

Instructional accommodations: Impact of conventional vs. social constructivist view of disability

Sarah M. Ginsberg and Karen Schulte¹

Abstract: This study examined the relationship between university faculty members' perspectives on students with special learning needs and their views on providing accommodations. Findings demonstrate that professors who view students with disabilities from a conventional, deficit perspective feel ill-equipped to provide necessary accommodations. Professors who hold a social constructivist view of disabilities view all learners, including those with identified needs, on a continuum and see accommodations for special learners as being an extension of their good teaching. Implications for faculty development and increased use of universal instructional design are discussed.

Key Words: accommodations, social constructivism, interactionist perspective, view of disability, college classroom, university teaching

I. Background.

We have seen a significant increase in the numbers of students with disabilities attending post-secondary education programs in the past decade. Current statistics suggest that approximately 10% of students in postsecondary education institutions in the United States have a disability (Rickman, 1995, Scott, McGuire and Foley, 2003). Unlike the K-12 programs, however, teachers in colleges and universities have little support or knowledge of how to effectively support and educate students with special needs. While there are many institutions that offer support programs to students who have identified disabilities, few of these focus on the improvement of the quality of educational experience from the faculty perspective. As one professor from a College of Business stated, "most of us around this university do not . . . even have any training in education per se. I mean you know for most of us teaching, exam writing, I mean, we've learned off-the-cuff, on our own." He goes on to explain that

I've never had training in the needs of special education students so unless the student tells me there's some kind of additional thing that I need to be doing in class or there is something that I could be doing differently, then I just basically have to assume that everything is going okay.

Limited familiarity with a wide variety of pedagogical techniques and with students whose needs are out of the mainstream of average learners is common in post-secondary institutions across the country (McGuire and Scott, 2006). There is a "persistent myth" (Roche and Marsh, 2001, p. 445) that college faculty who have completed terminal degrees are knowledgeable about teaching and are adequately prepared with pedagogical skills for teaching positions. Very few educators receive any formal preparation for their roles as teachers (Hativa, 2000; Hativa, Barak, and Simhi, 1999; Roche and Marsh, 2000). Instead most teachers report that they have learned their skills in on-the-job training and by trial and error with little support

¹ Department of Special Education, Eastern Michigan University, 128 Porter, Ypsilanti, MI 48197, sginsberg@emich.edu, kschulte@emich.edu.

or direct supervision. Faculty may have “fragmented knowledge and unfounded beliefs about what makes instruction effective” because of their limited formal training (Hativa, Barak, and Simhi., 1999, p. 3). Limited knowledge about the variety of learning needs present in their classroom may be one such area of deficit in their understanding of effective teaching. Many university instructors emphasize content over pedagogy (Shaw, Scott and McGuire, 2001).

The conventional view of students with special learning needs or disabilities as being “defective” (Ghersiequiere, Maes, Vandenberghe, 2004) is not unheard of in society in general nor amongst university faculty. This view of disabilities and special needs focuses on the disability labels assigned to students. The emphasis is on the impairment as it resides within the individual—This is perceived as the dominant characteristic and represents a deviance (Porter, 1994). The underlying assumption in this view is that the student who has a learning disability, for example, is a student who has an underlying condition that is the root cause of his success or failure (Dudley-Marling, 2004). This view of a disability sets the learner off to the side, creating a sense of otherness or being outside the spectrum of learners present in the class. It may be stigmatizing and overwhelming for the student as he feels that the disability represents his load alone to bear. Teachers holding this view may be “on the lookout for deficits in need of remediation” (Dudley-Marling, 2004) rather than seeing themselves as an educator seeking an opportunity for learning.

In contrast, the *interactionist* point of view suggests that disabilities are not “rooted in persons, but instead arising from interactions between persons and their environment” (Porter, 2004, p. 71). Also known as *social constructivism*, this perspective suggests that learning and learning problems are rooted with the context of human interactions and relationships (Dudley-Marling, 2004). A learning disability, for example, is not a reflection of the learner’s malfunction, but rather is evident when the learning activities and environment, including the teaching, do not sufficiently support the learner in such a way as to facilitate successful learning. Inherent in the *interactionist* perspective is the view of the student with special learning needs as one who may have more unique or extreme needs than the average learner, but whose needs are related to those other students have as well. In other words, they are not separate and apart from a body of learners, but perhaps some of their needs represent a farther point on the continuum of needs all learners have. In some learning scenarios, they may be as successful as or more successful than other classroom learners. They are not a deficient learner at all times, rather their abilities, performance and learning will change with alterations in tasks, environments, and teachers. The “disability” is not static and omnipresent, but dynamic and fluctuating across interactions (Porter, 1994).

