Diversity, Individual Differences, and Students with Disabilities: Optimizing the Learning Environment

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With the advent of the Americans with Disabilities Act, CU will have increasing numbers of students with disabilities matriculating in undergraduate and graduate programs. What can faculty do to accommodate these students and optimize the learning environment for them?

The disabilities most often found among CU students are as follows but not in any particular order: (1) educationally significant hearing loss, (2) educationally significant visual impairments, (3) language/learning disabilities, (4) physical disabilities affecting either fine or gross motor systems, such as cerebral palsy, (5) speech disorders such as stuttering, or need for augmentative devices, (6) neurological damage caused by traumatic head injuries from automobile or sports injuries, or by strokes, or (7) emotional/behavioral disorders such as severe depression, anxieties, or paranoias.

The Americans with Disabilities Act (1990) guarantees all students access to information, as well as physical access to educational institutions. Students with disabilities may need accommodations in order to receive both oral and written information that is communicated by instructors, fellow students, textbooks, films, etc. Adaptations to examination procedures may be required, such as additional time. Students should be informed through the syllabus, at the beginning of each class, that it is their responsibility to tell the instructor about any modifications or adaptations that will be required, so that the instructor has ample time to accommodate the students' needs. The following accommodations are the right of people with disabilities. They should not be provided in a spirit of pity or patronage.

Amplification Devices for Individuals with Hearing Loss

FM (frequency modulated) auditory devices allow individuals with sensori-neural hearing loss, as well as those with central auditory dysfunction, to hear the instructor's voice without extraneous classroom noise, which may be exacerbated by the reverberation characteristics of the room, its acoustic treatment, and its amplification system. The instructor wears a radio-frequency microphone and transmitter; the student wears a radio-frequency receiver. Occasionally the instructor may have to wear more than one microphone—the classroom system microphone and the microphone for the individual auditory amplification devices. While the Office of Disabled Students makes available several different technologies, all of them require that the speaker wear a microphone transmitting on a specific radio frequency. Therefore, in class discussions in large classrooms, the disabled student will be unable to hear the questions or comments of other students unless the professor repeats the information or allows time for the other speakers to use the microphone.

Sign-language Interpreters

Visual transmission of information takes longer than auditory transmission, so occasionally, if the professor speaks rapidly or is using numerous technical terms that must be fingerspelled, a sign-language interpreter may have to request that the lecturer repeat a piece of information or slightly slow the pace. Questions and remarks should be directed to the student, not the interpreter, although the interpreter will voice the student's responses and the student's own questions for the instructor. Additionally, the instructor should attempt to ensure that other students refrain from interruptions or talking simultaneously, since this situation presents significant obstacles both for the interpreter and for the hearing-impaired student.

Interpreters are also available for student-faculty meetings outside class. They may be used to interpret examinations to assure that the same language (American Sign Language) that was used in interpreting the lecture is also used in the examination. In fact, since American Sign Language is a different language...
from English, students who use American Sign Language may have many of the same problems as those who use English as a second language. Foreign students with English as a Second Language (ESL) who are experiencing problems with written language in English should refer to the Academic Skills Program or take advantage of the coursework offered through the University Writing Program.

Enlarged Visual Displays
Students with visual impairments often require enlarged overheads and handouts. Use of the Internet and Web pages to give students notes and outlines not only ensures information access for both visually and hearing impaired students, but also enhances the learning environment for all students.

Internet "Classroom" Discussions
Students with speech disorders are often reluctant to participate in classroom discussions. Virtual classroom discussion provides access for all students irrespective of shyness or disability.

Internet Access to the Instructor
Often questions posed by one student are questions that other students have had. Internet communication with instructors allows students to get immediate clarification or discussion of specific content within the course lectures or reading material.

Captioned Videos
Captioned videos, originally intended for individuals with significant hearing loss, can also serve students with central auditory dysfunction/learning disabilities, as well as students who use English as a second language. All newer televisions can show these videos; older televisions on campus can be enabled to decode closed-captioning by adding a closed-captioning decoder (available through Academic Media Services). Remember that when films and videos are shown the room is darkened as for the use of overheads and slides, thereby causing significant difficulties for students who must rely upon sign language interpreters. Therefore, if videos are not closed-captioned, the student may request that a special viewing time be arranged with an interpreter.
Consistent Organization and Structure

Sudden changes in requirements communicated solely through oral classroom announcements may open the door to miscommunication with a number of students who have disabilities. Again, using Web pages or the Internet to communicate class information can avoid such problems. Class lecture notes can also be provided on the Web to give better information access to students who must struggle to hear, process auditory information, or write down notes from a lecture. Access to these notes ultimately benefits all students enrolled in the course.

Avoiding Stereotypes/Stigma/Discomfort

Students with disabilities, like those from ethnic minority groups, are often perceived, by teachers and other students, as having inferior intellectual abilities or knowledge. They may also be perceived as all alike. Students with disabilities are a diverse group. Each student can speak for himself or herself but not for all individuals with the same disability.

Students with disabilities have the same desire for contact with the professor as all other students. Often people fear those who are different and avoid communication because of discomfort with interpreters or fear of saying the wrong thing.

It is often helpful for teachers to explore their own feelings about people who exhibit different physical and communication characteristics. Do you assume that individuals who have speech disorders are not as competent as those who do not? Do you assume that students with learning disabilities are intellectually inferior to other students? Do you assume that students with mental health issues are less capable?

Avoiding Discrimination

Understanding the rights of students with disabilities is not only the right thing to do but also the legal thing to do. While this information is ultimately intended to protect the rights of students with disabilities, it should also protect professors and the university from violation of the law.

Christine Yoshinaga-Itano

Biography

Christine Yoshinaga-Itano studies the development of language and cognition in deaf and hard-of-hearing children and has twenty-seven years of experience teaching individuals with disabilities. She is the Principal Investigator of three federal grants from the National Institutes of Health, Maternal, and Child Health and the Office of Education. Additionally, one of the grants is an investigation of bilingual Spanish and English language development in young infants and toddlers.