Teaching Insight: Connect to students in your class who have a disability

Full up to seven rows back, 9:08 Monday morning, Carslaw. The indecipherable buzz of fellow students settle and you know it should be a good lecture. As she begins, you realise your lecturer holds her head angled down and slightly off to the side, her voice is high, you sit too far back to read her lips easily. Adjusting your hearing aids makes them squeal, and you hope the person next to you doesn't hear. You are missing such a lot, it turns you off. Eyes glued to lips, it's hard to write your notes, you miss even more…*

ABS figures indicate that one in five Australians has a disability. It's likely that we are teaching students who might have hearing or vision impairments, physical or psychiatric disabilities, chronic medical conditions, specific learning or temporary disabilities, and we may not even notice.

Some students will have identified themselves to the University and registered with disability services who can arrange for the necessary support and adjustments to minimise the impact of a student’s disability on their studies.

In other cases, students might be more reluctant to disclose their situation. If we think a student’s work is being limited, perhaps by a disability we might consider initiating a discussion, asking the student whether there is anything we can do to ensure they can complete the course. Putting aside concerns of invading privacy or using the wrong terminology, we need to talk with these students and guide them to the network of support options available. (eg USyd Student Support Services – Disability Services ). An extensive resource useful in assisting teachers to better meet the needs of students with disabilities is the Creating Accessible Teaching and Support (CATS) website, funded by the ALTC and DEEWR and hosted by the University of Tasmania.

When initiating discussions with a student, ensure that your time together is free from interruptions and that you can talk privately. Provide the opportunity for students to discuss their learning support needs and do all that you can to make the interaction easy and supportive, most importantly, listen to what they say. Acknowledge the student’s feelings so they know they are being heard. Be clear about your limits of responsibility and recognise that you are not expected to counsel (if appropriate refer students to the Counselling Service ). If a student denies they are experiencing problems, explain why you are concerned, for example you might have noticed that their behavior has changed or the quality of their work has fallen. If they don’t want to discuss the matter then there may be little you can do but pass on the information about how to seek help in case they change their mind or want to follow it up independently.
Students with disabilities are not an homogenous group; it is important to recognise their individuality, particular strengths, and aspirations in the same way as we recognise all students as individuals. Inclusive teaching and assessment practices can minimise the need for individual support for students with disabilities while enhancing the learning of all students.

*Author's first hand experiences as a hearing impaired student and academic