Moving From Access to Inclusion by Making Communication a Priority: An Inclusion Mindset

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Abstract

This case study describes an effective mindset for building a fully inclusive approach to postsecondary teaching of students with and without disabilities. Via a faculty learning community (FLC) and partnering faculty with deaf and hard of hearing students, this 'inclusion mindset' resulted in customized strategies for faculty to increase interaction and collaboration in their specific classroom contexts. It also facilitated a transition for student-partners into agents for change. Starting from their own inclusion perspectives and helping to develop classroom strategies to address similar inclusion challenges, these students gained insights on the needs of others. Importantly, they grew into their own identity as someone who could influence needed change. Practical details of the implementation are provided within the context of intentionality as a mindset that moves a model of partnering from consultation to collaboration.

Introduction

In 2017, we both taught at a university that had over 15000 undergraduate students, 1300 of whom were deaf or hard of hearing (DHH). We began work on an NSF-funded project (NSF #1625581) with the goal of improving the classroom experience when you have communicatively diverse enrollment: Students who are deaf, hard of hearing, and hearing; students who use ASL, or who sign and talk, or who use spoken English; students who are new signers, native signers, and non-signers. We formulated an idea of learning communities where instructors were partnered with DHH students to inform "friction points" in the classroom teaching and learning space. The DHH students would observe (mainstream) classroom sessions and bring back their perspectives to the learning community.

We describe the attitudes and intentions associated with our project through "mindsets", which we define as established sets of attitudes that are intentional and action oriented. One example is Carol Dweck's (2006) growth mindset, in which people believe that they can develop their abilities through effort and practice. Another example is a student-centered mindset (e.g. Wright, 2011), where teachers consider students to be unique agents of their learning and collaborators in the classroom. Further, we distinguish between intention and intentionality. Intention is turning one's mind toward something; intentionality is the framework around (and behind) that intention. Intentionality provides the impetus for action towards one intention(s).

As our project got underway, we quickly realized two important shifts in mindset:

1. We needed total communication access, which required moving from a "minimally viable" access mindset (generally, either an ASL/English interpreter is provided *or* speech-to-text captioning, but not both simultaneously) to an optimal access mindset in which a comprehensive array of language and communication facilitation resources (things/services/tools) were provided so that each participant had their needs met in the way that best suited them.

2. We needed to center the deaf and hard of hearing *identity* of the student partners in order to move from an accommodation mindset to an inclusion mindset.

What ended up happening is that by prioritizing the communication and identities within our group we gained valuable insights about what *inclusion* really can look like. Students were pleasantly surprised by an experience where "everyone's needs were met," and they developed their own identities as agents of their learning and advocates for their own needs and the needs of others.

In this case study, we bring forth a mindset shift in approaching accommodations for needs of students with disabilities in the postsecondary classroom. Within the traditional accommodation mindset, postsecondary faculty provide the accommodations required by law (Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), 2008). A campus disability services office serves as grantor and certifier of necessary services and/or modifications to standard instructional delivery. Instructors and other students are left with little agency or responsibility beyond providing for the specified accommodations to take place. We propose a shift to the inclusion mindset where instead of belonging to a third-party disability services office, this responsibility and agency is re-centered in the classroom. Thus, the job of "teaching and learning" relies on instructors and students working together to achieve learning goals.

Desire to Improve

Moving from instructor-centered to student-centered mindsets (e.g., Wright 2011; Weimer, 2002; see also Chickering & Gamson, 1987) had already proven fruitful for us. For example, Marchetti taught statistics courses, and had long used a mini-lecture (10-15 minutes) at the start of class sessions, followed by team problem solving for the rest of the session. Adding large whiteboards as communication options for each group had gone a long way to improving interactions between hearing and DHH students in the course (Marchetti et al, 2012), and likely benefited other students who communicate differently due to language, cultural, physical, or social reasons. Schley had ample experience incorporating blended (online and in person) learning experiences into her courses, as well as collaborative writing assignments (Schley & Stinson, 2016; Schley, Duckles & Blili-Hamelin, 2020). Examples of these collaborative writing projects included students creating wiki resource pages together, students collaborating on chapters of a class-produced book, class-sourced group notes, and collaborative research assignments with group presentations.

These changes in our teaching methods were voluntary, motivated by a desire to better help our students learn. As with other pedagogical shifts, success lies as much in the advantages of the "new" method as in the intention of the person implementing it. We have to "own" a method to really make it succeed, invest in the work it will take to change what we do and have a growth mindset in which we are willing to struggle at first, knowing that we can improve with practice.

