [and] transforming' (p. 59) students, more recent educational philosophers have emphasised the need for this reorganisation, reconstruction and transformation to promote social justice. Unlike Dewey, who believed that an educator could become a neutral arbitrator allowing growth, Freire (1970) argued that teaching is a political act requiring educators to focus on creating equity within schools to change systems of oppression within society. Freire stated that, for sociopolitical change to occur, it is 'necessary that the weakness of the powerless is transformed into a force capable of announcing justice' in the classroom, and that, to assist this transformation, educators must recognise themselves as 'transformative beings and not beings for accommodation' of the status quo (p. 36). To adopt this transformative approach, Freire urged a turn to critical pedagogy in the classroom.

Freire's (1970) critical pedagogy is needed because, as Giroux (1999) wrote: 'Schools are more than instructional sites; they are cultural sites that are actively involved in the selective ordering and legitimization of specific forms of language, reasoning, sociality, daily experience and style' (p. xxiv). A classroom in which critical pedagogy is enacted can become a place to disrupt domination and social order, but a classroom in which such pedagogy is absent is more limited in its transformational space, and may, in fact, support domination and social control (Warren, 1999). If educators view themselves as agents of transformation seeking social justice, their actions should be evaluated to see whether and how they are supporting this mission.

Critical pedagogy theorists have only begun to look at how these identities are performed in lived classrooms (Fox,

2010). A few researchers have examined the accommodation of differences in race (Cooks and Simpson, 2007), sex/gender (Johnson and Bhatt, 2003) and sexuality (Gust and Warren, 2008) and how they are intertwined into course content and interpersonal interaction to allow space for transformation. We are unaware, however, of any critical pedagogy theorists who have examined accommodating disability in classrooms. Although students with disabilities are lumped into a larger category of ‘at risk’ students, this lumping together may disregard the need for different forms of accommodation to create a transformative classroom (Warren and Fassett, 2004). Similar to how other forms of identity have been studied, we see disability as a form of identity that is political and situated (Warren, 1999). Critical pedagogy approaches in the areas of sexuality, language and race, among others, have found that accommodating these factors also empowers students, enhances learning and promotes social justice (Gust and Warren, 2008). In our study, then, we adopted a critical pedagogy perspective to see whether, and, if so, how, university students say their professors make accommodations and create a space for transformative learning.

Participants and procedures

To access the classroom environment and to engage the voices of postsecondary students with learning disabilities, the first author conducted semi-structured interviews with undergraduate postsecondary students at ‘Heartland State University’ (a pseudonym) in the USA. To participate, participants had to meet four criteria: (1) have a diagnosed and documented learning disability registered with the Disability Services Office requiring accommodation; (2) be at least 18 years of age; (3) be a full-time student enrolled at Heartland State; and (4) have verified average or above-average intelligence on standardised intelligence tests (to separate the experience of individuals with learning disabilities from those with intellectual disability). After Institutional Review Board approval, we emailed a recruitment letter to all students registered with learning disabilities at the university.

Ten students participated as interviewees in this study. Six were male; four were female. Participants’ ages ranged from 19 to 29. All students identified themselves as White people. Students were enrolled in several different programmes offered at Heartland State. Three participants were studying education, two were studying communication arts, two were enrolled in science programmes, and three were participating in applied/technical programmes. On average, participants reported having been enrolled at Heartland State for 4 years, with six participants reporting that they had completed 2-year degree programmes from community colleges before enrolling at Heartland State. We collected interviews until theoretical saturation was achieved, and no new categories of theories were identified (Charmaz, 2006).

All students except one had been diagnosed with a learning disability before enrolling at Heartland State; however, four had to be retested once they entered the university to update documentation for registration. Participants reported a range of learning disabilities, and nearly all reported mul-

multiple types of disabilities. Nine said they had a reading/writing disability, and two were identified as having math disabilities. Two participants had short-term memory disabilities, and four reported an additional attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) diagnosis.

