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DESIGNING FOR ACCESS IN THE CLASSROOM AND BEYOND

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Introduction: The Challenges of Inclusion

Below are five scenarios.[1] Have you ever experienced one of them?

1. A seemingly well-intentioned student starts missing your morning classes. You reach out and learn she has a chronic illness and is experiencing a flare-up. She does not have official accommodations from Student Disability Services, but she suddenly seems to need them. What should you do?
2. A talented and prodigious student seems to struggle with reading social cues. He raises his hand to answer every question, and sometimes blurts out the answer before you can call on others. Some students grumble under their breath in frustration. Your student hasn't disclosed any diagnosis such as Autism Spectrum Disorder to you, nor has he asked you for any type of accommodations. How can you get your classroom dynamics back on track?
3. A student who you know to be insightful and well prepared never speaks up in your class. You suspect that the student is very shy, but are concerned because the student's grade in this seminar-style class is yoked to participation. Are you willing to allow the student to demonstrate participation in other ways?
4. You're speaking with your fellow instructors about testing accommodations, when one of them loudly complains, "If he needs all of these accommodations, maybe he should drop out. Clearly, he doesn't have what it takes to be a musician!!" As a colleague, what is the best way to reply?
5. A student does very well in most aspects of your musicianship class, but when it comes to sight-singing exams, they tend to have performance-based anxiety. This anxiety affects their ability to complete the exams. They do not have a diagnosed learning disability and do not have accommodations through disability services. How can you accommodate this student, and should you?

The five scenarios laid out here are exceedingly common, and will resonate with any instructor who has even a little experience in classroom teaching. Semester after semester, we see that musically talented humans come in a range of bodies and abilities. Students' myriad mental, physical, and emotional differences need our attention and management if we are to create productive and safe classroom environments.

Students in our classes often struggle to regulate their mental and physical health as well as their emotional and psychological wellbeing (Price 2011; Kafer 2016). While the earlier scenarios expose our students' abilities and disabilities, only some of them are diagnosable and/or

legally require accommodation under the terms of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Some of the students are undiagnosed, or need support in other ways that resist clear-cut accommodations. Far from easy problems to solve, these scenarios raise complex issues. To effectively address scenarios like these – in which students may or may not identify and present officially as "disabled" – instructors have to get serious about re-evaluating every aspect of our syllabus policies, our classroom dynamics, and our course design.

In this chapter, I explore ways of making courses accessible to a wide range of possible learners. I call this process "designing for access." We can begin with questions such as: what is essential about this skill, and what creates an unnecessary barrier? Are there various ways my students can demonstrate mastery? How can I create a more inclusive classroom environment? As we grapple with these questions, we open ourselves to flexible course design and execution. The aim is to move away from a post-hoc accommodations paradigm, in which disability remains stigmatized as a matter of individual difference. Instead, planning for a range of differences, we proactively design courses to minimize barriers and provide maximum access for many learners.

Let me disclose a caveat: the more I have read and thought about accommodations and access, the less certain I am that my classrooms are inclusive and accessible. Though barrier-free spaces are the goal, I pragmatically recognize that no classroom is likely to be maximally accessible for all learners all of the time. Work within critical disability studies problematizes the idea that there is a coherent, frictionless "all," whose needs can be reliably served in one fell swoop (Dolmage 2017; Hamraie 2017; Williamson 2019). Scholars likewise problematize the erasure of disability and difference within the utopic formulation of "universal" design, which is often praised for benefitting "everyone." Who is everyone? Why is it that the interests of disabled people have to be aligned with the interests of able-bodied people ("to the benefit of all") to matter?

For these and many other reasons, I believe it remains necessary – practically speaking – for instructors to work simultaneously within the frameworks of access and accommodation. These are not (yet) mutually exclusive categories. Universal design is not a noun, fixed arrival point, or a destination. There is no reliable recipe or checklist that will guarantee your classroom is universally accessible. "Designing for access" is a verb phrase; it is a process of continual collaboration and revision, in which we collectively learn "new ways to move" (Price 2011, 88; Dolmage 2015, 1). In developing the advice in this chapter, I spent quite a bit of time interviewing campus disability office staff and talking with other faculty about how they handle such issues. I learned the most, however, from listening carefully to my students and colleagues with disabilities as they related their personal experiences. Opinions on best practices vary widely. So, while I would like to claim mastery and expertise, I have come to understand my uncertainty is as it should be. Designing for access means meeting our students where they are. No two classrooms are ever the same, and no two students have the same needs. If teachers can use these uncertainties and tensions to keep curious, keep learning, and keep re-designing, we can offer the most benefit to our students. The following, then, aims not toward conferring a rigid plan, but instead toward inspiring perpetual conversation and curiosity about what accessibility and inclusion might mean.