Inclusion Mindset

In contrast to voluntary changes to teaching such as those previously described, the ADA requires that postsecondary students with disabilities receive necessary accommodations in order to access class material and interactions, and to share their own academic products (papers, tests, discussion, etc.). The framework of this law establishes accommodation as an "add on," doing what is required by law and their institution (e.g. providing extra time, having an interpreter in class), rather than instructor adaptations in teaching. In this *accommodation mindset*, someone else is responsible for managing the disability and communication with the assumption that once the accommodation occurs, the student with a disability is as close as possible to being "the same" as every other student. In a sense - the disabled student is thus also accommodating themself to the mainstream class norms.

We acknowledge that most faculty have good intentions - they want to help their students learn. But to best meet the needs of any student, one should directly ask the student, and not rely entirely on the assessment and requirements put forth by someone else or by federal access guidelines (e.g. the disability services office and the ADA, 2008). Rather than merely provide accommodation add-ons, an instructor could express curiosity about their students' needs. What they learn could surprise them.

Table 1 summarises the dynamic of the accommodation mindset and contrasts it to an inclusion mindset. We propose that learning and communication are the responsibility of all parties involved and that everyone must adapt to create a successful environment. In this inclusion mindset, every learning situation is different, and an instructor must work with each student to ensure that their needs are met. For those with differing modes of communication (e.g. spoken English and ASL), the efforts of each person to understand the other - and be understood - make a difference. This is more than reliance on an interpreter. It includes making eye contact, speaking at an appropriate pace, pausing to ensure understanding, taking turns, repeating when necessary, and managing the class discussion flow to accommodate the time it takes DHH students to follow the communication through the interpreter. Adjusting the way one teaches/interacts can make a difference beyond the students/partners for whom the changes were intended.

Table 1: Differences in Accommodation and Inclusion Mindsets

Mindset:	**Accommodation**	**Inclusion**
	"The problem lies with the student, not my teaching"	"Teacher and student engage together to address the problem"
With respect to:		
Needs	Rely on DSO for information	Ask each student about their needs, develop a solution together
Actions	Provide only what is required	Look for ways to improve the (learning) experience
Effort	Accommodations are an "add-on" to teaching	Design teaching to anticipate obstacles and remove barriers
Criticism	Assume student needs are met with the prescribed accommodation, ignore useful negative feedback	Solicit feedback from the student about how well their needs are being met, adjust accordingly, learn from criticism
Success	Student success does not depend on how well their needs were met	Student success is influenced by how well their needs are met

Case Study

To engage faculty in pedagogical improvements from an inclusion mindset, we established semester-long FLCs at our institution. The setting for this university includes ten colleges spanning disciplinary areas such as computing and information science, engineering, engineering technology, science and math, art and design, health sciences, liberal arts, business, and sustainability. Uniquely, it has a college (the National Technical Institute for the Deaf, NTID) for deaf and hard of hearing students who may be enrolled in technically oriented A.S. programs in this college or in B.S. programs in the university's other colleges. Students may take courses at this college while also taking courses "across campus." The faculty and staff at NTID are uniquely employed for their disciplinary expertise and their experience and training in working with DHH students. While we initially envisioned this project largely taking place across campus in courses at the other colleges, we very quickly added faculty and instructors from NTID to the mix, as many were managing complex communication needs amongst their students. Even if students in the course were all DHH, some signed without voice, some signed alongside using their voice, and some used their voices without signing.

In our FLC meetings, we wanted everyone present to be able to understand and contribute. To address the complex communication dynamics, we established a foundational rule: Everyone would be provided the communication and interaction access that they needed. This was a mindset shift beyond providing ADA-required access. Rather than providing a single communication access solution (e.g. arguably, everyone could access captions since we did not have participants with visual disabilities), we provided all options. This was also quite different from what occurred in classrooms where, generally, either interpreting services or captioning services were provided and a student's accommodations specified one or the other.

Another key aspect of the communities was the "ground rules" that were developed early in the semester and revisited regularly. One ground rule was a "talking stick" approach for which we used beanie baby toys (Blizzard & Foster, 2007). Because participants had to actively pass the beanie baby to the next speaker, it provided a moment for DHH participants to switch visual focus from the language access point (ASL interpreter or captioning) to see *who* was about to talk or sign.

The student partners were surprised and amazed from the outset. No one had ever put that much effort and resources into making sure they could be full participants. The community took the time to determine diverse needs, and made the effort to ensure these needs were met. It was not enough to make sure everyone had a place at the table, we needed to make sure everyone could participate fully. There was a level of "meta". Our communities were focused on improving classroom communication, interaction and inclusion. The communities, experiencing a complex set of communication dynamics, provided a real-time example of effective strategies for inclusion.