Data for this study were collected through individual in-person semi-structured interviews. Because we agree with Harter, Japp and Beck (2005) that stories help individuals make sense of themselves and others in the world, we saw the interview process as a way to collect student narratives about their interactions with their instructors. The first author conducted all the interviews. Each interview lasted 1 to 1.5 hours, was audiotaped and transcribed.

At the time the study was conducted, the first author was a graduate student at Heartland State. She was also registered with the Disability Services Office as a student with a diagnosed learning disability. Not only did this characteristic motivate the study, but, by being aware of the risk that her subjectivity might lend an inherent bias to the study’s outcomes, the first author was better able to co-construct narratives with the interviewees about their positive and negative interactions with instructors because, as indicated by Somers (1994), disclosure of shared characteristics allows for freer storytelling and a greater sense of comfort for the participant. The first author began by disclosing her learning disability to the participants in her initial email contact and at the beginning of each interview. She asked all interviewees a common series of questions about their experiences at Heartland State, their interactions with Disability Services Office personnel and positive and negative experiences with disclosing their disability status to instructors. Following these questions, the first author asked the participants if they had recommendations for Heartland State or for instructors in general. Finally, the interviewer thanked the interviewees for participating, and the interviews ended.

The first author transcribed all the interview data. As recommended by Creswell (2002), the first author listened to each audiotape while reading the transcript to ensure accurate transcription. To adjust for potential biases on the part of the first researcher due to shared disability status, the second researcher evaluated all statements for internal consistency (i.e., whether the participant contradicted her own story), and the third researcher evaluated all statements for external consistency (i.e., whether the transcribed statements corresponded with the recorded interview). To further ensure rigour, an independent researcher not associated with the project conducted an audit check to ensure that the interview protocol was consistent across interviews.

Data analysis procedures followed a constant comparative method (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). Each author identified emergent themes and categories within the themes (Creswell, 2002) as well as common and recurring response patterns, relationships and conceptual associations within the data. After comparing readings and collaboratively determining common themes, to ensure confirmability of

the interview data, as recommended by several researchers, the first author engaged in respondent validation and member checking to confirm or clarify the researchers' initial interpretation of the data and to seek respondent validation of the findings. All participants agreed with the researchers' initial interpretation of the data and gave their permission to report their interview comments.

Findings

As we analysed the interview transcripts, three themes emerged from students with learning disabilities' discussion of instructors' efforts to accommodate their disabilities: non-accommodation, formal accommodation, and accommodation for all.

Non-accommodation

The rarest theme was 'non-accommodation'. Although institutions of higher education mandate accommodation of students with disabilities and their learning needs, the students we interviewed indicated some instructors enact a non-accommodative approach to learning disabilities. For example, Vladimir, a 22-year-old education major diagnosed with ADHD, told us that, 'sometimes, when you meet a teacher for the first time, they go over their syllabus and my class is going to be like this, and you need to do this. Sometimes they might come off strong and you might think they are not as nice and not as understanding' of individuals with learning disabilities. Vladimir claimed that teachers who foregrounded rigid policies would be perceived as unwilling to accommodate. When instructors create a first impression of rigid non-accommodation, their actions can undermine even the best-intentioned university or college policy. We call this non-accommodation because these instructors all but tell their students that they are neutral regarding accommodations: no one gets them. In these cases, instructors may be asserting their power to shape their own classrooms by resisting administrative and legal dictates regarding accommodations. At the same time, though, the choice to privilege 'rigour' over access provides instructors with flexibility only by enacting power over relatively weaker students and in a way that may limit the success of students with learning disabilities. Although non-accommodation may demonstrate rigour, it may also intimidate students who need accommodations.

A second kind of non-accommodation is more insidious. In this non-accommodation, the instructor acts so as to deny the existence of the student's learning disability. In doing so, the instructor refuses accommodation because s/he claims there is no disability to accommodate. Gabrielle, a 29-year-old who, after 10 years of college, had decided to study speech-language pathology, alluded to non-accommodation when she described her experience. She said, 'When I told her I had a disability, she was still nice, but . . . like I said, she thought I put myself down.' To demonstrate this rejection of her learning disability, Gabrielle reported this conversation:

'Gabrielle: I have a disability and I need extra time.'
'Instructor: No, you don't have a disability. It doesn't define you.'

