

Consideration of Student Accessibility When Teaching Outside the Classroom

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Introduction

Effective teaching and learning can occur both inside and outside of the university classroom. While a traditional university course takes place in the lecture halls and labs of the academic institution, some course instructors extend the learning environment beyond the university classroom and into the 'real world.' Many professions, such as teaching and health care, require these out-of-classroom learning experiences and use professionals within the field as on-site instructors. The co-operative education model requires students to develop practice knowledge and skills within a work environment. For other academic areas of study, such as geoscience, these out-of-classroom experiences are not always required, but are seen as extremely beneficial for student learning. Out-of-classroom learning activities are commonly identified in the literature as 'internships,' 'fieldwork placements,' 'clinical education,' 'field-based learning,' 'experiential education,' or 'service learning.' For the purposes of this article, these out-of-classroom, non-laboratory activities with specific learning objectives, goals, and evaluation criteria will be referred to as field-based learning.

The information within this article is intended to be relevant and useful for both mandatory and optional field-based learning, regardless of duration or physical setting. The information is applicable to both individual and collaborative models of instruction, involving one or more students learning together with one or more instructors. This article considers Ontario-based learning only; it does not include a discussion of studying abroad. This article is also not intended for application to overnight stays that occur in some geography courses, although the tips and guidance provided herein would be helpful for these situations.

Benefits of Field-Based Learning

Field-based learning involves the integration of theory and practice and provides an opportunity for the student to apply classroom knowledge to a 'real life' setting. Students learn directly from role models within their professions and other subject matter experts, and develop their own professional competencies, skills, and attitudes. Students are thus 'socialized' into the profession (Dornan & Bundy, 2004). There is also an opportunity to network with many experts in their fields, which can lead to the provision of professional references and possible opportunities for future employment and mentorship. In addition, students learn more generic work and 'people skills' such as working collaboratively with others, communicating effectively, taking responsibility, and prioritizing assigned tasks (Hall, Healey, & Harrison, 2002). In this way, students gain marketable skills to aid in their search for employment after university.

Field-based learning offers the opportunity for 'hands-on' kinesthetic learning; a welcome alternative for many students to the typical visual and auditory learning

approaches prevalent in the classroom. By addressing different learning styles with varied teaching methods, educators can provide an enriching and rewarding experience for more students (Dorman & Bundy, 2004).

Field-based learning also allows students to experience different job and work settings, aiding in their search for careers that match their goals, interests, and abilities. In this way, students are able to explore career options (Sharby & Roush, 2008). For students with disabilities, field-based learning provides an opportunity to address disability issues in a work setting (Johnson, 2000). These students learn to advocate for themselves and create novel solutions to problems they encounter. They can also become more fully aware of their personal strengths, which can help them build confidence.

Legislation, Regulations, and University Policies Pertaining to Field-Based Learning

When a student with a documented disability requires an accommodation, educators and university staff have a duty to provide reasonable accommodations. In addition, they must comply with provincial and federal laws, including the Ontario Human Rights Code ([Ontario Human Rights Commission, n.d.](#)), the Accessibility for Ontarians Disability Act ([Ontario Ministry of Community and Social Services, 2005](#)), the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms ([Department of Justice, 1982](#)), and relevant university policies. The legal duties and rights of individuals with disabilities are highlighted by [Prince \(2013\)](#), and should be well understood by educators and educational staff at Ontario universities. By providing appropriate accommodations, barriers to accessible learning should be minimized.

Students Requiring Accommodations

A growing number of students with documented disabilities—such as issues related to mental health, brain injuries, mobility, vision, hearing, learning/cognition, and other medical health concerns—are enrolled in postsecondary education across the country. In order to receive accommodations for their disabilities, students are required to register with their respective university Student or Accessibility Services Offices. They may be reluctant to disclose the nature of their disabilities, but in the 2010-2011 academic year over 43,000 students with documented disabilities registered with Student Services at Ontario postsecondary institutions ([Ontario Ministry of Education, Special Education Update, 2012](#)), and the trend appears to be increasing annually.

All students have the right to accessible learning opportunities. It is crucial that students with documented disabilities are aware of their rights and that university faculty and staff understand their legal duties to provide inclusive and accessible learning environments.

When a student registers with a documented disability at Student or Accessibility Services, he/she may be granted individualized accommodations that facilitate full and equitable participation in academic endeavours. It is important for educators to remember that reasonable accommodations should not impose undue hardship on the institution or compromise the academic standards of the university. Students are responsible for participating in any assigned field-based learning opportunities and for meeting the same educational standards and requirements for training hours as all students enrolled in the course. Knowledge, skill, and abilities must still be acquired and demonstrated to ensure that appropriate learning has taken place, though the process by which this happens may be different.