Toward a More Accessible Classroom

Classrooms are demanding spaces filled with both explicit and implicit expectations. Teachers set the explicit demands based on the syllabus contract and the course content: mastery of certain skills, performance at a certain level, participation in certain formats, completion of certain assignments on certain timelines, and so on. These are not the only challenges in a classroom. Following Margaret Price (2011), we must also recognize that classroom spaces are scenes of many more implicit "kairotic" demands (from the Greek *kairos*, "the opportune or appropriate time," 60). According to Price, kairotic spaces "are less formal, often unnoticed areas of academe

where knowledge is produced and power is exchanged" (2011, 60). In classrooms, students must navigate highly complex social-emotional challenges, such as how to speak enough but not too much; how to appear knowledgeable but not arrogant; and how to appear present and engaged even when experiencing emotions such as anxiety, depression, or fear. The improvised, real-time, in-person exchanges of classrooms underscore the latent power dynamics of kairotic spaces: the combination of spontaneity with high-stakes professional consequences can be extremely stressful (2011, 61).

Musicianship and theory/analysis classrooms can even further amplify kairotic challenges. Music is a specialized skill, whose norms privilege some bodies and minds while arbitrarily excluding others (Straus 2009; Howe 2015; Cheng 2016). The kinds of barriers students encounter in the musicianship classroom are myriad: repertoire and ways of musicking that may be unfamiliar and forbidding; new, cognitively complex tasks like dictation, sight-singing, and analysis; assignments that privilege some kinds of instrumental engagement, embodiment, and knowledge over others; emotionally intense environments with new instruments, peers, performance pressure, and sometimes (semi) public assessments; time limits calibrated to the quickest minds; and participation expectations that cater to the most verbal and/or musically fluent students.

Examining and mitigating these barriers within our classrooms and curricula do *not* mean that we ought to protect our students from encountering challenges. Increasing access does not mean that students will never experience the sometimes-uncomfortable feeling of growth in our courses. Instead, in designing for access, we commit to engineering assignments, classroom activities, and assessments in ways that welcome multiple kinds of bodies and minds to fully participate. We can both challenge our students toward growth, and design courses that fully support it.

One good first step is to deconstruct the expectation that there is a "normal" student in any sense. The very idea of norms – normal bodies and minds, students of normal intelligence, normal practices that work for most – is a historically conditioned one (Davis 2017). And yet, such ubiquitous, unexamined logic often guides our musical pedagogies: "the way it's always been done around here" or "how I've always learned it" or worse, "the right way to teach it." As Lennard Davis reminds us, "with the concept of the norm comes the concept of deviations or extremes. When we think of bodies, in a society where the concept of the norm is operative, then people with disabilities will be thought of as deviants" (Davis 2017, 3).

Stepping outside of the deviant-norm-prodigy logic of the bell curve, we can instead conceptualize and meet our students as individuals, who are each deserving of an individualized educational plan.[2] "I already spend hours on teaching," you say. "There's no way I have time to tailor my course material individually for each student." Understood! I would not advise any instructor to tailor-make the course material for each individual student. And yet, what if we saw our students as agents, as experts in their own learning? What if teachers were able to offer a menu of options for accessing our courses, and allow students to choose their own best path? What if we took seriously the idea that all of our students learn somewhat differently, and understood our role as instructor to be that of partnering with them to approach the course from a position of wholeness and strength?

The dual strategies of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) include anticipating the needs of a diverse cohort within the course design, and creating systems for flexible execution and adjustment as the course unfolds. Figure 58.1 distills some of the guiding principles (sometimes called Universal Instructional Design; see Burgstahler and Cory 2008; Meyer, Rose, and Gordon 2014; Dolmage 2015; Quaglia 2015).[3] In short, instructors anticipate and allow for human diversity at all stages of the course: in the goal-setting and syllabus planning phase, in the content and design phase, and during in-class delivery and assessment.