'Gabrielle: No, I am just letting you know I have a disability and I need the extra time.'

Gabrielle then reported that 'she hated hearing me say that. It's the type of person she is.' The power to define oneself is often viewed as the starting point for individual liberation, but Gabrielle saw the power of self-definition as a means of denying access to accommodations. It was not clear whether the instructor was hostile to students with learning disabilities or simply did not believe Gabrielle had one. Regardless, the effects of this non-accommodation are the same. If the reason is hostility, these actions may tell Gabrielle that accommodations will not be provided because individuals with disabilities are to be excluded from higher education. If the reason is disbelief, this instructor tells Gabrielle that accommodation will not be provided because she does not need it. Either way, accommodation is denied.

Although non-accommodation is rare in our data, when it surfaced, it had a strong impact. Both Vladimir and Gabrielle reported that non-accommodation made them more reluctant to disclose their learning disabilities. More common than non-accommodation, however, was formal accommodation.

Formal accommodation

We define formal accommodation as the enactment of accommodation in higher education as mandated by relevant US laws (Zirkel, 2009). US higher education institutions are required to provide 'reasonable' services so that qualified students with learning disabilities will have equal access to academic programmes. Academic accommodations are made on an individual basis, and the institution has the flexibility to choose appropriate accommodations. These alterations allow students with learning disabilities to complete the same assignments as other students; they do not alter the content of or performance expectations for assignments (Hadley, 2007). To gain access to these accommodations, a student must document the need for services based on the student's current level of functioning in educational settings (Thomas, 2002). Although these accommodations are mandated by law, they are also stated in the Heartland State *Faculty Handbook*.

The most limited formal accommodations noted in our study were perfunctory statements that accommodations would be provided. Ned, a construction management major, aged 25 and in his seventh year of undergraduate studies, indicated the way most of his instructors had addressed disability. He said, 'A lot of times on the bottom of syllabus if anybody has learning disabilities contact ____ and it gives you a number. It doesn't say come up and talk to me after class, and basically I will help you through the class'. Ned's statement reveals how basic formal accommodation can be. Formal accommodation does not require individual attention or valuation of the student as an individual learner; it merely needs to refer students to resources that will gain them the accommodation they need. This minimal accommodation was echoed by Donatella's experience. This 21-year-old communication studies major indicated that the

accommodation need not be extensive. She stated, ‘When I go in and tell them that I have a learning disability they are always – like – “if you need anything let me know. I am willing to help you out in any way”’. Although these accommodations seem to be small things, they help create the classroom as a place where individuals with learning disabilities are recognised.

These formal accommodations fulfill the letter of the law. They require instructors to recognise disabilities by enacting accommodations and, thereby, implicitly valuing individual students. Miriam, a 19-year-old deaf education major diagnosed with a short-term memory disorder, claimed that, even if instructors are not sure what kind of accommodations to make, they should still try to enact formal accommodations. Miriam stated,

‘I don’t expect them to know what a learning disability is. With college teachers, most of their backgrounds are in their major and then they get a teacher thing. Sometimes they don’t know what they need. Don’t be afraid to ask the student. They know best. If you have questions about it call the Disability Services Office, they will be willing to talk to you about it.’

Although Miriam recognised that instructors have different knowledge bases related to disability, she also claimed that these instructors should attempt to accommodate. Her interview responses indicated that lack of knowledge did not excuse not making accommodation, but, instead, was an opportunity to learn.