Accommodations related to field-based learning opportunities will ensure that barriers to student learning are minimized. These accommodations could include a change to the hours of the field-based learning opportunity, such as a later start time or consideration of part-time hours; an increased amount of time to complete the learning opportunity; a change to the location of the opportunity to minimize travel time; or provisions of specialized equipment and/or a modification of the environment following the principles of universal design.

Field-Based Learning: Planning and Implementation

Preparation and implementation of field-based learning requires time, energy, and excellent written and verbal communication to ensure that all partners involved in the course are working together to optimize the learning experience. In order to provide equal access for all students to these learning opportunities, instructors should consider planning months before their courses begin.

The principles of Universal Instructional Design (UID) can help the course instructor design teaching and learning environments that allow students with a broad range of characteristics and abilities to participate fully with the instructors and with course materials (Opitz & Block, 2006). Sharby and Rousch (2008) suggest that the following principles of UID are most relevant to experiential education or field-based learning: creating a welcoming environment where students feel empowered; defining essential components; providing clear expectations; providing feedback; creating natural supports for learning; using varied instructional methods; and allowing students to demonstrate their learning achievements in multiple ways. Designing field-based learning experiences with these important concepts in mind will make individual student accommodation requirements much easier to implement. The sections below incorporate these concepts, and other essential steps for student inclusion and success in field-based learning experiences. For clarification purposes, the on-site or work setting instructor will be referred to as the preceptor, the university faculty member

teaching or coordinating the course will be referred to as the course instructor, and the facility where the field-based learning is taking place will be referred to as the site.

Planning Field-Based Learning

When planning field-based learning, the course instructor must be clear on the goals and objectives of the experience, and be flexible regarding how the desired development of knowledge, skills, or attitudes will be achieved and evaluated. For example, can some work be done remotely via teleconference, other electronic means, or by simulation? Examination of expected or desired student learning outcomes should be compared to the teaching methods used.

When considering sites for field-based learning, the course instructor must be informed about the accessibility of the environment. If universally accessible sites are chosen, less work will be required later from the student, the site, and the course instructor to implement accommodations. In addition, the student may not need to disclose their disability or need for accommodations (Sharby & Roush, 2008). If this information is not already available, an analysis could be done (see, for example COU's tip sheet on [Selecting Accessible Venues](#)). This analysis could address the physical, programmatic, informational, and attitudinal accessibility of the organization and its ability to accommodate experiential learners with disabilities (Chelberg, Harbour, and Juarez, 1998 as in Johnson, 2000). Clark and Jones (2011) provide an audit tool to anticipate barriers to geoscience fieldwork experiences for students with disabilities that may be helpful for some course instructors.

The course instructor should understand the physical and psychosocial demands on students in each environment. What specific expectations do the site and preceptor have for the student? The course instructor could plan to use a variety of learning sites so that there is student choice to address the various mobility, physical, and psychosocial issues that may emerge. In this way, the student requiring accommodations is able to undergo a self-selection process that will aid the course instructor in site assignment.

When advertising the course, the instructor can help students by ensuring that field-based learning opportunities or requirements are listed and stating whether there is any option for altered hours or days for the experience, and whether there are any additional costs involved. University course calendars could also include information about accessible field-based learning. More detailed information must be included in the course outline. Course instructors are strongly encouraged to include a statement that the course will accommodate students with disabilities. Students should also be invited to speak with the course instructor and/or Student or Accessibility Services about potential accommodation needs. For further guidance, see the COU tip sheet on [Writing a Course Syllabus](#). The following [Accessibility Statement](#) from the University

of Toronto Scarborough Campus website provides a good example of what should be included in a course outline.

Students with diverse learning styles and needs are welcome in this course. In particular, if you have a disability/health consideration that may require accommodations, please feel free to approach me and/or the *AccessAbility* Services Office as soon as possible. I will work with you and *AccessAbility* Services to ensure you can achieve your learning goals in this course. Enquiries are confidential ([University of Toronto, n.d. “Accessibility Statement”, para. 1](#)).

There are many other factors that apply to all students, regardless of the need for accommodations. Course instructors can inquire about whether sites have specific policies or procedures that will affect student learning or participation. Does the site have specific health and safety regulations? Will the student need a police check? Will the student need to show proof of immunizations? Does the student need to have training in privacy and confidentiality legislation or regarding hazardous materials handling? Are there forms that must be completed prior to the field-based learning? It is helpful to have the student contact the site or preceptor a few weeks before the placement begins, in order to introduce himself/herself and ensure that any site requirements are understood and met in a timely fashion.

Course instructors should also confirm that there is a written Placement Agreement between the site and the university, and that students have insurance coverage should there be an accident or injury. To increase accessibility for all students, this contract could include a statement that speaks to compliance with anti-discrimination laws (Kornblau, 1995). The contract may also include information regarding liability insurance if students have contact with patients or other vulnerable persons.

