Supporting Inclusive Teaching Through Student Observations (Practice Brief)

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Abstract

Institutions of higher education have a primary mission of providing a quality eduation to all of its student, including students with disabilities. This practice brief describes tools used in an innovative approach to teaching observations that were designed to improve access for students with disabilities through inclusive teaching strategies, an area where faculty members typically do not have robust expertise. Pivotal to this experience was observation and feedback by student mentors using a structured classroom observation and reflection tool. These tools provided unique and important information to faculty about how to improve the inclusivity of their teaching. The tool also gave students with disabilities agency in how they contribute to the improved accessibility of teaching on their campus. At an institutional level, this kind of tool may be a catalyst for collaboration between offices of disability services and faculty development as they work together to create a more accessible campus for students with disabilities.

Keywords: access, inclusion, universal design, teaching, observation, faculty development

Quality teaching is at the heart of the mission of postsecondary education. This mission is demonstrated in two ways – first, in the evaluation of teaching when being considered for a position, retention, and merit – and second, in resources that institutions put into improving teaching quality. Many colleges and universities recognize the need for continued professional development in teaching quality as faculty advance in their careers. More specifically, faculty often lack skills on the practice of inclusive and accessible teaching strategies, particularly for diverse audiences such as students with disabilities or English Language Learners. As college enrollment for students with disabilities and those from diverse language and cultural background continues to increase, institutions must be prepared to support faculty with approaches to teaching that will reach their whole classroom. Formative feedback is an essential part of this process.

The purpose of this practice brief is to describe the assessment tools and evaluation frameworks used in a collaborative project focused on improving the accessibility of postsecondary teaching through a professional learning community (Marchetti et al., in press). The brief opens with an overview of key ideas

behind inclusive teaching practices and measurement as part of that process. Next, the goals of this project are discussed in terms of the context that it provides to offer feedback to faculty about the implementation of identified inclusive strategies. Finally, the brief focuses on how a classroom observation tool and faculty learning community process developed a space for implementation of accessible teaching practices. Implications and areas for future work are offered.

Summary of Relevant Literature

Inclusive Teaching Practices

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a common framework for thinking about accessible and inclusive teaching strategies (Burgstahler & Cory, 2008). The UDL approach encourages faculty to be mindful, positive, and creative about classroom practices. When used effectively, UDL principles help meet the needs of the community of learners while focusing on access for individual learners (Rodeslier & McGuire, 2015; Rose, Harbour, Johnson, Daley, & Abaranell, 2006). Far from a prescriptive exercise or set of strategies, UDL was developed to be flexible in

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order to allow instructors to think intentionally about how these approaches meet the specific needs of their classroom content and format (Pittman & Heiselt, 2014). Fully inclusive environments (including classrooms) are at the heart of the Americans with Disabilities Act and in the mission of many postsecondary institutions to serve and support diversity in their campus population. Yet faculty need support in developing inclusive teaching practices (Moore, 2013; Smith & Tyler, 2011).

Measuring Teaching Quality

Measuring the quality of teaching is a challenging task and the reliability and validity of common teaching evaluations enjoy intense debate (Marsh, 1984). Assessment of postsecondary faculty tends to be equated with either (a) student reviews of teaching obtained at the end of the term; or (b) observations that are a part of a larger, more comprehensive review of a faculty members' contribution to teaching and learning. One of the less frequently discussed elements regarding faculty feedback is the relationship between the faculty member and the student (Lopez-Pastor & Sicilia-Camacho, 2015). While in some cases classes consist of large lecture halls (or online platforms) full of hundreds of students, in other contexts faculty and students know each other, and even have more than one course or other academically related interactions within a student's program of study. While degree of interaction is a desired component of learning experiences (Nwankwo, 2015), this closer proximity sets up a lack of anonymity that has implications regarding the reliability of the responses. There is a concern that providing negative feedback might have consequences for the student both within and across course experiences. This is particularly challenging when thinking about formative assessments conducted when the immediate learning experience is still underway.

Depiction of the Problem

Gathering reliable and valid student feedback on teacher use of inclusive teaching strategies is an obvious need, but a challenging process. There is rarely attention to issues of diversity, access, and inclusion in most summative teaching observation forms that are used at the end of the semester to rate teacher quality and course satisfaction. Furthermore, there are few faculty development models that include ways for students to provide structured and formative feedback to faculty about the accessibility of their teaching. Students with disabilities have an important view point to contribute in feedback about teaching accessibility. As key holders of knowledge about the

characteristics of students with disabilities on campus, Disability Service and Resource Offices have the potential to provide institution-wide advisement, consultation, and training in order to facilitate equal access. Including a student feedback and observations component would just be an addition to the model, but could be an invaluable tool when discussing accessibility because one size does not fit all. This practice brief describes the classroom observation tools and feedback methods that were a critical component of a professional development model that included students with disabilities.

