A Brief Guide to Accessibility in the Social Work Classroom

At the UW School of Social Work our mission is centered on social justice, empowerment, and social change. In order to apply this mission to student disability populations, classrooms, lectures, group work, handouts, Web based, instruction, fieldwork, and other academic activities need to be made accessible by faculty and staff. To aid professors, TA’s, and staff in this goal, I have created a helpful and practical guide that applies the knowledge of several different sources, as well as my own expertise to implement Universal Design concepts in the classroom.

Universal Design
Designing any environment or product involves the consideration of many factors including aesthetics, engineering options, environmental issues, safety concerns, and cost. Often the design is created for the "average" user. In contrast universal design, according to the Center for Universal Design, "is the design of products and environments to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design." While useful when talking about disability, Universal design is an approach that goes beyond ability and can be applied to racial/ethnic backgrounds, reading abilities, ages, and other characteristics of the student body. Rather than focus on adapting things for an individual at a later time, accessible universally designed learning environments are created to be accessible to everyone from the beginning.

In terms of learning, universal design means the design of instructional materials and activities that make the learning goals achievable by individuals with wide differences in their abilities to see, hear, speak, move, read, write, understand English, attend, organize, engage, and remember. Universal design for learning is achieved by means of flexible curricular materials and activities that provide alternatives for students with differing abilities. These alternatives are built into the instructional design and operating systems of educational materials-they are not added on after-the-fact (Research Connections, Number 5, Fall 1999, p. 2).

When designing classroom instruction, strive to create a learning environment that allows all students, including a person who happens to have a characteristic that is termed "disability," to access the content of the course and fully participate in class activities.

Universal Design of Instruction: 7 Principles
1. Equitable Use
2. Flexibility in Use
3. Simple and Intuitive
4. Perceptible Information
5. Tolerance for Error
6. Low Physical Effort
7. Size and Space for Approach and Use
Lectures

Provide paper AND electronic versions of notes

This can be helpful for students with learning, psychological, chronic health, and physical disabilities, and hearing impairments

If your notes are hand written:
- Scan your notes into PDF format using the scanner in the computer lab or the library, and then upload them to the class website
- Photocopy your notes in the mailroom before class

If your notes are typed:
- Upload your notes every week to your class website or e-reserve page
- Print copies of your notes to hand out in class

Hand Written notes:
- Ask the student to scan notes into PDF format using the scanner in the computer lab or the library
- Or they can photocopy their notes

Typed Notes:
- Ask the student to email their notes to you

You can borrow a digital recorder from the media lab weekly to record your class, and the media lab can then download the recording, and send it to the webmaster to upload onto your class website so that it is accessible to students.

Digitally record your classes & upload them onto your class website (podcast)

This can be helpful for students with learning, psychological, physical, and chronic health disabilities, and visual impairments

Ask a class member to take notes or share their notes with fellow class members

Schedule an appointment with a computing consultant to help you create a catalyst website, or email Alison to create a website for you

Ask the computing consultant on duty for help with the scanner

Upload the notes to your class website so that students can access them anytime

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You can borrow a digital recorder from the media lab weekly to record your class, and the media lab can then download the recording, and send it to the webmaster to upload onto your class website so that it is accessible to students.
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Try to avoid asking students to stop taking notes and “just listen.”

Many students process information by writing it down rather than auditory queues, therefore asking them to “just listen” ensures that they will not remember the information.

Provide a clear verbal AND written description of any writing, pictures, charts, graphs, or other visual aids.

For example, if you write an outline on the chalkboard be sure to also read it aloud, and if you use a bar graph during class be sure to include a written description under the graph and read the description aloud.

Be open to students taking a pre-arranged break beyond the one halfway point break.

In the beginning of the quarter, you can introduce this idea to the whole class by saying, “and if there is anyone that needs more than the break near the halfway point of class, feel free to email or stop by my office to speak with me.”

Try not to discourage or point out their computer usage, or assume that students are using their computers to check email.

Many times laptops allow students to type faster, better organize their notes or thoughts than in a notebook, or utilize online dictionaries. Be open to students using laptops during class.

This can be helpful for students with learning, psychological, and physical disabilities, and hearing or visual impairments.

This can be helpful to students with physical, psychological, learning, and chronic health disabilities.
Group Discussion/Work

Be open to letting the student give input about how they can be successful at group work

This can be helpful to students with hearing, and visual impairments, and with learning and psychological disabilities.

This can be helpful to students with all types of disabilities.

For students with hearing impairments, group work can be frustrating, they may have difficulty focusing on more than one individual (especially if people are talking over one another) and may not want to disclose their disability. Discuss privately with the student their preferences during group work

Working with just one other person that can wear an assistive listening device is one idea, and then there would be only one other individual for the student to focus on

If the student feels more comfortable with a certain student, allow them to pair up. If you plan on using small group discussion/work as a major part of your class, it may be easier to plan this ahead of time with any students with hearing disabilities.

