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**Subject:** Teaching Toolbox: Disability Disclosure in the Classroom  
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## **Teaching Toolbox: Disability Disclosure in the Classroom** **by Daisy L. Breneman**

As we start the semester, this is a good time to think about providing access for all of our students to fully participate in the learning experiences we are creating. We've all likely received Access Plan Letters from the [Office of Disability Services](#) before. These letters discuss practical considerations for creating access for students with disabilities. While these details are essential, it's also important for us to consider the full story of what is sometimes referred to in the literature as "disability disclosure," that is, the process through which an individual reveals an identity in relation to (dis)ability status. [Disability](#) can contribute a great deal to [larger conversations about diversity in higher education](#). [Disability Studies](#) as a field asks critical questions about the social and rhetorical construction of identity; definitions of "normal"; issues of civil rights, access and full participation; the lived experience of disability; and much more.

Unfortunately, part of the lived experience of those with disabilities is encountering [stereotypes](#), social stigma, as well as individual and [systemic oppression](#). To disclose a disability means accepting a label imposed by a society that, as medical sociologist and activist [Irving K. Zola](#) notes, "devalues, discriminates against, and disparages people with disabilities." Academic conversations about disability disclosure (such as [Fink 2014](#)) have focused not only on how fraught the process of disclosure can be, but also how we as an academic community can employ strategies, such as those detailed below, to ensure people with disabilities can choose to disclose, or not disclose, from positions of power.

When a student's first introduction to a faculty member involves [disability disclosure](#), this can be a complex experience, not only because of the social implications, but also on a personal level; for example, students may wonder if the instructor is going to be approachable, helpful, understanding, and informed regarding disability access. Some of the things we can do to allay these concerns before, during, and after a disclosure include providing a clear and welcoming syllabus statement on disability, listening carefully to our students and keeping the lines of communication open, avoiding intrusive questions that aren't specifically relevant to the access plan, offering resources and support, and actively working with the student to provide access. Approaching disability disclosure with empathy and care can help reduce social and physical barriers to learning, create inclusive spaces, and open up important conversations about disability and diversity.

One way to reduce barriers to learning, for all students, is through [Universal Design for Learning](#), an approach that strives to create accessible and inclusive learning experiences by providing multiple means of representation, action and expression, and engagement. Rather than thinking about "accommodations" after a disclosure, we can move to a more proactive, inclusive model that improves access *for all learners*. UDL eases the disclosure process by demonstrating that the instructor understands providing access is an inherent responsibility of teaching, as well as, on a practical level, reducing the burden of "accommodations" for students and instructors alike.

Examples of universal design might include presenting materials in multiple formats, providing choice and flexibility around tests and assignments, and [making sure all of our educational materials are accessible](#). For more on Universal Design, consider consulting resources provided by [DO-IT](#), based at the University of Washington, Seattle.

Another consideration in navigating disability disclosure is the inclusion of disability in the curriculum. Including voices of people with disabilities, representations of disability, disability history, and other content about disability ensures that the first-week access plan letter is not the *only* conversation about disability that takes place in the context of the course. This improves access and inclusion, and helps offer all students richer perspectives on human diversity and the human experience.

To continue this conversation, keep an eye out for opportunities on campus, such as Disability Awareness Week in March, guest speakers, and other events. Also check out the new Disability Studies Minor at JMU; for more information, contact co-coordinators Dr. Susan Ghiaciuc (Writing, Rhetoric, and Technical Communication) and Daisy Breneman (Justice Studies). The Office of Disability Services also provides [resources for faculty](#). For more on disability disclosure in the classroom, see the forthcoming book, [Negotiating Disability: Disclosure in Higher Education](#). Let's keep the conversation going!

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