

Creating Accessible Practical Spaces

This guide highlights important considerations that faculty members should take into account when working with students with disabilities to create accessible “practical spaces” (and includes learning environments not covered by the papers, [Creating an Accessible Science Laboratory Environment for Students with Disabilities](#) and [Understanding Accessibility in Practical Space Learning Environments Across Disciplines](#)). The guide also provides tips on interacting effectively and being proactive regarding the accommodation process.

What is a “practical space?”

A “practical space” is a learning environment where students have the opportunity to engage in active learning and to demonstrate, through hands-on activities, the understanding of the practical components of a given discipline.

Examples of practical spaces

- Hard sciences laboratories
- Art and design studio spaces (such as media labs, visual art studios, woodworking shops, jewellery-making labs)
- Archives and museums
- Occupational and physical therapy labs
- Pharmaceutical sciences and pharmacy labs
- Nursing labs
- Dental labs
- Kinesiology labs
- Allied health care discipline (clinical) labs
- Anthropology and archaeology labs
- Food sciences labs
- Psychology labs
- Computer/IT labs

Defining a culture of accessibility in practical spaces

In critically evaluating the accessibility of – as well as defining a culture of accessibility in – practical spaces, we recommend to faculty, staff, and service providers that the following “thought rubric,” evolved from our research to date, be applied:

Questions to ask in order to understand the barriers inherent in a practical space

- Through a rational deconstruction of the components of the practical space (including a “walk through” of the learning process with the student), what are the key issues that are likely to arise for the student?

- What barriers exist (physical, technological, attitudinal, other) to the participation of students with disabilities in the context of the practical space?
- What are the essential requirements of the course, program, or discipline?
- Are there learning outcomes that the student must demonstrate unaided? If so, what are these outcomes?
- What outcomes can the student demonstrate with the appropriate assistance or accommodation?
- Does the learning material that is being presented in the practical space meet the principles of universal instructional design/universal design for learning (see [*Inclusive Teaching Practices in the Lab Setting*](#))?
- What systemic barriers may exacerbate these considerations?

Questions to ask in order to identify potential solutions for the student

- What lessons by analogy can be applied from other disciplines?
- Will a laboratory or technical assistant be a feasible or appropriate accommodation/solution?
- What mainstream technology can be adapted as an accommodation aid for the student?
- What potential solutions can be evolved from experience and analogy that may be workable for the student, without compromising the essential requirements of the course, program, or discipline?
- What alternative learning strategies can be employed to achieve the objectives of the course, program, or discipline?

It is important to note that the aforementioned thought process should be applied to all students with disabilities because learning needs will vary from student to student. It is also important to note that, while accommodations can be translated from one student to the next, the effectiveness of their application will depend upon the individual student.