Have an e-post discussion instead of intense in-class discussion

An alternative way to have group discussion is to create an e-post account for your class, which can be allow students to share ideas and thoughts all week long instead of just 3 hours a week

Ask the computing consultant on duty for help in setting up an e-post through catalyst

Digitally record group discussion and provide access on your class website

Even in big groups you can still record everybody’s input by placing the recorder on a desk in the center of the group. If you have several small groups, you may be able to check out more than one recorder to record every group.

You can borrow a digital recorder from the media lab and ask them to upload it onto your class website so that it is accessible to students.
Try to provide electronic and paper versions of any supplemental discussion materials prior to class.

Providing supplemental materials prior to the class will allow students to participate better in the discussion.

Computing consultants can help you upload materials to your class website no matter what format they are in.

This can be helpful to students with hearing, and visual impairments, and with learning, and psychological disabilities.
Exam Accommodations

Flexible exam formats
This can be helpful to students with learning and psychological disabilities

Adjusting the exam format from multiple choice to essay format (and vice versa) can be helpful in allowing students to demonstrate their knowledge more effectively

While this may seem like a lot of work on your part, consider the fact that learning disabilities are the most commonly seen disability in college settings, and it is likely that you will use your flexible formatting many times over

Flexible time on tests
This can be helpful to students with learning, psychological, and chronic health disabilities, and visual impairments

Allowing a specific extra amount of time, to be negotiated before the exam, allows the student to focus on the exam content instead of the clock.

Time and a half, or double time are the most common time allotments and easy to calculate.

Test taking environment
For students that need extra time on tests, the setting or the environment plays a key factor. Too much noise, visual, or auditory distractions creates a hostile environment for students with disabilities. Allow the student to decide where the test is taken (in the classroom, in the Disability Resources for Students testing center, in a library study room, or any other place a student feels most comfortable).

In general, it is not wise to have the student take the test in your office, as the environment can be distracting, unfamiliar, and noisy.
This can be helpful to students with all types of disabilities.

Consider take home tests or tests taken in segments.

The home environment will decrease stress, and students can still arrange extra time with the professor if needed. For segmented tests, dividing an exam up into parts and allowing students to take them in two or three sessions over 1-2 class sessions helps reduce the effect of fatigue, and focus on one section at a time.

This can be helpful to students with learning, psychological, and physical disabilities, and visual impairments.

Be open to students taking their exam orally with the professor, dictating the exam, or typing exam responses.

Many types of disabilities, including psychological and learning disabilities may interfere with mental focus, concentration, ability to retrieve information, and/or writing capacity during a typical paper-pencil test. Reducing the amount of external pressure and distractions gives the student an equal opportunity to demonstrate his or her expertise without the disability skewing the results.

The Disability Resources for Students office may be able to assist with providing someone to dictate the exam.

Be open to alternatives to oral presentations.

If you decide to have an oral exam or presentation project in your class, allow students to demonstrate their knowledge in alternative ways. For example, they could present just to the professor, they could write an essay instead of orally presenting, and some students have even created a video or home movie to demonstrate their knowledge. Be open to student ideas and suggestions.

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Students can borrow media equipment from the Media Lab, or through the STF equipment loan program at: http://www.css.washington.edu/STFEquipment.
Out of class work/Assignments

Provide access to readings online as well as in a reader

This can be helpful for students with all types of disabilities

Have all readings available online or in hard copy at least 2 weeks before the quarter starts

This can be helpful for students with learning, physical, and psychological disabilities, and visual impairments

Having readings available online in a course website or in e-reserves as well as in a reader allows students to choose the format that is most accessible for them. It can also cut down costs for low-income students

Students with learning disabilities often require all readings to in an audio format, as well as in hard copy. Be sure to provide your course reading in electronic format to all students several weeks before classes start, this will give Disability Services enough time to have the reading ready when the class starts.

If early is not possible, provide students with a summary of the reading and the important points to take away from the reading (this should be provided in electronic format as well as hard copy).

Set up an appointment with computer lab consultants for assistance in uploading readings to a catalyst website, or email the webmaster, Allison

An example of this would be an oral narrative recorded on CD instead of a written journal, or for oral assignments allow an essay or video taped presentation instead of an oral presentation.

Be open to alternative formats for written or oral assignments

This can be helpful for students with all types of disabilities
Additional information & resources can be found at:
http://www.washington.edu/doit/Faculty/Strategies/
http://www.bu.edu/cpr/reasaccom/eda-accom.html