Redefining Disability and Disability Services: The Social Model

By Paula Perez

A shift in perception can make a world of difference. The social model of disability incorporates the concept that disability is a difference and part of the diversity of humanity: disability in and of itself is neutral. The model proposes that the concept of disability derives from the interaction between the individual and society. The negative stigma attached to disability stems from the failure of society to adjust to meet the needs of disabled people. If we can begin to accept disability as a part of diversity, it can become a source of pride, a descriptor, an identity, rather than the source of the problem (Crow 1996).

The social model of disability doesn’t deny an individual’s illness or condition, but offers a lens to see barriers created by society and the negative attitudes held. This approach is no different from discussions concerning racial and ethnic minority groups who believe the problem lies within society and the environment, and therefore society must change (Longmore, 2003). Rather than see an individual with a disability as the source of the problem, we look at society and its inability to create an inclusive environment. The focus of change will come from an understanding of the role of society and its systematic approach in designing environments that limit full participation of all its members and foster segregation and negative identity. Think about the benefit to all members of society from a simple change in environment—adding curb cuts to sidewalks. While created for people in wheelchairs, they benefit everyone and help us all get around easier.

What does this mean for those of us in higher education? While we may never completely eliminate individual accommodations, we can all take responsibility for full inclusion by incorporating strategies that promote instructional access through universal design. An example would be, when using electronic media in our classrooms, to make them accessible to the largest number of students possible by ensuring that videos are captioned and that materials viewed on the web are compatible with screen-reading software.

What We Offer for Students

**One-On-One Academic Support** including, but is not limited to, time management and organization, study skills, note taking, test taking, adaptive tech training, and academic advisement.

**Workshops/Group Work** based on student need: study groups can be customized for a particular subject or desired training.

**Technology** like CCTV, screen readers and magnifiers, speech recognition software, alternate text format, and self-editing software.

**What We Offer for Faculty**

**Instructional Support:** strategies are offered for effective disability-related teaching methods. In some cases, supplemental instruction of content material may be provided.

**Electronic Progress Reports** which, with the permission of the student, may be sent out after mid-term grades are posted for students who are in jeopardy of failing classes. These reports allow faculty to provide specific feedback and suggestions that our professional tutors will use when they work one-on-one with students academically at-risk.
Creating An Exam? These Universal Design Concepts Help ALL Students

People may be familiar with the concept of universal design as it applies to architecture and physical space. Ramps, automatic doors, and accessible bathrooms make buildings more useable for all of us whether we have disabilities or not. In the same way universal design on assessments—things like clarity in language and formatting—benefits ALL students taking tests. According to the National Center on Educational Outcomes (NCEO), universal design techniques can result in more accurate understanding of what students know and reduce the need for alternate assessments for students with some disabilities. On the other hand, poor assessment design may hinder students with disabilities from showing what they know.

Universal design starts at the beginning of the test design process. Ask: What are the constructs you are measuring? Is the test designed to measure those constructs, while minimizing irrelevant factors? Is the visual presentation clear? Is the type large enough to easily see and in a commonly used font? Is there enough space between lines? Are the graphics, if necessary to the exam, clean and the elements easily distinguishable? Are the directions and language clear and appropriate?

Something as simple as visually delineating questions and multiple choice answers is a great start toward universal design. Which format, below, would you want to see on a test you were taking?

| This is a multiple choice question, please select all that apply: A) Potential answer 1  B)Potential answer 2  C Potential answer three  D) Answers A and B  E All of the above |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Or like this: |
| This is a multiple choice question. Please select all that apply: |
| A) Potential answer 1 |
| B) Potential answer 2 |
| C) Potential answer 3 |
| D) Potential answers A and B |
| E) All of the Above |

The first example is definitely harder to read, even if you don’t have a disability. Imagine how difficult it would be for someone with a visual impairment or for a computerized screen reader to process. The second example takes up more space, but the question and potential answers are clearly delineated.

Remember, universally designed tests aren’t easier, just clearer. Reducing unnecessary language complexity and including clear graphics allow all students to better show their skills on the material being tested. They may also reduce the need to develop different tests or change test formats for different populations. Universal design won’t eliminate the need to provide accommodations—for instance, students who are easily distracted or read out loud to process information will still need an alternate location, and others will need the adaptive technology. But by using universal design, you can benefit all individuals and increase the validity of your assessment.

Notetakers Make The Difference

Our office helps secure notetakers for students with documented need. Notes are very valuable to students who have difficulty with dexterity, processing speed, hearing, and/or other disabilities. Matches between a student and notetaker are made without either individual knowing the other to preserve privacy. Our professional staff reviews the class roster and checks transcripts of students to make sure they meet academic standards before contacting potential notetakers by phone and email. When matches are made, the notetakers agree to bring class notes to our office to copy, or they send them by email and we forward them to the appropriate student. If we have difficulty making a match, we ask the teacher for recommendations, but for confidentiality reasons we don’t identify the student requesting the service unless they have given us permission.

In a recent survey we asked our students using the notetaking accommodation: “Do you anticipate using this accommodation next semester?” They answered:

“Oh yes without it I would be very lost in class.”

“Absolutely, I will most likely extend it to several other courses because it’s really helpful.”