Our interviewees told us that most instructors at Heartland State had taught students with learning disabilities before and were ready to formally accommodate them. Recognising their obligations, these instructors would find out what accommodations students needed and provide those accommodations. For example, Ricky, a 20-year-old football player and construction management major diagnosed with ADHD, told us, because he had registered with Disability Services Office, ‘I have a learning disability card, and I get extended time and I have a notetaker if I want it . . . I asked for a notetaker, I thought it would be a good idea and they said, “no problem” and they made me a new card with a new title on it’. In Ricky’s case, his disability was recognised and appropriate services were arranged. All Ricky had to do was show his card to the instructor. The power of the disability services card to obtain these accommodations was also articulated by Seth, a 22-year-old safety science major who also has ADHD. Seth said that on the first day of class, he approached his instructor. ‘I gave him the letter and told him I had a disability. He wanted to know if he could know my disability. I said, “yes.” . . . And he was, anything he could do great, if I needed to sit closer or needed extra time to write things down, just ask’. In both Ricky and Seth’s cases, the instructor was making accommodations as mandated by the law and by Heartland State policy. In these mandates, the free choice of the instructor to accommodate or not is strongly constrained; both policy and law

require behaviour changes by the instructor upon presentation of the card.

In addition to agreeing to do what the card said, the students we interviewed also told us about times when instructors provided accommodations even when the students had forgotten about them. Vladimir told us that, ‘last semester in my history class, we had to take the final exam and I pulled out one of the yellow sheets for my extra time, I said to my teacher. And I must have forgot and I ended up taking the test with everyone else in the allotted time’. Although Vladimir had forgotten that his accommodation included extra time, his instructor had not. He told us that he went ‘out the door and my teacher followed me outside. He said, “V, did you have enough time to take the test?” . . . That’s was pretty cool, I didn’t expect that at all. Other people were taking the test, and he followed me out the door and make sure I was alright’. A story with a similar outcome was told by Trisch, a 22-year-old art education major who experienced challenges from a disability similar to dyslexia. She claimed that the instructor

‘tried really hard for me to get that book on eText and she made sure she searched for these articles, because she made this thick packet, it was a compilation of everything. She scanned some in so she would have it as text and then e-mailed it to me. She didn’t have to but she did. She went above and beyond to make sure I could get this in some kind of format in the computer so I could have it read to me.’

Both Vladimir and Trisch indicated that their instructors had accommodated them beyond a statement on their syllabi. When Vladimir said he did not expect his teacher to remember to provide extra time and when Trisch said her instructor did not have to create electronic copies, they portrayed their accommodations as something special. This kind of accommodation may appear proactive to the student, in that the instructor is perceived as doing something ‘extra’ and not required. As such, the instructor who appears to enact formal accommodation of her own will is likely to be seen as more open to meeting the needs of students with disabilities.

Although Vladimir and Trisch seemed unaware that their instructors were required to provide accommodations, other students with disabilities were closely attuned to when their needs were met and not met through formal accommodations. Ned contrasted two instructors to whom he had revealed his disability. He stated that, during his ‘first year or second year, I walked up and I handed my teacher my little form [stating dyslexia accommodations], and he looked at me and said, “so you are stupid and you want extra help.” So I never did it again’ with that instructor. Ned recognised that that instructor had failed to accommodate his disability. Rather, that instructor had chosen to replace formal accommodation with an insult. Other instructors, Ned revealed, were more willing to accommodate. Ned told us that, in a different course, ‘I went up after class and I talked to him and said I have a learning disability’.

Although experience had told Ned he might meet hostility, Ned said that the instructor responded, ‘I am going to grade you on how many times you show up and how much you participate and whether you have your work done or not. I don’t really care about the level of writing in it’. This instructor, recognising Ned’s dyslexia, kept the same assignments but also made sure to accommodate Ned’s needs. By foregrounding what the assignment was meant to measure, and not the writing quality which was ancillary to the class, the instructor was able to create a rigorous environment for learning that also met his formal obligations.

