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A Model for Becoming an Inclusive Adult Educator: Designing for Disability

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Abstract

This evidence-based model of inclusive teaching offers knowledge and practical applications for adult educators. It provides strategies for equitably addressing all student needs, particularly those with disabilities.

Keywords: inclusive teaching, disability, adult education, UDL, evidence-based practices

A model of inclusive teaching fills a significant practical void in adult education and the practice of teaching. In higher education, 19% of undergraduate students have some form of disability (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). This number has steadily increased over the past few decades, yet despite increasing enrollment rates for students with disabilities, instructors are often unprepared to effectively meet the unique learning needs of this population. According to Sniatecki et al. (2015), “one of the important factors that may contribute to the challenging climate for [students with disabilities] is a lack of faculty knowledge and awareness of the issues that face these students” (p. 259). Instructional methods are cited as one of the most important factors to success for learners with disabilities, and learning environments in adult education may not meet the needs of diverse learners such as those with disabilities.

Other leading causes for concern are the lack of faculty support for disabled learners and the lack of awareness of appropriate support and accommodations. As noted in Park et al., (2012), “only 62% of postsecondary institutions provided faculty and staff handbooks designed to assist them in working with [students with disabilities], and only 64% of those institutions provided faculty with information and resources to increase their knowledge of working with [these students]” (p. 377). Instructors who have prior disability-related training demonstrate higher levels of willingness to implement accommodations. Additionally, research has demonstrated that educators who complete training related to disability and accommodations are more likely to demonstrate positive attitudes toward students with disabilities and are more likely to provide supportive learning environments that are diversified to meet the needs of all students.

A Practical Model for Teaching Adults with Disabilities

There are multiple elements of the model with significant relationships among them. The proposed model consists of a framework focusing on the following key components of cultivating an inclusive postsecondary education classroom: providing knowledge acquisition to instructors on current legal responsibilities, facilitating the application of instructional strategies to support the success of learners with disabilities, and encouraging continued resource seeking through a community of practice and professional development.

The first step of the model is to assist instructors in gaining a thorough understanding of the differences between legal requirements in secondary and postsecondary school to establish a

solid foundation of the transition from PK-12 to postsecondary. Next various accessibility options and reasonable accommodations for learners are examined in detail. To provide continued knowledge acquisition, the concept of Universal Design for Learning is discussed as a mindset shift for optimizing teaching and learning through the lens of a strength-based perspective. Then specific evidence-based practices that promote academic achievement for all learners and applications of accessible course design are introduced. The model also provides an opportunity for engaging in a community of practice by sharing resources and additional professional development enhancement. All elements of the model are interwoven to establish a holistic approach for navigating instructional design and delivery as an inclusive adult educator.

From Theory to Practice

The model is tied closely to existing adult education theory and social justice aims. Adults may choose not to disclose their disability to university personnel, but nondisclosure also applies in other adult education situations. If one wants to be an effective adult educator, it is imperative to understand that the teacher has to consider universally designed environments because they might not have knowledge of a student's ability status. If educational experiences are delivered in a way that is accessible, instructors will reach all students. Inclusive teaching reaches students in areas outside of higher education, such as adult basic education, language learners, community education settings, and students without prior educational opportunities.

It is important for adult educators to recognize the need to establish a partnership with students and share the responsibility for learning. A theoretical underpinning of the adult education field is the promotion of social justice and "equitable participation" in learning opportunities within basic and higher education settings, as well as within communities and the workplace (Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2010). Ability status is an underrecognized aspect of diversity, and this lack of acknowledgement perpetuates ableism. For learners with disabilities, adult education can bolster understanding of disability as diversity, enhance access to education and emancipation, and promote success of its learners as part of its social justice mission; "adult education can be an agent to change socially constructed views of disability" (McLean, 2011, p. 20) by implementing more inclusive policies and practices.

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