Given the lack of formal education regarding college teaching and limited exposure to individuals with disabilities in combination with the rising numbers of students with disabilities of all types in higher education, we began to wonder how university faculty members were responding to students with special learning needs in their classrooms. We set out to learn more about the faculty perspective on “What do you do for students with disabilities in your classroom?”

II. Method.

A. Study Design.

This qualitative study was conducted by interviewing individual faculty members to gain their self-report regarding their approach to teaching students with disabilities in their own classrooms. The participants' perspective was solicited in an effort to understand the multiple perspectives of those situated in the context of this particular problem (Glesne, 1999). We attempted to create meaning of the similarities and differences in the individual stories (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998). The use of qualitative research methods is possibly one of the most appropriate "because it allows researchers to unravel the complex school and classroom realities" (Ghesquiere, Maes and Vandenberghe, 2004, p. 172). This study used a multiple case study approach to aid in drawing comparisons and differences between of a small group of university faculty.

B. Participants.

This study was conducted at a large, Midwest, public four year university. Faculty volunteers were solicited from all departments across campus. Faculty volunteers were purposefully chosen in an attempt to have broad disciplinary representation of a typical case sampling (Glesne, 1999). Of the respondents, 12 full-time, tenure track faculty members were interviewed. Participants' experience with university teaching ranged from untenured assistant professors with only two years of experience to full professors who had been teaching for more than 30 years. No teachers who were in their first year of teaching were included in the study. Of the 12 faculty members, 25% of the volunteers were men. The average age of participants was 49 years old, ages ranged from 32 to 65 of age. Purposively sampling (Glesne, 1999) was used to obtain representation from all of the university's colleges, including Business, Technology, Education, Health and Human Services, and Liberal Arts. Faculty disciplines included teacher education, math, psychology, accounting, art, communications, health education, occupational therapy, geology, and engineering. No faculty from the Department of Special Education was included.

C. Data Collection.

As noted above, all participants were individually interviewed. Interviews averaged approximately 60 minutes in length. Questions were designed to elicit the perceptions and attitudes of the teachers (Glesne, 1999) regarding their teaching of students with disabilities. The term "disabilities" was broadly defined as any condition that affected the students' learning or limited functional abilities (Belch, 2004-5). The semi-structured interviews began by asking the professors the open-ended question "Tell me about your experience teaching students with disabilities or special learning needs at this university." In addition to spontaneous questions that arose during the course of the interview, all faculty were all asked to explain what accommodations they made in their classrooms for learners with special needs.

D. Data Analysis.

We audio taped each interview with the participant's permission. The audio recordings were transcribed. Creswell's (1994; 1998) guidelines for the analytic processing of data using reduction and interpretation were followed. We used the "progressive process" of sorting, defining, and relating the data with codes to interpret into relevant units to make better sense of their meanings (Glesne, 1999). In the initial coding stages, all data from faculty interviews were reviewed individually. All data was sorted sentence by sentence into categories related to content or message associated with immediacy behaviors reported and observed. These categories were then compared and consolidated into broader categories. Each chunk of data was then compared with these broader categories and compared with each other. As we analyzed the codes for patterns and themes, we "linked [them] together" to begin forming theoretical models (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003, p. 279). In addition, data analysis and coding was reviewed by study collaborators and co-authors for the purpose of validating codes and conclusions (Creswell, 2003; Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

III. Results.

Participants' responses to the question "Tell me about your experience teaching students with disabilities or special learning needs at this university" demonstrated that faculty tended to hold either the deficit, conventional view of students with disabilities or the social constructivist perspective, though none identified their views in these terms. Faculty whose responses to students with special learning needs indicated that they viewed these students as separate and unrelated to the range of learners in their classrooms were identified as having the conventional view of disabilities. Comments from these faculty suggested that the student with disabilities posed significant challenges to them as teachers, often because they did not have enough knowledge of the specific disability to educate adequately the student. This group also described the special needs learner as being the person primarily, if not solely, responsible for identifying how they should be effectively educated. Faculty holding the conventional view also noted that students with physical and other obvious disabilities, such as being in a wheelchair, were easier to educate because they understood those disabilities better.

The volunteers whose perspectives were consistent with the conventional view of disabilities advocated accommodations only for those students with appropriate documentation, and the accommodations mentioned focused on assessment. Providing "extra time to take the exam" was often the first accommodation reported by this group of faculty and was occasionally reported as the sole commonly offered accommodation. It was reported that it is "not faculty responsibility" to offer accommodations and that they prefer that the learner comes to the class "when they already have adaptations." The accommodations focused on specific activities within the context of the course, such as note taking, test taking, or periods for work completion. Additionally, all of the faculty who held the conventional view of disability expressed concerns that if they offered students with disabilities too many accommodations, it would not be "fair" to the other students in the class. Most of these faculty members indicated that they would not provide any accommodations to students who failed to produce the appropriate university paperwork documenting their disability. This belief was not explicitly connected to a strictly enforced university policy and was, in fact, quite dissimilar to other faculty interviewed at the same university.