There are some inherent difficulties in the implementation of formal accommodation. As revealed by our interviewees, formal accommodation has three possible moments of disclosure. The first of these is visiting the Disability Services Office. By entering the office, the student discloses to the staff (at least) that she or he has a disability, and, if others see him or her enter that office, they may become aware of a status the student would prefer be kept private. Similarly, the card or letter from Disability Services Office becomes an identity marker. Heartland State’s choice to make this card bright yellow, and thus easily seen from a distance, may further inhibit students’ willingness to show their disability identity markers in the classroom. Finally, although he was well intentioned, Vladimir’s instructor’s choice to follow a single student out to a hall after a test likely raised awareness among classmates that Vladimir was receiving accommodations. These three disclosures each create opportunities for publishing private identities. These formal accommodations may then limit how many and the extent to which students seek out formal accommodations individualised to their cases. Many advocates, as well as individuals with disabilities, believe that one of the primary obstacles for individuals with disabilities is negative attitudes regarding people with disabilities (Hunt and Hunt, 2000). By singling out students with learning disabilities through special markers or public conversations, these formal accommodations may also lessen the likelihood of students seeking services or requesting reasonable accommodations from instructors.

Accommodation for all

To this point, it might seem that instructors choose between not accommodating students or accommodating their disabilities but revealing their status to others. Our interviewees provided a third option. They advocated accommodation for all. In providing this type of accommodation, the instructor recognises that students with learning disabilities are not the only students who have special needs for learning. Providing accommodation for all, the instructor recognises that each student has a unique learning style, preferences in instruction, and needs and advantages that can be identified and adapted to create the most enabling classroom – one that enables students with and without diagnosed learning disabilities.

Our interviewees articulated clearly that students with learning disabilities are not the only students who would benefit from accommodation for learning. They said *all* students would benefit from accommodation. Jacob, a

20-year-old athletic training major, made this case the most extensively. He said,

‘I have never had [a teacher] that has really gone out of their way and done something special because I have a learning disability. They treat me just like they do every other student. Other than the fact, legally they have to give me these accommodations. They don’t help me out anymore than any other student.’

Jacob recognised that he was guaranteed accommodation, when reflecting on the best professors, Jacob claimed that he had not been singled out or treated differently just because he has a learning disability. When we asked why his professors did not make special accommodations for him, Jacob said,

‘If there is something else that needs to be done to help a student learn, that should be part of their teaching method. That should be done in class with every student, not just the one with or without learning disabilities. They should pick and choose on whatever basis they pick and choose. The professor looks back and says, “These kids need this” to be able to learn.’

Jacob continued to say that, if the teacher did not accommodate the learning needs of all in the class, and ‘if you have a variety of students coming up and saying we are having difficulties, it’s something that the professor needs to fix. That’s their error; that’s not the students’. If read defensively, Jacob’s comments could be seen as blaming instructors. More positively, though, Jacob’s claims could be read as saying good teachers will find the unique needs and strengths of their students and adapt to those students, regardless of their disability status. Jacob’s two main points – that everyone needs accommodations and that it is up to professors to accommodate all learners – were echoed by other participants. Jacob conceded that not all instructors are willing to do this work. He told us, ‘I am not that special, I’m not that important. I don’t think the whole class should revolve around me; it should revolve around every student. If the professor chooses to teach that way, great, I am glad I had that professor’. Jacob realised, as did most of our participants, that instructors have a choice in whether or not to accommodate the needs of all learners. They did, however, prefer instructors who were willing to accommodate for all.

For Trisch, the need to accommodate all students was based on the fact that we may or may not know which students have learning disabilities. She said,

‘Not just disability students need help. A lot of people don’t know they have dyslexia or something . . . But they do know they are bad at taking tests and their organizational skills are bad, and writing papers are harder for them and stuff like that. For teachers to be sensitive to that would be good for anyone, no matter what.’

Trisch understood that some students with disabilities are not officially diagnosed but still could benefit from

accommodations. Although difficulties in learning-related tasks are not always indicative of a learning disability, they all show student needs that sensitive instructors could address. Instructors must be careful, however, not to inquire into nondisclosed disability statuses. By observing all students carefully and finding areas where students may need individual help, instructors can avoid a disability-centred focus for accommodation in favour of creating environments in which accommodating everyone's needs becomes common place.

