Introduction

As a teaching assistant (TA), why should you worry about accessibility? In short, to be able to identify the different needs, learning styles and realities of students on campus when offering learning support and to direct them to the best possible resources when necessary.

Scenario

A student comes to you after the third class and tells you that she is having difficulty following during classes. She asks you for help. How would you react? What would you say? What would you do to help?

We will come back to this. In the pages that follow, I will define accessibility; I will touch on the concept of variability, the notion that there are multiple ways of learning; I will present a few important facts about the student population and the main challenges that it faces; I will explore the role that TAs can play in the context of inclusion; and I will outline a few useful strategies to help effectively support students in their learning.

Definitions of Diversity, Accessibility and Inclusion in Teaching

Reflection

What are the similarities and the differences between students on campus? Why is this important to know and to take into account?

What is diversity? What is the difference between inclusion and accessibility?

Diversity is defined as a set of individual characteristics that make a person unique. In a university setting, there are students who demonstrate different “communication skills, culture, marital status, ability to attend, learning abilities, intelligence, interests, (cognitive abilities), values, social skills, family support, learning styles, age, socioeconomic status,
religious beliefs, sexual orientation, ethnicity, physical and sensory abilities, race, gender” (Burgstahler & Cory, 2008, p.4).

In other words, you may have students who are returning to their studies in their forties and need to coordinate their studies with other responsibilities; students who have to work to pay for their studies; students who are new arrivals to the country and must adjust to how Canadian universities function, including the language; students who are the first in their families to attend university and are receiving very little support; and students who are limited by their physical or cognitive capabilities as well as mental health issues. This diversity has an effect on how they function in class and how well they succeed. The quality of the support that you offer students can make all the difference in their chances of succeeding in their academic careers.

Inclusion refers to the action of taking into account this diversity in your interactions with students and in your actions when assisting them. Further on, I will describe a few strategies that will allow you to act in an inclusive manner in your role as TA.

Finally, accessibility allows students with disabilities to overcome barriers and offers them the support to reach their full potential. Accessibility can be considered a subcategory of inclusion. Accessibility also applies to a variety of students, not to only those with disabilities. The current article focuses on students with disabilities, but the strategies that will be brought forward could also be applied to students from all backgrounds, and would be beneficial to the student population as a whole.

Regardless of its definition, it is important to realize that each person comes with a specific set of characteristics and that it is essential to respect, to acknowledge and to accommodate their differences in terms of your support. We are not talking about lowering academic standards or our expectations of students, but rather about showing flexibility in the ways of achieving those standards. TAs must be proactive instructors by acting as facilitators and guides to learning alongside the professor, while providing engaging, relevant and challenging learning activities. Inclusive practices are our responsibility as citizens and as employees of the university, as implied under the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA -2005; see link in the Further Reading section).

**Concept of Variability (Diversity in Learning Styles)**

When discussing inclusion and accessibility, it is important to reflect on variability. Professor Todd Rose from the Harvard Graduate School of Education and Project Variability (English-language video on YouTube) states that the fields of neuroscience and education now recognize that brains are not all alike and, therefore, that students do not all learn the same way. For this
reason, the concept of “the average learner” is a myth. Varying methods of instruction is key to reaching as many people as possible in the teaching and learning dynamic. Inclusive practices aim at minimizing the impact of functional limitations and at removing barriers to learning, whether systemic, attitudinal or environmental, as shown in the strategies described further on in this article.

Main Learning Barriers and Their Impact

Reflection
What learning-related barriers exist in your discipline? Think about an undergraduate experience you had.

What could these barriers be? There are certainly a number of them. For example, you may encounter students who have difficulties receiving or processing information; expressing themselves; concentrating or paying attention; maintaining their energy level during class, during the day or during the week; getting organized or following through with a task; self-regulating, interacting with others or managing their time or stress. These difficulties can affect their understanding of the subject matter, note taking, effective study habits, their willingness to ask questions, their involvement and participation in class, their grades during exams or other assignments, or the general way that the student performs in their courses and academic life.

Now, you may be asking yourself how many students experience such obstacles. On average, 10% of students registered in university or college have a disability. Only 3% of these students are signed up with the University of Ottawa Access Service (in 2012-2013, there were 1,262 students registered out of nearly 40,000). To put these statistics in context, it can be said that out of a class of 100 students, 10 will have difficulties and only three of them will officially receive services. If we also take individual characteristics into account (see the list under the definition of diversity) and their different learning styles (e.g. visual, auditory, kinesthetic; active, observing, theoretical or practical), it is easy to imagine how some students may face obstacles that will have an impact on their learning in certain learning environments. To echo the words of Professor Rose, it is clear that diversity is the norm rather than the exception!

Did You Know?

“(Educators) have less favourable attitudes towards students with hidden disabilities, such as psychiatric disabilities and ADHD, and provision of accommodation for those groups which are seen as more challenging (...) (Burgstahler & Doe, 2006; Hindes & Mather, 2007; ...); (And) (...) non-visible disabilities comprise over two thirds of students registered with DSOs.” (Vukovic, 2012, p.8).
When looking at the statistics provided by Access Service, we see that 72% of registered students have a non-visible disability. These students, who struggle with a learning disability, an attention deficit disorder or a mental health issue, are particularly sensitive to the classroom environment, and the nature of interactions with the professors and TAs; examples include the greeting at the outset of class, the appropriate amount of openness, empathy and level of support shown over time, as well as the content and format.

Students are generally uncomfortable revealing their disabilities or having their challenges exposed during class. It is, however, normal that they be able to discuss their specific needs when it comes to their learning. To make this possible, the professor and, by extension, their TAs, must establish a relationship of trust, a comfortable learning environment and offer support inside and outside of class, for example, during office hours, either in person or online.

