



Working with Students who Have Physical Disabilities

by Naomi Ortiz

This was originally written to help college professors understand the struggles of students with physical disabilities. It is not intended to be comprehensive, but it is a guide that may be helpful. Feedback is welcomed. Send it to info@fvkasa.org.

Use People First Language

People First Language is a widely accepted way to talk about people with disabilities. In fact in any group or organization made up of people with disabilities uses People First Language. **People First Language** is the concept of acknowledging the person before the disability.

For example, refer to a person with a physical disability NOT a disabled person, a person with a cognitive disability NOT a retarded person), a person who is deaf NOT a deaf person or better a person who is hearing impaired, people with disabilities, etc.

Terms that are NOT Acceptable and Reasons Why

Crippled/Deformed- these terms are often used in the medical profession and many people with disabilities see nothing wrong with their bodies and are not waiting to be cured or healed and therefore find it offensive.

Handicapped- the history of this word comes from after WW1 and WW2 some of the veterans, who had lost body parts in the war, started begging on the street holding out their army hats to collect money. These people were called "hand to caps". This word is found offensive in the general disabled community.

Differently Abled- this word is often used as a "politically correct" way to describe people with disabilities. The disabled community's problem with this word is that it often leads able-bodied people to think that if a person has a disability than they must have some other skill to compensate.

For example, if someone is in a chair (wheelchair) then they must be extra smart, or if a person is blind than their hearing must be extra good. Although people with disabilities do learn to adapt it leads to misinterpretations of what it means to be disabled.

Classroom Issues

Adaptive technology comes into effect on many different levels, depending on the student's disability. The teacher needs to be aware of how that adaptive technology effects the student's work or ability to get things in on time. Disabled students are expected to be just as responsible as any other student, but this is something a teacher needs to be aware of. There is a technology out that many people with disabilities use to write on computers. It is voice activated and prints what a person says on the screen. Yet, this technology is far from perfect. For example it takes me about an hour and ½ to write a two-page paper and that's if I am completely prepared with an outline and my notes. That is two to three times longer than a non-disabled person.



A good rule for the teacher is to **ask the student** what type of adaptive technology they use, then to discuss how that will impact the student's work.

Notetakers--When a student requests a notetaker, the student should be taken seriously. Even if the teacher does not think they give a lot of notes they should make sure the student has a notetaker. If the student after time determines that a notetaker is not needed, then the student can terminate the process.

- Finding a notetaker- if the student wants the teacher to find a notetaker, than the teacher should make an announcement in class stating "*someone in this class needs a notetaker. If you feel you take clear, concise notes, and attend class regularly, than you would be a good person to volunteer. The disability student services provide a stipend for doing this service. Who is able to volunteer?*" Hopefully someone will volunteer, if not the teacher should tell people to think about it, then read the announcement again at the beginning of the next class. If still no one volunteers, tell the student to contact disability student services, because they will help the student with other options.
- It is **essential** to find a notetaker with in the first few days of class.

Testing--Disability Student Services has a lot of options available for the student, but the student needs at least 1 and ½ weeks notice to set these services up. So, if there are any pop-quizzes, small in class tests, or anything off the syllabus, the teacher should plan to make adaptations along with the student. This may mean doing the test orally, by tape recorder, by personal computer/laptop or other options that the teacher and the student can come up with.

Field Trips--For day-to-day class, students can usually deal with barriers on their own. Yet, if there are any plans to do any field trips this may take a lot of planning. The teacher needs to talk to the student about their limitations and discuss options.

For example, accessible transportation might be an issue, especially if the student is in a chair (wheelchair). Some people may use handi-van (an accessible bus service provided by the city) but services have to be requested at least a week in advance, and even then they are not guaranteed. So it may also be necessary to have a back up plan in place.

- The teacher should **call ahead** and talk to manager/boss of where ever the field trip is to and ask them how accessible their facility is. This includes the distance between the parking and the facility, where the accessible entrance is in the building, if and where there are any stairs in or outside the building, and if there are elevators or ramps to compensate, if the bathrooms are disabled or wheelchair accessible, and finally does this person foresee any other barriers that would be a problem. If there are problems the teacher should discuss it with the student and come up with accommodations to make it possible for the student to go.
- The teacher should **talk to the student about their mobility issues**; they may need to have a chair (wheelchair) even if they don't use one at school. The teacher



should ask the student if they have one already or if the teacher needs to rent/borrow one. If the teacher does need to get one the Disability Student Services may be able to help.

- If the student needs some assistance during the field trip, some options are offering (to pay if there is an entry fee) for a friend or other person to come along (to push the chair, and/or with other needs). Or, **only if the student feels comfortable**, having a classmate help them.
- **Most Important: The teacher should not abandon the student.** Something is bound to not turn out as planned, if the teacher and the student do not have a back up plan, the teacher may need to be willing to be flexible. They should stay with the student until they have it figured out, and the teacher should be sure the student is comfortable with whatever needs to happen.

Communicating with Students

A teacher should not single a student out in front of the class. No matter how much a student talks about their disability, in or out of class, the teacher should treat them with the same level of confidentiality as some one who never says a word about their disability. Some ways to do this are to ask to see the student after class, or make an appointment to see them.

General Tips

- A teacher should **be aware** of physical barriers in the classroom. If there is a student in a chair (wheelchair) the teacher can remove a chair from the table each day near the door, or make sure a table is in a classroom that has only desks.
- A teacher can still **do activities** that move the students around the room.

For example, if the teacher splits the class into groups they can just make sure that whatever group the student with the disability is in goes to them.

- The teacher must be also **be aware of body language**. This means if a student is in a chair (wheelchair) the teacher must not stand over the student and talk down to them, or pat them on the head or shoulder.
- Another issue many students with disabilities face is **parking**. The teacher may have to be flexible with tardiness due to the fact that sometimes accessible parking is available and other times it's not. If the student that day can not find accessible parking they may have to rest on their way to class, hence the tardiness may occur. Or, if they use a **university sponsored shuttle** service for students with disabilities, they may be late due to the unreliability of the service. As with anything it is best for the teacher to discuss this with the student if it is an issue.

It is very important if teachers are asking classes to meet in a separate place, other than University property or regular meeting place, that they treat it like a field trip.



- If a student with disabilities is in your class, it is **not the student's job** to educate the class on disability issues.
- There is a fine line between advocating for a student and letting the student **advocate for themselves**. The teacher should talk to the student and they should work it out together.
- Another tip is for the teacher to **have a checklist** of things discussed on this etiquette list so they can make sure that they cover what needs to be covered.
- The teacher should, if possible or if needed, **write up an agreement** with the student, and make a copy both for himself or herself and for the student.

Additional Educational Resources

There are two books I can recommend as good ways to learn about disability issues.

- **No Pity** by Joseph P. Shapiro

An amazing book that looks at the disability rights movement. It is an excellent book to explain to able-bodied people what disability rights is all about and what people with all kinds of disabilities are going through in present day America.

- **Moving Violations** by John Hockenberry

A great book if you prefer a more personal approach. It is an autobiography written by a journalist in a chair and he does a pretty good job bringing up physical disability issues.

Naomi is a student at the University of Arizona. She recently transferred there from another University that did not respond to her accommodation needs.