The first column of Figure 58.1, "Course Goals," broadly concerns syllabus planning and the affective engagement of students. Ideally, instructors will reverse-engineer the course from the

Course Goals (the WHY of learning) *strive to provide multiple means of engagement*	Content and Design (the WHAT of learning) *strive to provide multiple means of representation*	Execution and Assessment (the HOW of learning) *strive to provide multiple means of action and expression*
Build Interest optimize choice optimize relevance minimize threats	**Perception** offer multiple media and formats offer alternatives for auditory info offer alternatives for visual info	**Physical Action** vary options for response optimize access to tools and assistive technologies teach reliable practice strategies
Sustain Effort articulate goals with clear logic for *why* give mastery-oriented feedback foster community	**Symbol Decoding** clarify vocabulary clarify syntax and structure clarify methods for decoding text, sound, and notation	**Communication** use multiple media in instruction allow students to respond in multiple media build fluencies in graduated levels of mastery
Self-Regulation facilitate coping skills and strategies facilitate managing information and resources develop self-assessment and reflection	**Comprehension** supply background knowledge highlight patterns and relationships foreground big ideas promote reliable methods of problem solving maximize transfer to other domains	**Assessment** provide options to decrease anxiety clarify expectations and grading schemes support strategy development enhance students' ability to self-monitor progress

Figure 58.1　Universal design for learning guidelines, adapted from CAST (http://udlguidelines.cast.org).

learning objectives, a process often called "backwards design."[4] When goals are articulated to students, they develop ownership, see connections and relevance, and can more easily offer their investment. With student buy-in, instructors can support self-regulation and self-assessment: everyone is on the same team.

The second column of Figure 58.1, "Content and Design," reminds us that students will always need to access information in multiple media and formats. Furthermore, students will need support in remedying areas of weakness, in decoding unfamiliar texts, in using new methodologies, and in extending their knowledge to new contexts. Instructors should be in the habit of continually circling back in dialogue with students: is this mode of delivery working for you? How can I support your comprehension?

The third column of Figure 58.1, "Execution and Assessment," highlights the diverse ways that students will engage with our course material and with each other. In our networked world, we have more options for communication and engagement than ever. Instructors can minimize anxiety, and maximize access, by providing multiple (technologically aided) options for submitting assignments, assessing progress, and communicating with peers or the instructor. Assessment is a high-anxiety area for students and teachers alike; students want to do as well as possible, while teachers need to ensure academic integrity. Though this is a sticky issue, teachers should give serious thought to the ways they handle every assessment (Alegant 2013; Gawboy 2013). Is it necessary? Is it effective? Are my expectations clear? Upon further reflection, teachers may find that adjusting the design of exams (content, length, format, allotted time, physical space, media, etc.) benefits many learners.

So far, the UDL course design and execution principles that I have been advocating resonate strongly with cooperative and student-centered approaches to music pedagogy (Zbikowski and Long 1994; Duker, Gawboy, Hughes, and Shaffer 2015; Segall 2015).[5] Music teachers will ideally negotiate UDL perspectives in dialogue with the extant and growing literature on music pedagogy, especially for aural skills, as this is often an area in which students struggle for many reasons (Karpinski 2000; Rifkin and Stoecker 2011). And yet, teachers will undoubtedly encounter new scenarios and new students, whose abilities and needs raise further questions. Teachers need to specifically plan for disabled bodies and minds.

Laurel Parson's (2015) essay on dyslexia in aural skills instruction and Stephanie Jensen-Moulton's (2009) essay on teaching music to a multiply disabled student are both full of extraordinary insights.[6] Teachers of neurodiverse students will benefit from learning more about the numerous ways autistic students and those with intellectual disability engage with music (Kochavi 2009; Scotto 2009; Carlson 2016; Dell'Antonio and Grace 2016; Bakan 2018). Teachers of blind or visually impaired students will benefit from plenty of preparatory lead-time and the practical guidance laid out in several essays (Pacun 2009; Saslaw 2009; Johnson 2009, 2016). Increasingly, students are struggling with mental illness such as depression or invisible illnesses, in which case, teachers can rely upon the insights of several books and essays (Attinello 2009; Bassler 2009; Deaville 2009; Jackson 2009; Price 2011; Cheng 2016).

Vulnerability and Disclosure

As we think about how to organically plan for and include these types of diverse learners in our class, we can begin with the accommodations statement on the syllabus – the contract you share with the students. If your university allows you to augment their boilerplate, do so. Let the statement be written in first person, be warm in tone, and be collaborative in design. Explicitly discuss your commitment to access on the first day of class. My statement shows that I work within both accommodation and access frameworks:

> I am committed to making our classroom as accessible as possible for all students. I would be happy to talk with any of you who have an Accommodation Determination Letter from the Office of Student Disability Services (http://disabilities.uchicago.edu/ 5501 S. Ellis Ave.) We can speak individually (I respect your confidentiality and privacy). I am open to having a discussion about accommodations/access with the class as a whole if you prefer it. Also, if you do not officially have accommodations but would like to share things about your needs, preferences, or desires, I welcome that. While I actively move toward a paradigm of removing systemic barriers, I also see you each as individuals. Most importantly, I want to know what works for each of you, and also what is/is not working. Please know that the question of collective access and our classroom environment is an open, ongoing conversation.