We set up these learning communities to focus on increasing interaction and collaboration in courses across our campus with mixed enrolments of deaf, hard of hearing, and hearing post-secondary students. We advertised to all faculty on campus (there were about 1400 full and part-time instructors spread across all colleges at the university) via several emails, inviting faculty to spend a semester focusing on improving classroom access, increasing engagement and collaboration, and benefitting from an innovative research-to practice NSF-funded project. The invitation also specified that the semester-long FLC would review principles of universal design for learning, brainstorm new strategies, and test them in classrooms.

The structure of the communities was to meet biweekly, with two faculty facilitators (one of the authors, hearing; and a deaf faculty member with similar training and teaching responsibilities). We planned for 4-6 faculty participants, alongside several DHH student employees serving as support in gathering information (classroom observations) and providing a "lived experience" perspective for faculty wrestling with access and inclusion friction points. Faculty and instructors across all ranks, discipline areas, and classroom contexts (lecture, discussion, wet labs, group activities) and learning platforms (online, blended, in person, flipped) were welcomed. While we did not offer compensation or incentives to join, we did have a modest budget for any materials and supplies that participants wanted to explore using. To apply for a spot in the learning community, we asked faculty to briefly describe: (1) their interest in this topic, (2) one challenge they had had in the classroom with respect to access and diverse learners, and (3) what classes they

were teaching this semester. By the end of the project, we ran five sessions of these communities.

Within two meetings of the first learning community, we realized that we needed to elevate the role of students to a primary focus of the research project. As they became full-fledged partners with the faculty, the partnership began impacting their own identities and agency in the process of learning and developing pedagogy.

Their job description included the following: Conduct classroom observations, participate in 1:1 debrief sessions with their faculty partner after reviews, participate fully in the learning community sessions, and take notes on their perceptions and observations. The class observation tool (see Cawthon, Schley & Davison, 2019; Jassal, Cawthon & Schley, 2020) served as a guide for the 1:1 debrief sessions, where the student/faculty pair discussed the insights, reactions, and suggestions about access and inclusion. At the start, both parties in the partnership had some trepidation: students were nervous about giving "feedback" to faculty, and faculty felt vulnerable in opening up about their process with a student. While the student mentor was not enrolled in the course they were observing, this partnership fundamentally broke through some of the typical power dynamics and boundaries between the role of faculty and role of student (see Marchetti et al., 2019).

Since the learning community sessions occurred every other week, on the alternate weeks we met with the group of DHH student mentors to coach them on partnering with faculty, and generally check in with them. They began reporting insights about their own experiences as a member of the project team. Crucially, this went beyond what we initially defined as their role and their contribution to the project. They were initially in a "support" role with and for faculty. As partners, their work centered on informing friction points in the classroom experience, brainstorming and designing solutions, and in general helping to reduce access and inclusion friction points. The experience of being a DHH mentor to and with faculty was transformative for the student mentors themselves. The project team submitted an amendment to the IRB office and added the student mentors to the project's research focus.

We held five learning communities between the fall of 2016 and the spring of 2019. Some details of the sessions evolved - for example, later in the project, we had a group of faculty interested in exploring how to increase engagement and interaction specifically in online settings. However, the focus remained on increasing inclusion, rather than relying on accommodation services. At the end of each semester, we collected reflection and feedback insights from both faculty and student participants. Reflections from the DHH student mentors included (see also Atkins et al., 2021):

> … *I was able to give faculty feedback it was exciting to see them implement the change.*

> *This experience has influenced my future career. I will be working with teachers and now I feel that I can give them feedback of how to make their classrooms accessible for all students.*

> *I feel empowered, trusted, and respected from my work within the FLCs.*

[The FLC experience] helped me to develop the skills to be able to provide feedback to the teacher if I noticed something that may need to be changed in the classroom. I have more of a voice now and I can give feedback to the teacher from a student's perspective on what they need to improve.

... I have one class that has a Deaf professor. In that class are two voice interpreters, but no captionist. I mostly rely on captioning so that's a problem for me. I made a stupid decision and decided to sit in the back of the room, behind the voice interpreter. The teacher signed but I could not really see her signing sometimes, so that was a bad idea. The classroom was set up in a good way, in a U-shape. On the second day, I decided to sit in the front of the classroom, so I can see the voice interpreter and the teacher, and see the whiteboard better. So this is like I was using the strategies for myself in my own classroom.

Faculty participant reflections included:

Best part was having [my DHH mentor] review content and organization from the student perspective and provide feedback.

