

Curricular Transformation for Students With Disabilities



Greg Long, Professor of [Rehabilitation Counseling](#), has several tips to share with faculty who would like to transform their curriculum with regard to students with disabilities.

“Most people believe accessibility is a physical issue involving things like stairs and grab bars,” he says. “Although physical accessibility remains an important issue, attitudinal accessibility and technology accessibility are two major issues faced by students with disabilities that faculty seldom consider.

“The primary barrier cited most frequently by individuals who have disabilities is the attitude of people who are not disabled. For example, students with learning disabilities, mental health issues, or other difficulties are frequently reluctant to disclose their disability. It is not uncommon for them to hear comments like ‘You don’t *look* disabled’ or ‘You just aren’t trying hard enough.’ These types of reactions can be very daunting; and social criticism combined with lack of appropriate assistance distinctly hinders the learning process.

“Another critical barrier is technological access. Students who have learning disabilities or visual impairments frequently use screen reading software to access information online. Unfortunately, a significant portion of NIU’s web presence is inaccessible. For example, many aspects of Blackboard are not accessible. In a similar vein, most PDFs are incompatible as well.”

Dr. Long pointed out that federal law has long been in place which mandates accessibility of public institutions. [Section 504](#) of the Rehabilitation Act debuted in 1973, and the 1990 [ADA](#) was modeled after these laws. In addition, he recommends that faculty peruse the [Illinois Information Technology Accessibility Act](#) (2007). This state law “...[requires] Illinois agencies and universities to ensure that their web sites, systems, and other information technologies are accessible to people with disabilities.”



DO-IT

Recommended Resource

One of the best online resources Professor Long has found is the University of Washington’s International [DO-IT \(Disabilities, Opportunities, Internetworking, and Technology\)](#) Center.

The Center indicates: “DO-IT serves to increase the participation and success of individuals with disabilities in challenging academic programs and careers. It promotes the use of computer and networking technologies to increase independence, productivity, and participation in education and employment.”

- The international DO-IT Center:
- * Promotes the use of accessible information technology and universal design.
 - * Distributes publications and videos to freely use and reproduce for presentations and exhibits.
 - * Provides resources for students with disabilities, K-12 educators, postsecondary, faculty, and administrators, librarians, employers, and parents and mentors.
 - * Sponsors or co-sponsors programs that are grounded in research and maximize the independence, productivity, and participation of people with disabilities.

Communication Hints from the University of Washington's DO-IT Resource Center

Treat people with disabilities with the same respect and consideration with which you treat others. There are no strict rules when it comes to relating to people with disabilities. However, here are some [helpful hints](#).

General

- Ask a person with a disability if he or she needs help before providing assistance.
- Talk directly to the person with a disability, not through the person's companion or interpreter.
- Refer to a person's disability only if it is relevant to the conversation. If so, mention the person first and then the disability. "A man who is blind" is better than "a blind man" because it puts the person first.
- Avoid negative descriptions of a person's disability. For example, "a person who uses a wheelchair" is more appropriate than "a person confined to a wheelchair."
- Do not interact with a person's guide dog or service dog unless you have received permission to do so.

Blind or Low Vision

- Be descriptive. Say, "The computer is about three feet to your left," rather than "The computer is over there."
- When guiding people with visual impairments, offer them your arm rather than grabbing or pushing them.

Special Announcement

The 2008 Multicultural Curriculum Transformation Institute (MCTI) has been canceled. Dr. AnaLouise Keating, who was scheduled to be the keynote speaker for the Institute, has agreed to speak next year. The 2009 MCTI is set for May 11-15. For more information, contact mcti@niu.edu.

Learning Disabilities

- Offer directions or instructions both orally and in writing. If asked, read instructions to individuals who have specific learning disabilities.

Mobility Impairments

- Sit or otherwise position yourself at the approximate height of people sitting in wheelchairs when you interact.

Speech Impairments

- Listen carefully. Repeat what you think you understand and then ask the person with a speech impairment to clarify or repeat the portion that you did not understand.

Deaf or Hard of Hearing

- In groups raise hands to be recognized so the person who is deaf knows who is speaking. Repeat questions from audience members.

Psychiatric Impairments

- Provide information in clear, calm, respectful tones.
- Allow opportunities for addressing specific questions.

Excerpted from the University of Washington's DO-IT website.

Peer Experience: Sally Conklin

Dr. Sally Conklin, Community Health Coordinator in the School of Nursing and Health Studies, prepare students to be comfortable in a variety of professional settings, e.g., health educators. Students should come out as 'competent, comfortable sexuality educators.' She cites three points to successfully integrating LGBT diversity into her curriculum:

1. Normalize LGBT as part of the entire course. Choose a text that doesn't separate issues such as homosexuality to a specific chapter. LGBT examples should permeate the text as well as other course materials.
2. Rather than the faculty member lecturing about LGBT issues, bring in experts such as LGBT guests or an out faculty member or panel.