As students approach you to discuss, you will have to bear in mind the power relationships of the kairotic teacher-student relationship. Moments when students ask for an accommodation – official or not – or share something about themselves and/or their learning style, are moments of high-stakes vulnerability. Students regularly report that professors disbelieve them, question their diagnosis, refuse to implement their official accommodations, or coach them to minimize the degree to which they use accommodations.[7] Even though you are aiming toward maximum access and universally accessible design, you should never dissuade students from using their accommodations. And when students approach you with suggestions for course design and execution, try your best to adjust.

Likewise, students have differing attitudes toward privacy and confidentiality. Some students will want to keep a diagnosis private and speak with you only (perhaps minimally) about the accommodation. You should never require disclosure, but some students will want to share about their diagnosis, invisible illnesses, personality, life challenges, or learning style, any of which might impact their success in the course. You should meet both styles with compassion and non-judgment. One thing to be constantly aware of is that any moment of negotiation or disclosure is risky for students, especially when they've been regularly disbelieved and questioned by other professors and gatekeepers. Be mindful of your own attitude, and do what you can to make this less of an emotional expenditure for your students.

When it comes to accommodations, the canonical advice is to send students to the campus disability services office. This office exists for several reasons: to keep students' medical and diagnostic information private, to determine what accommodations are needed, to protect faculty from being in the position of adjudicating disabilities and accommodations, and to meet the legal mandate for non-discrimination under the ADA. Bearing these many important functions in mind, however, we should also acknowledge that students' experiences with the student disability services (SDS) office vary widely from campus to campus. Sometimes, the staff advocates for students and forms strong partnerships with faculty. You should, of course, strive for this collaborative relationship with the staff in the SDS office on your campus. Staff may need your help adapting general accommodations such as "double allotted time on exams" to the new and particular difficulties of the musicianship classroom. But as with the variability in faculty reactions, students who use the SDS office sometimes report being disbelieved, turned away, shamed, or not properly serviced. Sometimes SDS offices are under-funded and increasingly overwhelmed, or do not seem to be primarily focused on student advocacy. Students also face barriers to obtaining official diagnoses, including lack of (timely) access to resources, family wealth, (lack of) insurance, shame, and more.

Given this inconsistency in the SDS experience from campus to campus, it may be tempting to advocate for a direct-request paradigm, in which students speak directly with teachers about access needs. Let's recognize that this puts students in the extraordinarily vulnerable position of having to disclose disabilities to a wide range of faculty responses and – given faculty resistance – perhaps going without needed accommodations. Let's also recognize that faculty are vulnerable when they are adjudicators. Faculty are not in a position to judge a student's disability and its consequences. Furthermore, faculty (especially contingent, young, female, and/or people of color) do not have an endless supply of authority, time, and resources to meet a rolling series of requests.

These complicated dynamics of vulnerability and disclosure leave us in tension between accommodations and access. I do encourage you to hear information from any student, but I also encourage you to develop a cooperative relationship with the SDS office. Regularly soliciting feedback from students – anonymous or not, and in multiple formats – is a good way to make sure accessibility stays an open conversation in your classroom. In addition to planning ahead for diverse learners, teachers should save some emotional energy for adjustments, knowing they will be necessary. The best solution to these tensions is to work collaboratively, partnering with students to look for multiple solutions and to create a productive, rich, and supportive classroom environment.

Toward Some Best Practices

UDL principles emphasize multiplicity, and for good reason. Figure 58.2 sketches several best practices that instructors can consider and adopt.[8] I have said a lot about accommodations and communication in the previous section. Furthermore, it is always a best practice to make all information available in multiple formats. This means providing course material and supports in text, in video, in web-based media, and in sound. A simple but important practice is to make sure all text materials are searchable and readable by screen readers. Sometimes .pdf documents (for instance, scanned book chapters) are recognized as a single image, rendering the text unsearchable and unreadable by digital technology. Optical character recognition (OCR) deconstructs the image and recognizes characters and words, so the text becomes searchable and screen-readable. Instructors can search the web for low-cost or free software that makes documents OCR-compatible.