I preferred to have a student mentor because there was no risk. Students are more technologically savvy, and they have the student perspective. If I had a peer they may not want to be totally honest, or I may have taught differently because of a peer watching me.

Ultimately, the FLC experience constantly reminded me and challenged me to be intentional about HOW I am presenting material, WHY I am presenting in that way, and to then take everything a step further by assessing whether or not my attempts were perceived as effective or useful to the students themselves.

Having neutral, non-biased feedback from a student in the classroom is a wonderful tool.

Meeting several students with varying hearing abilities helped me realizing that D/HH students have different needs e.g. some of them prefer ASL, others prefer to read captions.

Clearly, these partnerships had value and benefits beyond our original vision.

Discussion

What does it mean to be a *full* participant in a faculty-student partnership? We tackled this question by considering disability identity and communication access as pivotal mindsets in facilitating not only pedagogical change in the college classroom, but also student transformation into change agents. Via a series of semester-long FLCs, we used a partnership model to develop strategies aimed at increasing interaction and inclusion in postsecondary courses (Schley et al., 2021). The student partners were all deaf or hard of hearing (DHH), with a diverse set of communication preferences. Faculty partners were also diverse: some were DHH though most were hearing; disciplinary areas included math and statistics, engineering, visual arts, psychology, and developmental writing.

Our experience led us to new understandings of access and inclusion. While the ADA guarantees basic access to information exchanged in classroom settings and for students demonstrating their knowledge, it does not address a complex set of interaction and collaboration dynamics that occur frequently in higher education classrooms. Only when we remove barriers from the classroom can students experience full participation through inclusion. This requires making space for faculty and students to explore the barriers and friction points and work together to find solutions. Figure 1 illustrates three mindsets in teaching: 1) equality, where everyone receives the same treatment, 2) accommodation, where a modification to address the barrier makes participation possible, and 3) inclusion, where the barrier has been removed, so no modification is needed.

The multiple iterations of the FLCs had a consistent focus on developing strategies for faculty to increase inclusion and interaction in their courses (rather than relying solely on disability accommodations). Participants embraced this mindset shift, generally seeing these efforts as resulting in better learning experiences for their students, as well as better experiences for them as teachers (Marchetti et al., 2019). We cannot claim that these FLCs impacted a collective mindshift at the university as a whole as there are over 1000 full time faculty (we had 21 faculty participants across all five iterations of the FLCs).

Overall, there were not noticeable differences in the inclusion mindset perspectives of faculty participants based on their diversity (disciplinary areas, hearing status, etc.). Both DHH and hearing faculty participants developed useful strategies for increasing interaction and collaboration in their own classrooms, and saw the value of using an inclusion mindset (over an accommodation mindset). We cannot claim that there were no differences between faculty regarding their mindset perspectives, however within the structure of these FLCs, all faculty were able to develop strategies that fit their own particular classroom needs and demands. There were certainly differences in strategies based on characteristics of individual courses. Faculty with larger classrooms were not able to tackle the same kinds of individual-student focused strategies as faculty with small course registration. Faculty with specific physical features (e.g., classroom in the round) were constrained in specific interaction and engagement strategies. In all cases, faculty participants were able to develop strategies that worked for their specific context.

In the end, the FLC experience contributed to the students' transformation into change agents. They became a part of the solution and gained agency over complex classroom dynamics. Previously, access was "provided" but not linked to specific needs and preferences. While our context was deaf-hearing communication access, the concept can be applied more broadly to other student needs. By being deliberate about ensuring mutual understanding of what all classroom participants are saying, the teaching and learning experience will improve. The inclusion mindset adopted here does not only apply to our context (large, private university with large enrolments of both hearing and DHH students). All institutions of higher education can benefit from focusing on inclusion with specific attention to their own demographics and student and faculty needs. Leaning into this kind of diversity provides insight into broad classroom inclusion.

Figure 1: Representations of Equality, Accommodation, and Inclusion (Adapted from https://otis.libguides.com/accessibility)

As in many teaching and learning partnerships, the students and faculty in our project generally had intentions to learn, to teach, to improve upon the learning experience. Our student partners also gained valuable skills regarding their own learning processes (see Atkins et al., 2021). In particular, they gained confidence in advocating for their own access needs, and insight and perspective into the differing needs that individual people have in various settings. From our experience we have learned that to have a true community partnership, community members must also intend to facilitate the full participation of all. Intentionality (a mindset) opens the door. It shows that you value the contributions of your partner(s), that this relationship is more than a "check box" for you. With that foundation, even if your implementation is not perfect, your partnership can improve and be successful.

Acknowledgements

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