Academic Accessibility

Autism @ Rensselaer Club + Disabled Students @ Rensselaer  |  3/8/2023
Disability in Life & Education

Many forms of disabilities, including mobility, cognition, vision, hearing, learning, chronic illness, mental health, and more

- Large discrepancies in educational attainment rates
- Ongoing global pandemic and public-health emergencies
- “Long COVID-19”, a mass disablement event
- Accessibility “lifts all boats”
Disability in Life & Education

Many forms of disabilities, including mobility, cognition, vision, hearing, learning, chronic illness, mental health, and more

- “Spoon theory”
- Disabled people are limited in ways that able-bodied people can’t see
- “Spoons” communicate limitations
- Require strict budgeting of effort
Pedagogical Solutions
STRUCTURE

- One-line solution
- Barriers
- Pedagogical Solutions
- Aspirations
Lecture Slides

- Post lecture slides online, including in-class markup!

- Barriers
  - Loss of focus/note-taking during lecture
  - Might miss an important lecture slide or derivation
  - Incomplete understanding, even when trying your best

- Pedagogical Solutions
  - Post all lecture slides (including in-class notes/markup!) online
  - Record live lectures and post them online
    - Or, post saved recordings from the earlier phases of the pandemic

- Aspirations
  - Install A/V recording equipment in all classrooms
  - Automatically record and post every lecture in every class
AUDIBLE DISTRACTIONS

- Minimize audible distractions!

- Barriers
  - Neurodivergent students are more easily distracted by the audible environment
  - Chatter and noise can make it difficult to hear, even when sitting at the front

- Pedagogical Solutions
  - Ask students to reduce noise
  - Allow headphones for in-class individual work
  - Use a microphone when lecturing
  - Keep classroom doors closed

- Aspirations
  - Distribute lapel microphones to all faculty
  - Consider nearby classes when scheduling facilities and grounds maintenance
Embrace accessible attendance policies!

Barriers
- Issues with physically getting to or staying in class
- Sitting in a classroom for 2+ hours is physically demanding
- Graded attendance disproportionately affects disabled students
- Missing in-class assignments reduces understanding of course content

Pedagogical Solutions
- Open a Webex call for a hybrid lecture when requested
  - Even just an audio stream makes a huge difference!
- Schedule a mid-lecture break during 2+-hour classes
- Exclude attendance from grading schemata
- Post in-class assignments online and accept remote submissions
Office Hours

- Offer scheduled online/hybrid office hours!

- Barriers
  - Issues with physically getting to in-person office hours
  - Office hours without a set time create extra hurdles
    - “Email me to schedule a meeting”
    - Back-and-forth emailing/scheduling is more exhausting for neurodivergent students
  - Missing in-class assignments reduces understanding of course content

- Pedagogical Solutions
  - Offer online or hybrid office hours via Webex
  - Schedule definite times for office hours
    - Even if it’s just one hour per week
TIMELY FEEDBACK

- Return feedback before the next assignment!

- Barriers
  - More difficult for neurodivergent students to understand instructions
    - Lack an effective theory of mind
  - Quick feedback lets students know if they’ve misinterpreted content or instructions
  - Unpredictable chronic illness can make it difficult to study consistently
    - Quick feedback permits more efficient time management

- Pedagogical Solutions
  - Return assignment feedback before the next assignment
    - Especially between the first and second assignments of the semester!
  - Offer detailed, explicit rubrics
CONSISTENT COMMUNICATION

- Establish a single communications channel!

- Barriers
  - Spreading information across different communications channels makes it easy to miss important announcements
  - Lack of consistency

- Pedagogical Solutions
  - Establish a single official communications channel
    - Single source of truth
    - Announcements can be syndicated elsewhere, but the official channel should have everything
  - Check messages regularly
Consider disability when designing exams!

Barriers
- It may take significantly more effort for disabled students to complete a long exam than other students
- Extra-time accommodations are very helpful but exacerbate temporal effort

Pedagogical Solutions
- Make assignments reflective of exam problems
- Make exams a reasonable length and amount of work
Thanks for listening!