During the class time, instructors should be in the habit of describing all slides and information written on the board. All score examples should always be played in sound. Likewise, instructors

Some Best Practices Summarized

Accommodations	Work cooperatively with students and the campus student disability office. Implement official accommodations with willingness and discretion.
	Minimize the degree to which disclosures and adjudications are necessary. Build flexibility and feedback loops into the system.
Communication	Welcome students to tell you about their preferences and needs.
	Allow students to communicate with you, and with each other, in multiple formats.
	Provide a clear plan for the course, and for each class period. Having expectations reduces anxiety.
Materials and Content	Make course material available in multiple formats: text, video, audio, web-based.
	Perform OCR on .pdf documents.
	Describe slides; play score examples in sound.
	Provide visual supports for sonic information.
Flexible Execution	Offer multiple ways for students to demonstrate participation and engagement.
	Offer choices for assignments, especially large projects.
	Allow students to demonstrate mastery in multiple modes wherever possible.
	Carefully consider time-based barriers, including attendance policies, due-dates, and timed assessments.
	Reconsider assessment strategies.
	Offer options that students can use at their own discretion.
	Save some of your own emotional energy for readjustment and revision, knowing changes will be necessary.

Figure 58.2   Summary of best practices for accessible course design and execution.

should provide visual supports for audio material. When students with sensory differences are a part of class, instructors should circle back frequently: is this accessible to you? Am I remembering to describe what I write on the board, and play the notation I'm showing? How can I improve?

Finally, instructors can make their classes most accessible to students when they design flexible participation, discussion, and evaluation scenarios. Students should have multiple ways to demonstrate participation and engagement – written, oral, and digitally mediated. Students respond positively to choice and options. Particularly when it comes to large assignments and projects, students do best when they are allowed to showcase their strengths. Instructors should ask: can I allow students to use their primary instrument? Can I allow students to apply their own creativity in some way? Can I allow students to demonstrate mastery in this task in sound as well as in writing (and vice versa)? It may not always be possible to reconfigure every assignment and assessment, but instructors should make a concerted effort to expand their ideas of what counts for comprehension and mastery. When teachers ask themselves, "what is essential about this task?" they may find more options and more flexibility.

I personally find time-based barriers (such as attendance policies, due-dates, and timed assessments) to be some of the hardest to remove. As such, I favor offering students a few exceptions that they can use flexibly, at their own discretion. These may include dropping a lowest assignment, a chance to revise and resubmit one assignment, one or more unexcused absences for self care, take-home exams when practical, or (when I know several students are struggling) the occasional deadline adjustment offered to the whole class. In my own experience, students respond well to even small changes that allow them autonomy and ownership.

Conclusion

By paying careful attention to the different kinds of challenges students face in our classrooms, teachers can design for access rather than relying solely on accommodations. We can build our classroom environments to welcome students with many kinds of differences. Though it may not be possible to anticipate every challenge in advance, we can make great gains in allowing students to be agents of their own learning. As we design for access, nothing substitutes for an open dialogue between teacher and student: how is this working for you? What do you need? How can I improve? When teachers are engaged in an ongoing conversation about access, they are willing to constantly re-evaluate and continue learning. This is how we invest in the success of each student.

Notes

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2 In primary and secondary public schools, individualized educational programs (IEPs) give students with diagnosed disabilities access to accommodations and special education. Free and appropriate public education for students with disabilities is guaranteed through high school, but not college, by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA 1974/1990/2004). Universities are bound by non-discrimination law including the ADA 1990/2009) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act (1973). For more on disability law in higher education, see www.higheredcompliance.org/resources/disabilities-accommodations.html (accessed November 15, 2018).

3 Much of this material is also freely available on the web: http://udlguidelines.cast.org (accessed November 15, 2018).

4 Several guides to backwards course design are freely available on the web, for example, from Vanderbilt University: https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/understanding-by-design/ and from Indiana University: https://citl.indiana.edu/teaching-resources/course-design/backward-course-design/ and from Stanford University: https://teachingcommons.stanford.edu/resources/course-preparation-resources/course-design-aids/designing-courses-backwards (accessed November 17, 2018).

5 See also several articles in the *Engaging Students* volumes, all freely available on the web: http://flipcamp.org/engagingstudents/ (accessed November 16, 2018).

6 In fact, an entire issue of the open-access journal *Music Theory Online* (15/3–4, August 2009), from which many of the following citations are drawn, is dedicated to issues surrounding disability. www.mtosmt.org/issues/mto.09.15.3/toc.15.3.html (accessed November 16, 2018).

7 For instance, see Alyssa, "Disabled in Grad School: How 'Out' Do I Need to Be?" *Inside Higher Ed Blog* www.insidehighered.com/blogs/gradhacker/disabled-grad-school-when-you-tell-me-disability-story (accessed November 17, 2018).

8 Dolmage 2015 has a useful appendix of practical "places to start" in implementing UDL: http://dsq-sds.org/article/downloadSuppFile/4632/700 (accessed May 5, 2019).

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