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Transcription David Creelman, UNB Saint John

Introduction: A video in which David Creelman, Professor at UNB Saint John, talks about his experiences in accommodating students with special needs in his classes.

How did you accommodate a student with a disability in your class?

I've had a number of different kinds of students with different kinds of challenges and we generally try and make the accommodations that are specific to those people. I think the idea is just to make sure that they are playing on a level playing field with everybody else in the class, so that whatever they're struggling with, we make the accommodations that allow them to be operating at the standard level. I've had a number of people who have test anxiety or need a separate, quiet environment. The university is terrific for that—they can set the tests or assignments in a separate room, provide an invigilator and they have the kind of environment that allows them to do their best. I have a student at the moment who has quite severe challenges, particularly in terms of reading and expression. He has to read off a special reader and has to spend a lot of time before class getting through the material that we're looking at. He also speaks with kind of the same device that Stephen Hawking uses where he uses eye movement to control and identify what words he wants the machine to say and then he has a number of helpers with him to move him through and to assist. That's probably the biggest challenge and there we've made accommodations that are appropriate. I had multiple choice tests set up where the questions and the answers were overly long and in the process of working with this student we redesigned the tests so that they were more precise, more clear. I think the first test took him three times the amount of time it would have taken the student who didn't have to work as he did. So, in some cases we redesign tests, we change the test slightly because it's hard for him to contribute in a group setting. These are all tests that were taken individually and then by a group so that you have to know the material individually but then you get to sort out as a group a second set of answers and you get marks for both—it's a group activity that enhances learning. Of course, it's very hard for him, spur of the moment to talk about his particular rationales for the answers he chose, so I redesigned the test to give him additional space to add his thoughts as he was taking the test and then the group has access to those after the fact. So those are some kinds of accommodations. I've had other students who have real struggle with language production—essays are very difficult for them. That's a bit more of a challenge. As an English professor, one of the discipline's key objectives is to produce clear, effective writing. One of the goals is to be able to express yourself clearly, cite evidence. Sometimes there are challenges that our discipline isn't able to make all the accommodations that I think the student would like. That means the same way that I struggle in a math course for all kinds of different reasons—somebody struggles in an English course for similar kinds of reasons. I think there are some things that are difficult to do.

How was the experience from your perspective?

I think, without exception, that we usually have maybe one or two students per course per year who have accommodations of some type. I think in almost every case it's been helpful to me as an educator

Jan. 17, 2014

to think through and work those accommodations. It's very rare—I really like the universal accessibility course design models that are being developed because as they point out, what's really good for one student is often exactly what's good for every student and if you can see your discipline through somebody else's eyes and make the kinds of changes that help them to get to something a little bit more clearly, a little bit more directly, then that's probably equally helpful to everybody else in the class, whether or not they have that particular challenge. Everybody needs that additional bit of clarity or additional help. I know the student I was thinking of who found my multiple choices overly long because they were terribly long, it's been really helpful to go back and rewrite those quizzes and to look for language that didn't need to be there, look for clear stems, more direct answers, seeing the course as he would see it really helped me find language that was much closer to what I wanted to say, what I wanted the students to be able to learn. At least in my experience I found it very helpful as an educator, to know more clearly how my students see it, to try and see it through their eyes.

What would you say to a colleague who will have a student with a disability in his or her class?

I think as university educators, we get into the system with a disadvantage. It feels like home to us. You probably become a university prof. if you're really comfortable in an academic environment. It seems natural and easy and that's great. That's one of the reasons we're attracted to this world. But it does give us a disadvantage with our students—we don't always see the barriers and we don't have those struggles, by and large; we don't anticipate that our students will have those struggles. I think one of the things that's really helpful to let go is the ease with which we get through the system is in any way natural or to be assumed. We happen to experience it one way, our students experience it in a multitude of ways. Letting go of our assumptions is a great first step. I think secondly, a lot of academics are anxious about the students needing a certain amount of context, they need to pass particular benchmarks, they all need to be able to do it in the same way. Students who need that extra hour or a second revision are not getting a real world experience and there's all this sort of setting our benchmarks to the process in a way that doesn't really work for a lot of our students and the way that they experience the world. I think we have to be clear about what we really want our students to be able to do and then to set up our assessments, our courses in ways that really get to those kinds of issues and objectives. Our students come to us because they want particular kinds of knowledge and information, and they want particular skill sets. We want to make sure we design them in ways that really address what our discipline is about in terms of its content, its ideas and I think if we do that honestly, we can let go of a lot of the other kinds of assumptions that don't really matter as much. I think, by and large, what all educators care about is getting that "aha moment" for our students, that they reach into the material and find something and that's what we really love as teachers is the moment of enlightenment. I don't think it's in any way unfair to anyone or really an accommodation if we just produce a whole variety of ways through which those "aha moments" can arise. It's what we want to be doing as educators. It's the advantage really of the new accommodations model is that it gives us a chance to see the world through a whole different set of lenses, it gives us a clearer sense of how people really do see our discipline, what our discipline's really about. I think it's a win-win situation for the students who might previously have been blocked by an artificial barrier. They get access to information that previously wasn't available to them but we as educators are in an even better position.

Jan. 17, 2014

We get access to minds and ideas and students that previously didn't come to us and I think we're better for those kinds of contacts.