

Accessibility in Teaching and Learning

What it is and how to work with it in practice | Teaching Commons

YORK 



What is it?

According to the York University Decolonizing, Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (DEDI) Strategy 2023-2028, “accessibility is a foundational principle for proactive and universal design and implementation of policies and practices to remove barriers that limit the equitable and meaningful access to participation and opportunities for people with labelled disabilities and variations in functioning and aptitude, which include cognitive, neurodiversity, learning, visual, motor, auditory, and medical disabilities, as well as disabilities of mental health” (p. 10). Accessible education is an iterative process of anticipating and mediating barriers to learning through proactive design and responsive teaching. For example, considering where flexibility, variety, and student choice is possible in course delivery, content, student participation, assessments, and due dates. It is important to note that accessible education does not negate the need for accommodations as it is not possible to create a perfect learning environment that meets the needs of every student, all the time.

Why is this important?

A commitment to accessibility in teaching and learning involves recognition and acknowledgement of the lived experiences of learners and makes a conscientious effort to ensure more equitable learning environments for as many students as possible. An accessible learning environment aims to support everyone more fully by opening multiple avenues of learning. Although it is not possible to eliminate the need for accommodations, implementing small changes in the classroom enhances accessibility for the benefit of students and these small changes can have a huge impact on their learning experience. In doing so, educators can make steady progress towards creating more inclusive learning environments for as many students as possible.

How can instructors make their courses more accessible?

For instructors who are interested in creating accessible courses, consider the following suggestions:

1. **Offer course material, content, or resources in a variety of modes or formats.** Students will access information in different ways, and some formats will create barriers for some students to learn. By offering a variety of formats, students will not be stuck with a format that creates a barrier for them, and they will be more likely to engage with the material. Course content can be delivered via lectures that include both visuals and aural descriptions, or via storytelling,

artifacts, physical objects and manipulatives, readings and written documents, images and diagrams, as well as videos and other audio-visuals, like podcasts.

2. **Ensure all course materials are accessible.** For visual materials, consider font size, style, and colour contrast, as well as the organization with use of headers, and alt-text and descriptions for images and diagrams. Ensure all documents work with e-Readers and text-to-speech devices so that all students can access the material as intended. Accessibility checkers, although not perfect, can assist and serve as a preliminary way for instructors to assess the accessibility of this course content. For audio-visual materials, provide written transcripts or closed captioning. If you are recording lectures so that students can access them asynchronously, ensure you turn on accessibility features, like automatic transcripts or captioning. Similarly, if you are playing a video in class, turn on the closed captioning so students have multiple ways to access the content.
3. **Offer students multiple ways to engage in and demonstrate learning.** Providing students with multiple means to engage and participate in the course as well as demonstrate their learning is another way to support accessibility. For instance, if fostering dialogue between students is a core learning outcome for a course, provide students with a chance to contribute to class discussions asynchronous via forums on eClass and/or synchronously in small groups or in breakout rooms on Zoom. Increasing the options available for students to learn and express their learning simultaneously works to increase accessibility because it creates more opportunities instead of limiting them.
4. **Implement flexible due dates for course assignments.** While it is still necessary to enforce due dates for administrative purposes (e.g. submitting final grades), providing students with a few days grace, or even a submission window, to submit their assignments is another way to support accessibility. Given that some students may require more time to process information needed to complete their work, having time to fully engage with course content without additional stresses can have a tremendous impact on students' ability to complete the course requirements and get the most out of the learning experience.
5. **Be explicit in assessment design and offer different modes for instructions and feedback.** In addition to providing clear and explicit written instructions for students when designing and preparing course assignments, consider creating a short audio or video clip outlining the instructions so students can access the course requirements in a different medium. Similarly, when providing written

feedback on student assignments and tests, consider giving students the option to receive verbal feedback via audio recording or live meeting if that is preferable and more accessible to them. Explicit instructions and feedback provided in multiple formats can help ensure students fully understand course expectations and can help them realize the learning outcomes of the course.

Additional Resources

CAST. (2024). *CAST Universal Design for Learning Guidelines version 3.0*. Retrieved from <https://udlguidelines.cast.org>

Council of Ontario Universities. (2017). *Ontario's universities accessible campus*. <https://accessiblecampus.ca/>

de Bie, A., & Brown, K. (2017). *Forward with flexibility: A teaching and learning resource on accessibility and inclusion*. McMaster University. <https://ecampusontario.pressbooks.pub/flexforward/>

National Deaf Center. (2020). *Rebecca's experience: what is an accessible learning environment?* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8YP3f6YLiI>

Wilkie, C., McNabb, J., Rose, N., Westin, O., Duez, P., & Dimayuga, P. (n.d.). *eCampusOntario's digital accessibility toolkit*. eCampus Ontario. <https://ecampusontario.pressbooks.pub/digitalaccessibilitytoolkit/>

York University Decolonizing, Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy 2023-2028. https://www.yorku.ca/vpepc/wp-content/uploads/sites/310/2023/03/22-201_DEDI-Strategy-2023-28_EN_r3.pdf

York University Accessibility Hub. <https://www.yorku.ca/accessibilityhub/>

York University Library Accessibility Services. <https://www.library.yorku.ca/web/ask-services/accessibility-services/>

York University Student Accessibility Services. <https://students.yorku.ca/accessibility>



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