Student evaluation must be considered during the planning stages. The Council of Ontario Universities’ tip sheet on [Evaluating Students and Giving Feedback](#) provides helpful advice for this important aspect of planning the field-based learning experience. While varied methods of evaluation may be required to accommodate students with disabilities, everyone must be held to the same educational and, if applicable, professional standards.

Student and Preceptor Preparation

Effective field-based learning requires thorough preparation of students, sites, and preceptors. This is especially important when students with accommodations are enrolled in the course.

Instructors can help students by providing detailed, site-specific information at least six weeks before the field-based learning begins so that the latter can identify potential issues and request placement at the site that can best accommodate their needs (Kornblau, 1995). The course instructor should avoid his/her own biases and perceptions of what a student with a particular learning need may require. It would also be helpful to provide any necessary training for students (e.g. Workplace Hazardous, Materials Information System [WHMIS], other safety issues, privacy issues, policies and procedures) well in advance.

The course instructor should encourage students to meet with him/her to discuss any issues affecting their learning or participation in the experience. If a student needs accommodations, he or she should be encouraged to make contact with the university Student or Accessibility Services Office, if they have not done so already. The course instructor will then need to liaise with the accessibility counselor and the student regarding the required accommodations. The student, course instructor, and accessibility counselor can work together to overcome obstacles to the accommodations, to full participation in the field-based learning, and to other issues that could arise, such as negative attitudes towards the student on placement (Cooley & Salvaggio, 2002; Reeser, 1992).

A course instructor must consider the standards of the profession and academic institution when assigning alternate experiences or making accommodations of any kind. Educational standards and requirements should not be compromised. Consideration must also be given to the safety of the student, potential clients, the preceptor, and other team members when assigning a site to a student needing accommodations. The learning needs of the student must be balanced with concern for the safety and well-being of students and clients, and the potential for lawsuits (Reeser, 1992). It is often helpful to assign a field-based learning site for a student with a disability prior to site assignment for other students, so that the course instructor has greater flexibility in choosing placements with suitable accommodations.

Preceptors will need to be prepared for field-based learning. Preceptors must understand the goals and objectives of the experience, and the methods and tools for evaluation. Teaching tips and techniques for giving feedback to students and matching learning opportunities to the students' education level can be offered. Preceptors may require training to ensure that they will provide a welcoming environment and use appropriate language for all students. Site-specific emergency information should be discussed with all students. Students with disabilities may require an individualized evacuation plan. Written materials and recorded webcasts are helpful to prepare busy clinicians/staff members who may not have time to attend preparation sessions. The COU tip sheet on [Understanding Barriers to Accessibility](#) could be a helpful resource.

Preceptors may need to be informed of student-specific accommodations. It is advisable to contact the preceptor many weeks before the beginning of field-based learning to ensure that the site is a good fit for the student, and to guarantee a welcoming environment. Negative attitudes towards a student by the preceptor, other staff, or clients at the site will detract from the student learning experience (Cooley & Salvaggio, 2002). Preceptors may need to be reminded of relevant legislation and university policies and procedures regarding the provision of equitable learning opportunities for all students. They can also be directed to helpful COU documents, such as the [Teaching Persons with Disabilities](#) tip sheet. Course instructors are only informed of a student's diagnosis if the student chooses to disclose it. Permission must be given by the student to disclose the diagnosis to the preceptor.

The instructor may need to advocate for the student if there is reluctance on the part of the site or preceptor to provide the unique accommodations or if assumptions are being made about ability/disability. In this case, a site visit may be helpful (Kornblau, 1995). The preceptor could interview the student if this would help increase comfort and ensure an effective working relationship (Reeser, 1992). Essential responsibilities and critical components of the job should be identified (Sharby & Roush, 2008). Accommodation-specific issues should be discussed in relation to critical job responsibilities. The student and preceptor can be encouraged to discuss expectations pertaining to workload, feedback, independence, specific tasks, etc. to set the stage for optimizing the learning (and teaching) experience. The course instructor can encourage creativity when thinking about overcoming obstacles to the required accommodations. The focus should be on the student's strengths and not on their limitations (Cooley & Salvaggio, 2002). The student is often a great asset in this process as he/she has usually built up a personal resource of coping mechanisms and strategies.

If adaptations to the site are required, course instructors, in discussion with the accessibility counselor, must decide who will provide any necessary funding and what the timeframe will be for purchasing equipment or implementing changes. Preceptors should consider whether their clients or staff need help preparing a welcoming environment for the student. When students are being taught using a group model, any disclosure to fellow students regarding accommodations that affect group functioning should be done in a judicious manner and only with the consent of the student who requires the accommodation.