Most of our participants agreed that all students have needs for learning that require accommodation. Ned argued that instructors 'have to realize everyone is at a different level. Some people are good visual learners and some people are hands on. And so forth'. In addition to reminding us of some of the basic differences in learning style, Ned further explained,

'Everyone learns at a different rate. All different learning styles and teaching styles. If you have a big class of 100 kids to fit all those different teaching styles and learning styles into one, where everyone understands, it will be hard. They have to realize that some don't learn this way, some people learn better this way.'

Similar to Ned, Seth said that most students want an instructor 'that would do anything to make sure every student could do it and could do everything. Teach in a style to want to make a kid learn'. The points made by these interviewees are simple. First, they claimed that everyone is able to learn, but individuals learn in unique ways. Second, they posited that it could be hard work for instructors to adapt to all of these different learning styles. Despite the difficulty accommodating for all, our interviewees saw this responsibility as incumbent on instructors.

Accommodating all learners' needs is the mark of the best instructors, according to our interviewees. Perry, a 19-year-old physics major with ADHD, stated that

'a true teacher will be willing to be there, to help you, they are willing to notice that you are doing something wrong to succeed so they will reach with open arms and let them know in class what they can do to help them.'

Similarly, Trisch claimed that every instructor should 'take the time to sit down with you and [ask], "What do you need? And, what makes life better for you? How do you learn?"' Extending this idea, Ned told us that, in college, 'You get to see different types of teachers and teaching methods and what works. Each kid's different. For one teacher, this kid could be great, and then for this teacher, this [other] kid could be great' because their styles adapt differently to different needs. Collectively, Perry, Trisch, Ned and others argued that teachers should work to adapt to their students. The alternative, as outlined by Seth, is a classroom where the instructor does not accommodate any of the students. He reported:

'It makes me feel really bad when an instructor won't help the class. If the class isn't understanding something. If the whole class isn't understanding something. I don't think it's because of the students. I think it's because of the teacher not explaining it right. I've always thought that and many, many students think the same thing.'

Seth's comments appeared to make lack of understanding the fault of the instructor. Although students have preferences for learning, they should also recognise that, when they believe the instructor is 'not explaining it right' because 'the whole class isn't understanding', they may be projecting their individual frustrations onto the rest of the class. Rather than blaming the instructor, this comment could be read more constructively as reflecting a failure of instructor and student to connect over the course material. If Seth's mention of class-wide misunderstanding is put into conversation with his earlier comments about adapting to the learning needs of all students, a clearer picture emerges. When an instructor accommodates all, everyone in the class becomes empowered to learn because their unique needs for learning will more likely be met. On the other hand, should an instructor not accommodate all, only those students who learn the way the instructor teaches will learn. Instructors are confronted with this choice, but must be willing to assume the extra burden of accommodating all to enable all students to learn.

Interpretations

In discussing instructors' accommodation of students with learning disabilities, our interviewees told us three ways in which instructors accommodate: non-accommodation, formal accommodation and accommodation for all. Legislation, institutional policies and, most likely, instructors' personal beliefs prompt instructors to accommodate the learning needs of individuals with disabilities. These informants, however, all told us that instructors need to reflect on how they enact accommodation. Moreover, as educators who embrace the ideals of critical pedagogy, as individuals who strive to be agents of transformation seeking social justice, we believe these student comments help us to see if and how our accommodations support or interfere with this mission, as well as how we help reify or challenge structures of domination within and beyond our classrooms.

When students with learning disabilities tell us that some instructors engage in non-accommodation, there is obviously a challenge to enacting transformation. Denial of the existence of learning disabilities or denying accommodations likely contributes to instructional and institutional environments that delay students' graduation, limit their academic success, and, ultimately, undermine their ability to use higher education as a stepping stone towards meaningful life goals. Our interviewees also revealed some difficulties with formal accommodations. These students with learning disabilities told us that some instructors struggle with making formal accommodations because they are unsure how to enact them but also that some instructors who know how to enact formal accommodations do so in a way

that singles out and isolates students with learning disabilities. These limits of non-accommodation and of formal accommodation may lend themselves to similar redress.

