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## Transcription Jane Dryden, Mount Allison University

**Introduction:** A video in which Jane Dryden, Professor at Mount Allison University, talks about her experiences in accommodating students with special needs in her classes.

How did you accommodate a student with a disability in your class?

So, normally in terms of accommodation the most frequent case is that I have a series of tests, I get a form from the student with their requested accommodation, I fill it out, they write the test elsewhere, it's all very sort of straightforward. The more interesting cases are where students require me to do something a little bit different in the classroom itself and I can't just ship it off to the very competent people in our Disabilities Services Office. What I find then is that it's really helpful if I've had a conversation with the student about how I can be most helpful. I try in that conversation to very much phrase it as a, "I want to be a resource to you, I want to be helpful to you, this class is a class for you, how can it be better?" Sometimes this has involved things like remembering that for students with hearing impairments, it's really important and vital for them that they see me as I'm speaking, as I'm lecturing. So I've trained myself more or less successfully over the years to make sure that even when I'm going on and writing a bunch of stuff on the board, that I regularly turn around, face the classroom, and address them. The nice thing with this is that actually that's the thing that's helpful for all of my students, so this is a case where an accommodation for one student actually makes it better for everyone. Another story of a time that there was some accommodations to be made in the classroom itself involved a smaller class in which there was this really interesting intersection of students with various needs, various disabilities. There was a student who had a lot of difficulty with any kind of visual distractions. So students fidgeting in his eyeline were really a problem for him. And then I had another student who, in order to focus, needed to be constantly fidgeting as a way of keeping his mind on track—he needs to be constantly moving. Then I had another student in that class who had a hearing impairment. So all of these different things. You can kind of look at this situation as, "Oh, no, what are they going to need next?" Or you could look at it as a chance for the class to have an honest discussion amongst themselves about what everyone's needs are. In fact, we did this. We had this problem solving conversation about "OK, if you sit in this place, and you sit in this place, then your fidgeting won't be in your eyeline and then you need to sit close to me because of your hearing impairment and you need to sit over there because you're going to be able to have a better sense of everything that's going on. We worked this out, in public, in this kind of shared way and the nice thing about it meant that for the whole rest of the course, all the students knew what was up. Everyone knew where to go, where to sit, no one was going to disrupt this process and if one of the students who couldn't deal with distractions, if something came up, it was very easy to just say, "Hey, we already talked about this and we know how to work this and we can do it." It wasn't a class about studying disability, or anything. But having that discussion in class allowed everyone to feel more comfortable in that class about what they needed, about where they were coming from, and I hope it was experienced as inclusive and not as stigmatizing for anyone involved, because everyone shared.

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How was the experience from your perspective?

The experience for me was a little bit mixed because on the one hand you go into a class with a certain sense of what it's going to be and as you're preparing for a class most of the time you're worried about the content, you're worried about the stuff that you're supposed to teach and that you're supposed to sound smart about and in the process of this conversation it's really clear in that moment that it's not up to you, as the professor, to be the "capital A authority" in the room. Your role in that moment is to facilitate a conversation amongst everyone and to risk showing that you're not perfect, and to risk showing that you don't necessarily have easy or obvious solutions but to admit a little bit of your vulnerability as an instructor and to say, "We may not figure out a perfect solution, we're going to do the best we can, all I want to make sure is that everyone feels like we've tried to do the best we can." Partly this is because I'm a philosophy professor so I'm interested in these sorts of dynamics in general, but also partially as an instructor it can be really scary to have these kind of conversations at times, especially because you're very aware of not wanting to intrude on what might be a private experience for some students. You don't want to stigmatize anyone, you don't want to make anyone feel "other" or threatened or anything but you do need to have these conversations in order to move on. I think if we're ready for them, and we expect them, and we allow ourselves to not have to be perfect and to have it all worked out but say, "Hey, what do you need, what can I help with, I may not be able to do everything but it's the best I can do, let's go for it." I think just letting ourselves have that is good.

What would you say to a colleague who will have a student with a disability in his or her class?

Well, I think the first thing I'd say to a colleague who is curious about whether or not they would have a student with a disability in their class and what they ought to do if they do is to say that you are always going to have a student with a disability in your class. In fact, unless it's a tiny, tiny class, maybe an independent study, you're going to have many students with disabilities in your class and you're going to have many students with different sorts of disabilities in your class. You're going to have some students that you know about and maybe they have official accommodation forms and maybe there's official procedures that you're following with them, and you're going to have students that you don't know about their disability. Maybe it's because it's something that they didn't need to disclose to you, maybe it's because it's something that hasn't been diagnosed yet, that they're still working through—you're going to have all of these different situations and you have no idea where they're coming from. So what I say to my colleagues is that you need to prepare as much as possible in advance to make your classes as accessible as possible in advance to as many different kinds of students as possible, so that you're not frantically scrambling after the fact to worry about how you're going to change your teaching style because you're already ready. Now, obviously, there's limits to this. You can't prepare for everything and every once in a while a student will suggest something to you mid-semester and you'll sort of slap your forehead and go, "Oh, I should have been doing this that whole time, I'm sorry, I really never thought of that." But that's the great thing about students—they're constantly pointing out ways we can do this better so listening to them is the best advice anyone could have. That's the main advice, to be prepared, to know that it's not just that you need to teach the students you have, you don't teach a kind of idealized normal student. You teach a range of students with different kinds of experiences and different kinds of needs. But it's also that these students with disabilities really present us this challenge,

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and invitation to “up” our teaching game, to see how we can be even better teachers. So the example of the student with hearing impairment, that was the catalyst that obliged me to start regularly turning and stopping and facing my students while lecturing, well that made me a better lecturer and so I have to thank the student who reminded me to do that for that reminder.