In contrast, some faculty described their view of students with special learning needs in a manner consistent with the interactionist view. These faculty see special needs students as students on another point of the same continuum as all other students. Rather than describing their understanding of the specific disability causing learning difficulties, they focused on their interactions with the students. Many participants in this group described sitting down and talking with the students about what they need in order to be successful learners, independent of disability label. In fact, few of these teachers required students to present formal documentation. Rather, they viewed their role in teaching to be one in which they were able to facilitate learning for all students, no matter that their particular needs were. This perspective was best described by one participant when she said that what she does “isn’t an accommodation, it’s just good teaching.” Samples of faculty verbatim quotes are included in Table 1 to illustrate the two perspectives.

Table 1. Faculty conventional vs. social constructivist view of disabilities.

Conventional View of Students with Disabilities	Interactionist/Social Constructivist View of Students with Disabilities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I don’t have a tool kit of adaptations.” • “I don’t have that knowledge of how to teach kids with special needs.” • “How do you adapt your teaching? I haven’t because I don’t know what it should be.” • “I’m treating the students [with disabilities] differently.” • “I’ve never had training in the needs of special education students, so unless the student tells me there’s some kind of additional thing that I need to be doing in class or there is something that I could be doing differently, then I just basically have to assume that everything is going o.k.” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I’ll do whatever the person needs.” • I do for them “what I do for all students.” • I talk “about the wonder of our differences” in class. • “There aren’t any magic wands.” • “It is the students who have success . . . not me.” • What matters to me is their mastery of the material, not how long it takes them to communicate that.” • “The difference between a problem and a crisis is about 24 hours of neglect. We just need to take care of things.” • “This isn’t an accommodation, it’s just good teaching.”

When asked how they accommodate for learners with special needs, the focus of faculty who held the social constructivist view was on the interactions between themselves and the learners in their classrooms. Accommodations were developed following interactions with the students. The power of the teacher-student interaction was frequently mentioned. They noted that it was important to them to create a “safe environment” for learners in their classes, including those with special learning needs. In contrast to the faculty who had a more conventional view, the teachers who had a social constructivist view of disabilities seldom raised concerns regarding accommodations being “fair” to other students. Little mention was made regarding accommodations made for specific disabilities or some disabilities being easier to work with than others. These faculty members did not require documentation of student disability prior to

providing accommodation. They espoused a view of teaching that invited the students to interact with them so that together they could be sure that the students' needs were met. Table 2 summarizes common accommodations and responses to the question of what faculty do for students with special learning needs.

Table 2. Faculty conventional vs. social constructivist use of accommodations.

Conventional View of Students with Disabilities	Interactionist/Social Constructivist View of Students with Disabilities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Extra time to take the exam” • Lecture notes in advance • Extra time for work • “Supplemental Instruction” provided by learning center G.A. • “It is best when they already have adaptations.” • It is “not faculty responsibility.” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Paraphrase readings to teacher to check understanding • Break content down into “smaller pieces” • “Cafeteria exams” giving students choices of variety of question styles • Give exams “orally” • Peer support facilitated by instructor • Create a “safe environment” • “I would be happy to meet with you as much as necessary.” • “Come and see me . . . so we can work things out.”

IV. Discussion.

Ghesquiere, Maes and Vandenberghe noted that viewing students “with special education needs to be a special, ‘defective’ group hinder[s] the development of a truly inclusive vision and practice” (p. 182). The data from faculty interviews suggest that indeed the faculty whose beliefs in the social constructivist view of students with disabilities espoused very inclusive ideas about how to educate the entire class, including those with special needs. In contrast, faculty who held a conventional view of students with disabilities viewed the educational practices for these students to be very separate from the whole of the class.

The qualitative nature of this study means that we cannot generalize the results to all groups of faculty in all situations. Rather it gives us insights into the perspective of faculty from one university who were chosen based on representative sampling for the wide-ranging disciplinary background, age, and years in higher education. These results give us a new framework that may be transferable to broad faculty development issues in efforts to improve the quality and accessibility of higher education to all students, particularly those with special learning needs. As this study was fairly preliminary in nature, it did not seek to gain first hand observations of the professors teaching, nor were students in their classrooms interviewed regarding their perceptions of the teachers' views of students with disabilities. Inclusion from these sources would be a next logical step for the progression of this line of research. It is a limiting factor for this work. Additional work might take into account greater representation of diverse faculty, including, but not limited to, different types of post-secondary institutions and cultural diversity. Nonetheless, the results reported here do allow us to reflect on the value of

understanding teachers' perspectives on the students in their classroom and the impact on how they facilitate their learning.