During Field-Based Learning

The course instructor must be readily available to the students, the preceptors, and the accessibility counselors during placements. A check-in via email or phone call with students and preceptors mid-way through the placement is helpful to ensure that they are having positive learning and teaching experiences. If there is a possibility of student

failure at this point, it may be helpful for the course instructor to talk with both the preceptor and the student. Discussions regarding the knowledge, skills, and attitudes the student must demonstrate in order to pass should take place with the student and preceptor, both together and separately. Encouraging the student to set personal learning objectives can be helpful. The student may also find it helpful to contact their accessibility counselor to discuss possible strategies for success in the second half of the field-based learning experience.

After Field-Based Learning

After the field-based learning is complete, the course instructor could facilitate the provision of student feedback to the site and preceptor via face-to-face discussions and/or electronic surveys. This provides a good learning opportunity for the student to practice essential communication skills, and may also enrich the learning environment for future students.

The course instructor may find it helpful to schedule time to debrief with the students to reflect on their experiences, emphasizing key areas of learning. This can be done in group or individual settings. Students who had special accommodations, however, should at some point meet individually with the course instructor to reflect on their learning experiences, and to discuss whether the accommodations were adequate or required. This review assists the student in personal planning for future field-based learning and also helps the instructor maintain or improve the general accessibility of the course.

Similarly, the course instructor could provide the preceptor with an opportunity to reflect and give feedback regarding both the teaching and learning experiences. The preceptor can share insights into how he/she overcame any barriers for learning, and whether certain accommodations were helpful to enhance the educational experience for the student.

Challenges and Solutions

Although every attempt to facilitate equitable student participation in field-based learning opportunities is made according to laws, rights, duties, and policies, there are some practical challenges associated with the provision of student-specific accommodations. By being proactive, planning early, and implementing standard processes and practices, challenges can be minimized. It often takes a community of people to accommodate students' unique learning needs outside of the classroom. Partnerships and collaborative working relationships should be developed between the student, university faculty/staff, and the site in order to make the experience as successful as possible.

Students and university faculty/staff are all busy during the academic year. It takes a great deal of time to plan and implement successful field-based learning opportunities for students who require accommodations. It may be difficult to communicate efficiently and schedule time to meet with all field-based learning partners in person, via email, or by telephone. Documentation associated with each individualized student accommodation also requires dedicated time. Possible solutions to such challenges include regular meeting times throughout the field-based learning opportunity, scheduled as early as possible. Preceptor training can be delivered in groups to minimize time commitments. Electronic and paper files can also be organized for easy reference, and templates created for required documentation.

It is challenging to provide field-based learning that is equitable for all students; no student should have an advantage over another with regard to the development or assignment of these opportunities. In the event that students can choose from a variety of field-based learning opportunities, students with accommodations may need to be 'pre-placed.' Other students may become aware of the pre-placement of others and may feel disadvantaged. In this situation, students and university faculty/staff can be reminded that students' who require accommodations may have fewer choices, due to the availability of sites where the student's unique learning needs can be adequately met.

Implementing reasonable student accommodations in accordance with course, university, professional, and degree requirements can be challenging. It is crucial that all partners think creatively, embrace flexibility, and remain open to change as different methods to attain competency at the learning site are considered. It is vital to involve the student in discussions around the development of competencies and reasonable accommodations. In order to provide inclusive field-based learning opportunities, it is necessary that students and university faculty/staff study legal documents such as the Ontario Human Rights Code ([Ontario Human Rights Commission, n.d.](#)), AODA ([Ontario Ministry of Community and Social Services, 2005](#)), and Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedom ([Department of Justice, 1982](#)), in addition to university, site, and professional standards, policies, and guidelines. For example, an accommodation such as the use of a tape recorder to record discussions may violate a site's privacy policy. Many health professions have essential skills and attributes documents that can be useful when considering accommodation requirements. For examples, see the [Essential Skills and Attributes Documents](#) for the study of Rehabilitation Sciences.

Conclusion

Students with disabilities play a key role in the success of equitable and inclusive learning experiences. Students should be encouraged and empowered to demonstrate self-directed learning and to advocate for themselves and their unique learning needs in

a professional manner. It is ideal to involve the student when the planning and implementation of the learning experience is initiated. Students requiring accommodations are well aware of their learning needs and can often generate creative solutions to potential barriers. Students should be encouraged to use and further develop their strengths throughout their field-based learning opportunities.

Federal and provincial legislation, in addition to university policies, mandate that students with disabilities are provided with accommodations, so that barriers to learning are reduced and all students have full access to all learning experiences. Thoughtful planning and clear communication with all partners paves the way for students with accommodations to fully participate and benefit from these learning opportunities. Although additional time and effort will initially be spent to ensure equal access to field-based learning for all students, it is a worthwhile investment. Students with disabilities can greatly enhance a course, providing unique perspectives and insights that would not otherwise have been revealed. Field-based learning can provide a rich and rewarding learning experience and must be available to students of all abilities.

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