**Roles of the TA in Inclusive Student Support**

Looking at the TA union’s collective agreement, it is clearly stated that you play an important role in student learning by virtue of your involvement in many of the following tasks: “preparation, teaching, attending lectures, demonstrating, leading discussions, laboratory supervision, marking, student consultations, invigilating, holding office hours, setting up experiments, supervising field trips, researching, preparing reports and writing papers, conferring with the Supervisor in charge as required by the assignment and provision of other academic support and assistance” (Excerpt, article 31.2 of the collective agreement, CUPE, downloaded June 18, 2013).

**Reflection**

What links can you make between diversity, inclusion, accessibility, variability, learning obstacles and your role as TA?

Are you beginning to understand the importance of having an awareness of accessibility and different learning styles? By becoming aware of different needs, you will be able to offer specialized support and, when necessary, to refer students to appropriate resources. You will also be better equipped to choose strategies that are appropriate to each student’s specific situation.

**Reflection**

What possible strategies might one employ to effectively support students in an inclusive learning environment?
Inclusive Strategies in Teaching Assistant Positions

There are many strategies available to support accessibility in particular and inclusion in general, as per the guide available on the website of the Council of Ontario Universities. Other helpful links can also be found on the University’s accessibility website.

Here are a few useful strategies to consider. Depending on your specific role you could do the following:

- Share your contact information and office hours with students in your professor’s class;

- Upload the course material to Blackboard (Bb)/Virtual Campus (be aware of accessibility related challenges for visually impaired students);

- Make teaching materials accessible, in writing or online, in PDF format, MS Word, PowerPoint and Excel; or audio-video format. This enables the use of speech synthesis software for blind or visually impaired people, among others. For example:
  
  ◊ Use the “Alt Text” function for images, tables, and graphics, and the “Accessibility Check” function when preparing written documents to ensure that the speech synthesis software can read the information being shared.

  ◊ Prepare clear and structured written documents to facilitate comprehension of people who have attention deficit disorders, or who have difficulty processing information, among others.

  ◊ Present captioned videos, or offer a transcript of content for audio or video materials.

- Provide lecture outlines to students before class to help them structure their work and plan their note-taking or their learning strategies (a summary or a table of contents should suffice: it does not have to take the form of course notes or a PowerPoint presentation);

- Whenever possible, use a microphone in class;

- When you make an important announcement in class, also inform your students by email or with a post on Blackboard (Bb);

- Encourage group work in class, during labs, and during work sessions;

- Audio or video record your lectures, and edit and post short audio or video clips on Bb,
allowing students to review more complex content;

- Structure teaching: Put the day’s lecture in context; repeat or summarize during class (e.g. after the break or at the end of class);

- Vary learning activities: mini-lessons (20 minutes maximum), discussions, case studies, have students work in smaller groups and compare notes, etc.;

- Face students when you speak; look at them; be aware of what is happening in the classroom environment (pace, comprehension), of the class dynamic (including student-TA interactions), and make the necessary adjustments after confirming your perceptions with the group;

- Encourage student participation: ask questions at regular intervals, use think-pair-share, small group activities, one-minute questions or reflection;

- Repeat questions asked by students during class so that everyone can hear;

- Give examples from real life; make sure they are relevant to a wide variety of students;

- Explain new concepts or provide a glossary;

- Provide tutorials and additional resources;

- Verbally describe projected images and graphics and what you write on the board or display on the electronic overhead projector;

- Link assessments to learning outcomes and differentiate between what students need to know and what is supplementary;

- Offer choices as to how students can demonstrate their understanding of the content (evaluation): vary the type of assessment per semester or project (e.g. essay vs. blog);

- Provide ample time between assessments to give your students useful feedback;

- Give students a rubric outlining the evaluation criteria for each of their assessments;

- Allow students to submit work either electronically or in hard copy;

- Use online quizzes with automated feedback;

- Encourage teamwork through social media, Skype, chat, etc.;

- Use mid-semester student feedback to make adjustments to your teaching throughout the course;

- Summarize your lecture at the end of class and encourage students to ask questions to verify their understanding; begin the next class with feedback;

- Follow up with students who appear to be struggling.
Reflection

Working from this list of strategies and from what you have read in this article, what would be your next step? What ideas did you find particularly interesting? Which would you like to, or should you, put into practice in the upcoming weeks or months? Which would you like to share with your professor? What will you do if you want to learn more?

Conclusion

In summary, to be an effective guide and facilitator of student learning, as a TA it will be important to:

- Recognize that all students do not learn the same way (variability/diversity of learning);

- Be proactive, creative, and open-minded when interacting with students to help them overcome learning obstacles and to offer them a fair chance at success;

- Support professors in their course preparation by suggesting various learning activities that could be suitable for a variety of students with different needs and learning styles;

- Help professors grade assignments and exams by offering suggestions to optimize evaluations and allow students to reflect on their understanding of the material; this must be done while still doing all that you can to respect their needs and styles (diversity of learning) without lowering academic expectations;

- Reflect on the support you offer, and learn from your successes and your mistakes in order to improve your interactions over time.

Good luck! If you would like to further discuss any of the ideas outlined, you can contact a member of the Centre for University Teaching team at cpu-cut@uOttawa.ca or at 613-562-5333.
Further Reading


University of Ottawa. Accessibility toolkit (e.g. Introduction guide to inclusive teaching practices and online training modules on creating accessible documents). Available at: www.uOttawa.ca/accessibility/.