University students who participated in this study reflected the assertion of Gregg, Hoy and Gay (1996) that students with learning disabilities often need accommodations to succeed in academic studies. Existing literature offers students a variety of strategies to improve their efforts at seeking accommodation (Orr and Hammig, 2009; Trammell and Hathaway, 2007). Nevertheless, existing literature generally neglects ways in which instructors can learn how to accommodate students with learning disabilities. Although we should expect students to make their needs for learning known, we also should expect instructors to meet those needs. We should not expect students to enact the lion's share of the effort, as is done now; rather, both parties should meet part way.

As a practical step to transforming instructors' non-accommodation to accommodation, and to improving instructors' formal accommodation, we believe that higher education institutions need to continually provide information about national laws and individual institutional policies to university instructors to increase their awareness of disability issues and ways to accommodate students' needs for learning. We agree with Houck, Asselin, Troutman et al. (1992) and Finn (1998) that disability awareness and sensitivity training for instructors should be incorporated more thoroughly into professional, course and programme development efforts. Another strategy that would support this transformation is Hartman-Hall and Haaga's (2002) call for the creation of academic support units that can assist faculty members with requests for accommodations. The stories told by our participants would support these recommendations for improving accommodations. Although we believe that educators should become acquainted with disability issues on principle (Barga, 1996), our findings reveal on a practical level that students felt that their professors' choices had an impact on these students' comfort in the classroom and their ability to learn. Thus, it may behoove professors to be aware of their choices and the fact that all professors can act differently to enhance positive student – teacher interactions and student learning outcomes. By arming professors with appropriate resources for enacting accommodations for students with learning disabilities, we might help improve classroom environments for instructors and students.

Perhaps more surprising to us was the type of accommodation our interviewees identified: accommodation for all. Instructors need not limit accommodations only to individuals with diagnosed learning disabilities. Our interviewees reminded us that some individuals simply have not been diagnosed. They reminded us that some students will not seek out diagnoses because they do not want to be labelled. And, most of all, our interviewees reminded us that all individuals have unique learning needs that should be met if students are to perform to the best of their abilities. Our interviewees provided statements that encourage

instructors to reflect on whether or not we create accommodations in our classrooms that enable all students, not just students with disabilities.

This call to accommodate for all learners does not mean that university instructors should not assume all students have learning disabilities. Rather, we should see accommodation for all as a generally effective pedagogy strategy. As instructors, we have often recalled Cochran-Smith and Zeichner's (2005) claim that good teaching is good teaching. Our interviewees confirmed this notion. Things that help students with learning disabilities learn may help all students learn (Orr and Hammig, 2009). Our students identified several specific techniques that could accommodate all learners:

- discovering students' interests to help choose appropriate examples and topics;
- consistently showing the relevance and applicability of theory to everyday life through direct connections;
- repeating material, both visually and orally;
- creating accessible resources, such as audio recordings and slide projections, and uploading them to course web pages;
- clearly identifying testable material and providing a review sheet before examinations;
- naming course and individual lecture learning objectives and providing students with an outline of these objectives; and,
- holding more extensive office hours.

Students with learning disabilities who participated in this study have recommended these accommodations for learning. Although these recommendations are particularly salient for students with learning disabilities, they are likely to assist all students in learning. Moreover, they are not particularly challenging or time consuming for most instructors. The key lesson learned from this study is that we want classrooms that enable all learners, and these recommendations provide a starting point for accommodating all learning.

Address for correspondence

Margaret M. Quinlan,
Assistant Professor,
University of North Carolina at Charlotte,
Charlotte, NC 28209,
USA.
Email: mquinla1@uncc.edu.

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