For students with teachers who hold the conventional view of disabilities, the sense of being divided from the main learning community has the potential to not only put undue burden on the learner for their role in their education, but to create a sense of alienation in the learning environment. Students who do not feel that they belong are likely to have decreased retention in post-secondary education programs (Belch, 2004-5). A common and successful approach to remediating this problem in college classrooms is the use of universal instructional design (Belch, 2004-5; Burghstahler, 2001; Mino, 2004; Ouellett, 2004; Scott, McGuire and Foley, 2003). In universal instructional design, education is designed to be accessible to all learners, including those with and without disabilities. It is accepted among those following universal instructional design principles that the educator recognizes that the differences between learners is a continuous range and that no one group represents a discreet, disconnected set of students within the classroom (Belch, 2004-5; Scott, McGuire and Foley, 2003). Flexibility is a key component that allows teachers to adjust and adapt to the varied learning styles and needs in their classroom.

In recent years, there has been an increasing call for expanding the awareness of faculty in higher education concerning issues of diversity in our classrooms as well as implementing universal instructional design (Belch, 2004-5; Burghstahler, 2001; Mino, 2004; Ouellett, 2004; Rickman, 1995; Scott, McGuire and Foley, 2003). This inclusive approach to education has been mandated in public K-12 education since Public Law 94-142 Education for All Handicapped Children Act was passed by Congress in 1975 (Smith, 2004). This legislation has been reauthorized numerous times, most recently in 2004, and is now known as the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA). While access to higher education has been a more recent mandate, legislation such as the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990 and the Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 requires education to be nondiscriminatory and equally accessible to all students. (Belch, 2004-5; Rickman, 1995; Scott, McGuire and Foley, 2003).

The use of universal instructional design is one way to ensure the adherence of colleges and universities to the above laws and is beneficial to all students, not just those identified with special learning needs. However, if we expect professors to be able to provide an accessible education for all students, faculty development centers will need to begin not only with increasing faculty awareness of disabilities, but by teaching the underlying premises central to social constructivism before moving forward to address universal instructional design. Instruction in pedagogical accommodations, while a necessary component of change is not sufficient. This must be accompanied by experiences that will change the perspectives teachers hold related to disabilities. Without addressing the underlying view of students with disabilities, they will continue to be seen by faculty as a distinct and separate group of learners within the classroom.

References

Belch, H. A. (2004-5). Retention and students with disabilities. *Journal of College Student Retention*, 6(1), 3-22.

Burghstahler, S. (2001). Universal design of instruction. DO-IT. Seattle, WA; University of Washington. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. EC309179).

Denzin, N. K. and Lincoln, Y. S. (2003). *Collecting and interpreting qualitative materials*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Denzin, N. K. and Lincoln, Y. S. (1998). *Strategies of qualitative inquiry*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Dudley-Marling, C. (2004). The social construction of learning disabilities. *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 37(6), 482-489.

Ghesquiere, P., Maes, B., and Vandenberghe, R. (2004). The usefulness of qualitative case studies in research on special needs education. *International Journal of Disability, Development and Education*, 51(2), 171-184.

Glesne, C. (1999). *Becoming Qualitative Researchers: An introduction* (2nd ed.). New York: Longman.

McGuire, J. M. and Scott, S. S. (2006). An approach for inclusive college teaching: Universal design for instruction. *Learning Disabilities*, 14, 1, 21-31.

Mino, J. J. (2004). Planning for inclusion: Using universal instructional design to create a learner-centered community college classroom. *Equity and Excellence*, 37, 154-160.

Ouellett, M. L. (2004). Faculty development and universal instructional design. *Equity and Excellence*, 37, 135-144.

Porter, J. (1994). Disability in higher education: From person-based to interaction-based. *Journal on Excellence in College Teaching*, 5(1), 69-75.

Rickman, J.C. (1995). The microculture of disability. In J.Q. Adams and J.R. Welsch (Eds.), *Multicultural education: Vol. 4. Strategies for implementation in colleges and universities* (pp.177-186). Macomb, IL: Western Illinois University.

Scott, S. S., McGuire, J. M., and Foley, T. E. (2003). Universal design for instruction: A framework for anticipating and responding to disability and other diverse learning needs in the college classroom. *Equity and Excellence in Education*, 36, 1, 40-49.

Shaw, S. F., Scott, S. S., and McGuire, J. M. (2001). Teaching college students with learning disabilities. ERIC Digest. Arlington, VA: ERIC Clearinghouse on Disabilities and Gifted Education. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED459548).

Smith, D. D. (2004). Introduction to special education (6th Ed.). Boston, MA: Pearson.