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Teaching and Assessment can be inclusive too.

Jackie Lane

Teachers are bound to come encounter students in the course of their career who have a learning disability of one kind or another, but they should not be concerned that this will take up an inordinate amount of their time and resources since there are simple ways of supporting such students, partly through the use of modern technology but also through simple adaptations to teaching and assessment methods. All students should be treated as individuals who deserve equality in the classroom, which does not mean being treated as if they are all the same, but that adjustments are made in accordance with the needs of the individual learners.

Those learners may be dyslexic, or may have any of a range of learning difficulties or disabilities. There is plenty of information and published research to help you make suitable adaptations. Disabled students will (or should be) referred to the Disability Office in the university or college for an initial assessment, and recommendations will be made for extra time in exams, permission to record lectures, access to lecture notes prior to the lecture, a dedicated note-taker or whatever else is considered desirable for that student to gain equality with their peers on the law course. None of the recommendations is likely to need the tutor to do very much at all and will certainly not include a requirement to make adjustments to the assessment, since that is entirely the domain of the tutor.

Nevertheless, the tutor can make simple adjustments to ensure that assessments are as fair to the disabled student as to the non-disabled. Flexibility is essential and this may mean that exams are discarded. Exams do not suit everyone, but they are an efficient and quick way of assessing large numbers of students in a short space of time with minimal human or physical resource requirements, but are these good enough reasons to have exams? The crude adjustment of 25 per cent extra time or provision of an amanuensis cannot possibly provide equality of opportunity for the seriously

dyslexic student in an exam, so it is down to the assessor to design equality of opportunity into their assessment methods. The good news is that, whether you have disabled students or not, a flexible and inclusive approach to teaching and assessment will benefit *all* students, so you do not have to worry that about lack of time to deal with individual issues because you will be acting for the collective good of your whole student cohort.

Students who have been diagnosed with dyslexia are not uncommon in Higher Education and they are usually diagnosed before they reach that stage, but if you suspect that someone may be dyslexic and they have not been tested, refer them to the Disability Office. This will happen most often with the more mature student as schools were not as efficient at picking up on the problem when they were young, and they may have slipped through the net. You will be advised on what you need to do, such as providing exam papers in a larger font or on a particular coloured paper, but again consider different types of assessment. Verbal presentations (individual or group), poster presentations or a viva are all ways of getting away from the traditional written assessment and help to create a more level playing field for the dyslexic student who will usually find the written word something of an uphill struggle.

A disability you may see more and more of in the classroom is autism or Asperger Syndrome. Students with this condition will often struggle with social interaction and may therefore perform badly in assessments involving team work, social interaction or verbal skills, and may also find exams hard to cope with. If you are going to persist with exams, you will need to make sure that the questions are clear, specific and preferably objective – multiple choice questions or those requiring short answers are ideal. Vague essay questions, typically beginning with a quotation and asking the student to ‘discuss’ are not. (These could be the topic of a formative assignment, however, subject to the provision of a clear structure that the student can work around). Remember that you are testing knowledge in an exam so devise ways of enabling the student to demonstrate that knowledge.

Moreover, these students will often suffer excessive anxiety in a large exam room so consider whether they could be tested through electronic means. The suggested reading will give you some useful ideas.

It is not just assessments where adjustments need to be made, but in teaching too.

Finally, learn to value difference and really care about enabling students to do the best they possibly can. Forget conformity, embrace flexibility and work towards equality so that all students can live happily ever after.

Further Reading

Betts, S., Betts, D., Gerber-Eckard, L., *Asperger Syndrome in the Inclusive Classroom: Advice and Strategies for Teachers*, London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2007.

Birnbaum, B., *Using Assistive Technology for Instructing Students with Disabilities: A Survey of New Resources*, Lampeter: E. Mellen Press, 2005.

Hodge, B., Preston-Sabin, J., *Accommodations or Just Good Teaching? Strategies for Teaching College Students with Disabilities*, Westport, Conn., USA: Praeger, 1997.

Orr, A., S. Bachman Hammig, *Inclusive Postsecondary Strategies for Teaching Students with Learning Disabilities: A Review of the Literature*, *Learning Disability Quarterly*, Vol. 32, No. 3, pp. 181-196.

Seale, J., *E-learning and Disability in Higher Education: Accessibility Research and Practice*, Oxon: Routledge, 2006.

The National Autistic Society: www.nas.org.uk

Glossary:

Dyslexia: A learning difference which affects the learning process in reading, spelling, writing and sometimes numeracy. There may be weaknesses in short-term memory and information-processing speed.

Asperger Syndrome: A form of autism with a triad of impairments: difficulties with social communication, social interaction and social imagination.