

It's important to remember that all of our students need accommodations of many kinds, whether "official" or not, and those needs may have suddenly intensified with the change to an online (or remote) format.

By Jessie Male, Ph.D. candidate, and Dr. Margaret Price, director of Disability Studies

BENEFITS OF AN ASYNCHRONOUS MODEL

As we continue to transition and adjust to online classes, it's imperative that we maintain support of disabled students—those who have registered with Disability Services, and those who now request accommodation. It's important to remember that all of our students need accommodations of many kinds, whether "official" or not, and those needs may have suddenly intensified with the change to an online format.

Although many institutions are encouraging synchronous teaching to enable a level of intimacy and routine, for a variety of reasons students might not be able to all congregate during a specific timeframe. The asynchronous model has many benefits. Professor Ellen Roberts [notes](#): "Asynchronous approaches can be powerful as they build in more time for reflection." This extra processing time can be vital to building an accessible and compassionate learning environment.

Whichever mode you've chosen—synchronous, asynchronous, or a hybrid approach—it can be useful to check in with students about the tools they need to succeed in your class. Their input is useful on an individual level, and can also help curate a dynamic online experience. Checking in can be as simple as a one- or two-question anonymous survey—"What do you need in order to learn successfully for the rest of the semester?" "What do you hope our class will include--or not include--as we continue working together?" More extensive surveys have been developed as well, including [this survey](#) for students from Lauren Cagle.

Here are a few additional ideas for creating an accessible classroom.

COMMUNICATION AND ACCOMMODATION

- Ensure all student accommodations continue to be met. Pop quizzes and timed essays are often utilized to determine student engagement with materials. However, many of these high-pressure scenarios counter student

need and learning style. Students who are entitled to extra time must still receive it. If a student needs a quiet space to complete an exam, check in to learn if they have access to one.

- The truth is, we simply can't know the individual environments our students are now working in, and thus, it's important to consider how many students are participating amongst a variety of constraints. For example, a queer student who is not out to their parents may suddenly encounter difficulties in participating visibly/orally in their Queer Studies class. Remember that you probably can't imagine the range of issues your students are grappling with—just know that those issues are there.
- Video conferencing should not inhibit the use of CART and/or sign-language interpretation. Christian Vogler, Director of the Technology Access Program at Gallaudet University, [provides an ample overview](#) of how to support the needs of deaf and hard of hearing participants
- Students may be using audiobooks, ebooks, or various print editions. When assigning texts, consider alternative signifiers to page numbers. For example, offer a phrase that students can search online or locate quickly by visually scanning a page.
- Offer alternative means of 1:1 communication. Face-to-face meetings can occur through Zoom, Google Hangout, Skype, or Canvas Conferences. However, some students may prefer to meet via chat function or over the phone (note many of these services offer unique phone numbers so you do not need to share personal information with your students).
- If you are holding synchronous classes, record and upload the lecture as a resource for those who cannot be present, and as a reference for future reflection (Zoom provides transcripts, but they are not fully accurate and take 24-48 hours to upload). With students accessing materials from around the world, it's inevitable that time-zone differences will impact the ability of some to join during the regular class time.

Remote Teaching: **Support for Disabled Students**

- For this reason (amongst others) a designated notetaker can be a useful role for a student to take on; a responsibility that also indicates presence and participation (depending on your class size, you might delegate more than one notetaker/class).
- Disability Studies scholar Aimie Hamraie advises: “Do not penalize students for spelling or grammatical mistakes. The extra cognitive load of so much typing (or text production via voice transcription technology) may make things difficult for them.”
- All video content should be captioned. Automatic captions have become much more reliable over the years but often miss punctuation and sentence structure, and accuracy often depends on the speaker’s speed. Instructions for captioning on YouTube are available here.
- It might be tempting to put as much information as possible on each slide. However, the large input of information can become overwhelming and counterproductive. Keep slides brief and simple. Just moving through slides can help students remain focused and engaged. Remember that they are already processing many, many screens full of dense text (emails from your college/university, for example).

DEVELOPMENT OF TEACHING MATERIALS

- Consider multi-modal means of engagement. Images and video are often effective ways to supplement alphabetic text. This can be achieved simply; for example, Margaret sometimes holds an image (from a print book) up to her computer camera to show it to students. While more elegant means of sharing information may be desirable, they aren’t always possible in these times. Accessibility is about considering everyone’s needs—not doing everything perfectly.
- Descriptions should be provided for every image. If you are using Carmen, use the box on the right-hand side of the screen to enter alt-text. In addition, provide descriptions alongside images. These often appear in brackets. Here is a useful guideline outlining when and how to include image descriptions.
- You can also incorporate image descriptions into your recorded and/or live lectures. For example: “This slide features Garfield, a large orange cat with black stripes, eating a lasagna.”
- Note that all screenshots, and some pdfs are not screen-reader accessible. Melanie Thorton of Explore Access has suggestions about how to assess accessibility of various file formats (in addition to many other ideas).

EXPECT CHANGE OVER TIME

Disability is not a monolith, and disability status can change over a period of time. In these final weeks of the semester, students may experience temporary disabilities and illnesses, including COVID-19 itself. These students—and others—are experiencing immense physical and emotional trauma as they grapple with the ramifications of a global crisis. Flexibility is key, especially as we move into final exams and projects.

Extend flexibility to yourself as well, insofar as that is possible. While every teacher must confront their own particular array of limitations and needs, try to teach with compassion—for yourself as well as your students.