3. Every 2-3 class periods, have students write 3-minute paper. Utilize open-ended questions, such as, "What topics would be most difficult for you as a teacher?" "What is your response if a parent objects to your curriculum?"

The papers permit Sally to 'take the pulse' of the students' professional development. Typically, she assigns them to write before the guest speaker on the topic appears. Students are permitted to send sexual orientation questions to the guest speaker ahead of time.

After the guest speaker's Q&A, the students write reflectively about their reactions. Sally also shows a video to the class which demonstrates how students might apply what they learned.

Method: Snowball Activity

This exercise is good for students who are young (such as freshmen), or who are new to discussing sexuality as part of their pedagogical education. It enables them to ask and respond to questions in an anonymous way.

Have each student divide a blank piece of paper into four quadrants.

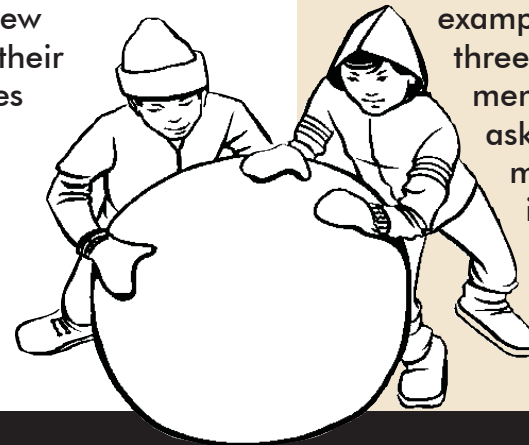
Direct the students to write, in the first quadrant, three things they think teachers need to know about sexual orientation.

In the second quadrant, let the student write a question, such as, "What questions should a classroom teacher be prepared to answer?"

In the third quadrant, ask the student to write what they themselves have seen, heard, or experienced firsthand about a given topic.

In the fourth quadrant, students indicate whether or not they were present for the speaker or video (yes or no).

All students then wad up the paper into a snowball and throw them into a basket, or into the center of the room. The faculty member then has a variety of approaches to the discussion. For example, if the question in quadrant three is, "I have a friend or family member who is gay," she can ask for show of hands. This method doesn't out anyone. It is also much more effective at demonstrating the instance of LGBT in society than citing a fact in a lecture.

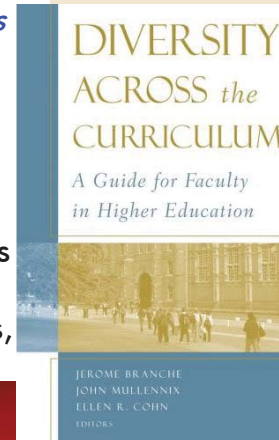
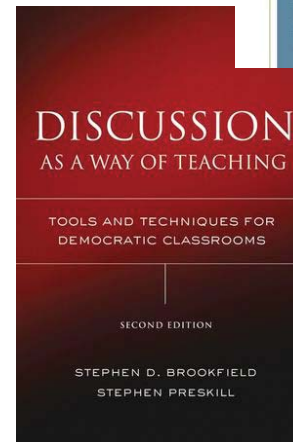


Featured Books

Discussion as a Way of Teaching: Tools and Techniques for Democratic Classrooms (2005) by Stephen D. Brookfield and Stephen Preskill. This book shows how to plan, conduct, and assess classroom discussions. The authors suggest exercises for starting discussions, strategies for maintaining their momentum, and ways to elicit diverse views and voices. This revised edition expands on the original and contains information on adapting discussion methods in online teaching, on using discussion to enhance democratic participation, and on the theoretical foundations for the discussion exercises.

Authors Brookfield and Preskill show how discussion can enliven classrooms, and outline practical methods for ensuring that students will come to class prepared to discuss a topic. They also explain how to balance the voices of students and teachers, while still preserving the moral, political, and pedagogic integrity of discussion.

Amazon reviewer William Jamison, who teaches philosophy at the University of Alaska, writes: "I have been teaching for 10 years and have had lots of opportunity to put these techniques into practice. Many of the times discussions did not go well -- and the book describes why. Many times the discussions went well -- and the book describes why. It can be very daunting encouraging students to get started and keep a discussion productive, fair, and equally engaging for all students. ... The suggestions are very practical and easy to use and make a big difference in the class."



Diversity Across the Curriculum: A Guide for Faculty in Higher Education (2007) by Jerome Branche, John Mullenix, and Ellen R. Cohn. This practical guide will empower even the busiest faculty members to create culturally inclusive courses and learning environments. In a collection of more than 50 vignettes, exceptional teachers from a wide range of academic

disciplines—health sciences, humanities, sciences, and social sciences—describe how they actively incorporate diversity into their teaching. Different strategies discussed include a role-model approach, creating a safe space in the classroom, and the cultural competency model. Practical guidance is offered for culturally inclusive course design, syllabus construction, textbook selection, and assessment strategies. This book contains an overview of the following areas:

- * Diversity as an integral component of college curricula
- * Structuring diversity-accessible courses
- * Practices that facilitate diversity across the curriculum
- * Diversity and disciplinary practices

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