Chapter 15
Reflections on Teaching Students with Special Needs in an Online Master's Program

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ABSTRACT

Accommodations for a student with a traumatic brain injury in graduate level class go beyond extended time for completing assignments. Additional accommodations include breaking major papers into stages with peer editing at each stage, using shorter articles for article review assignments, and substituting threaded discussions for some article reviews. Greater attention to the affective dimension of teaching and learning also assists students with exceptionalities and can include specific threaded discussions where students give each other tips on completing assignments. Teaching students with special needs can enhance instructor consideration of the needs of all students and make the class better for all the students involved. Additional graduate program and societal involvement is needed to make college and graduate level education more accessible for students with exceptionalities.

BACKGROUND

I recently received a call from Anne, a graduate student with a learning disability who needed into one of my classes. In the last few years I have revamped assignments in my graduate classes

to meet Anne's needs and I immediately began thinking about the assignments in the class and how I could adapt to Anne's needs.

I teach at a small private university with a large non-traditional student population. My undergraduate and graduate communication classes—public speaking, interpersonal communication, leadership—are classes where conditions

like social anxiety disorder, Asperger Syndrome, and learning disabilities are immediately evident. Some faculty might feel these students are a burden, but I find that in adapting my assignments and teaching methods to accommodate students with disabilities, I have made the classroom experience better for all my students. This process has been much more difficult for me at my current institution, however.

My university has only a rudimentary system for notifying instructors that a student in their class needs some sort of accommodation to succeed. The lack of attention to the issue of student accommodation shocked me at first. I had grown accustomed to notes from student services, but at my current university, I receive little to no help in determining what an appropriate accommodation might be for the students in my class. As the former director of our master's program in communication and leadership, I am especially concerned with our graduate students' needs for accommodations.

CASE DESCRIPTION

Our master's program in communication and leadership has a student, Anne, with a learning disability caused by brain trauma. The disability has slowed her reading to a crawl, and she obsesses about every writing assignment. She was very hesitant to let anyone see her writing before she was happy with it. This is perhaps the toughest accommodation I have made in my teaching career. Anne takes our graduate classes in eight week sessions online. The reading load in graduate classes is significant and that, coupled with the accelerated 8-week term, makes our classes challenging for the average student. I battle internally with how much extra time to give Anne to complete assignments in a way that I do not with undergraduates. I worry because I cannot read her nonverbal communication in class to tell when she is having a tough time.

I asked Anne to keep up with the reading for the class and the class discussion, but any assignment that does not affect the group can be completed later. She usually takes an extra two weeks to finish the course. Anne has affected my teaching positively in three major ways.

First, Anne has reshaped the way I give writing assignments to the entire class. I now divide every major assignment into many steps. Now, for a literature review, for example, students turn in a bibliography, an annotated bibliography, a "doggie draft" (so named because it's a rough, rough draft), a rough draft, peer edit, and then turn in the final draft. I give Anne no extra time for the bibliography, the doggie draft, the rough draft, and the peer edits but I time due dates so that she has extra time on the annotated bibliography and final draft. Anne later completes other short writing assignments scheduled between the bibliography and the annotated bibliography.

I typically assign a number of reviews of scholarly articles in each class. To accommodate Anne's slower reading and writing rate, I have replaced a couple of those assignments with a threaded discussion of an article the entire class reads. I also pay more attention to the length of articles that I assign.

The final way Anne has influenced my teaching, is in the support I offer the entire class. I do not remember a professor in graduate school ever reassuring me or my classmates that we could accomplish a task or talking about their own struggles in graduate school. As a teaching assistant, I drew support and comfort from my peers. Now, thanks to Anne, I have created discussion threads where students share problems and tips. I post examples of my graduate school work and point out the flaws as well as the strengths so all students come to see that even imperfect writing can be improved and even imperfect study habits can be altered.

Students have responded positively, generally, to the focus on writing as a process, the class discussions, and my self-disclosures.

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