Participant Demographics and Institutional Partners and Resources

This project context was an initiative to support faculty at a STEM-focused university in implementing accessible teaching strategies, with a specific emphasis on strategies that are successful in classrooms with hearing and deaf or hard-of-hearing students. This project was conducted in partnership with a large public university that focused specifically on the assessment tools and design. The overall project goals were to (a) improve resources available for faculty teaching students in mainstream settings, (b) create training environments where faculty are encouraged to experiment with and innovate new resources and strategies for accessible and inclusive pedagogy, and (c) to sustain and expand these practices via multifaceted dissemination efforts (Names removed for review, 2018). The overall project examines the role of student observations of faculty teaching, specifically focusing on accessibility in classrooms with diverse students. The observation tool and process that is the focus of this practice brief was implemented as part of the ongoing feedback loop between students and faculty as part of the professional development project.

Participants in this project include project facilitators, faculty, and undergraduate student mentors. The four facilitators of the professional learning communities have extensive experience on the research and practice of accessibility for deaf and hard-of-hearing students and are faculty in a range of departments across the campus. The lead measurement design faculty worked with the project directors and met periodically with the student observers as part of their training on the feedback measures and discussion of reesults. A range of six to eight faculty have participated each semester across three semesters of the project thus far. Each faculty member applied to be part of the project and receive support from their departments to participate in the professional learn-

ing communities. The undergraduate cadre of four-six deaf undergraduate students served as student mentors for the six to eight faculty. All were deaf or hard-of-hearing and used a range of communication modalities. Faculty and students were paired based on schedule availability; some students were paired with more than one faculty member to ensure coverage across the project. Undergraduates were paid for their work and represented a range of majors across the campus.

Description of Practice

Faculty Learning Community

The model chosen focuses on pedagogical conceptual change, going beyond the "what" of teaching, and instead encouraging faculty to focus on the "why" behind the practice of inclusive teaching (Keiny, 1994). The overall context of this project was the work of a Faculty Learning Community (FLC), which consisted of faculty members who agreed to spend a semester participating in a group to learn new practices, skills, and technology applications (Nugent et al., 2008; Richlin, 2004). These groups provided faculty with a safe and supportive space to reflect on the practice of teaching, and to explore challenges and strategies within a group of peers. This collaborative environment included several tools that were designed to: (a) capture the use of the access strategies, and (b) give feedback as to the overall accessibility of teaching. UDL principles served as a "hook" into designing strategies to be more accessible and inclusive. Faculty were not required to revamp their courses to follow UDL principles from start to finish. Instead, UDL was framework to identify current challenges in a faculty member's classroom, and to develop, implement and evaluate a strategy solution in the classroom.

The Observation Tool and Process

Observation tool. The main assessment strategy used to facilitate interaction between the participating faculty and the student participants was the classroom observation tool (see Appendix). The class observation tool served as a template for students to take observational notes about access and inclusion factors in the classroom. They were asked to note physical features of the class session (lighting, seating layout, etc.), faculty pedagogical strategies (pacing, use of visuals, course activities), interaction in the classroom (between students, and between the students and the faculty member), and perceptions on what went well in the session and what could have been done to increase access and inclusion with the stu-

dents. Students were also given a set of instructions about how to observe the class sessions and make observation notes. In addition, they participated in a training session as well as ongoing discussions about conducting class observations and giving feedback to faculty. The observation tool was revised twice, once after the pilot and once when online teaching components arose as a key area for further observation. These revisions were made based on feedback from the student mentors. Student observers thus had time to grow into this role as not only observers, but analysts of the tools they were using.

Faculty-student mentor pairs. Student mentors were paired with each faculty participant. Starting in week three (out of 14) of the semester, they observed the faculty's class sessions on at least a weekly basis. During the first week of observations, they observed all class sessions during that week to lay a foundation for understanding course content, the instructor's teaching style, and student interaction. For subsequent weeks, they observed a single class session and took notes using the observation tool. In addition to standard questions, faculty identified specific areas for feedback from the student mentors. After each week of observations, student observers met with the faculty member to discuss what they observed and to talk about access and inclusion challenges. They used the observation form as a starting point for the discussion and followed a structured protocol that allowed for both connection to the training as well as specific examples that arose in the class session.

Evaluation and Observed Outcomes

The use of an observation tool within professional development is perhaps not unique in and of itself, but the connection between the content (inclusive teaching), the participants (student observers and faculty), and the method (the observation tool) dovetailed to support a dynamic and in-depth shift in how the participants engaged in pedagogical change. The implications of this project thus lies in the intersection of these three components. The remainder of this brief discusses how the observations and the tool, specifically, led to an increased rigor and quality of the professional development experience.

The observation tool was structured to provide student observers and faculty with an inquiry-based approach to implementation of inclusive teaching strategies. The observation tool was developed around the same questions about pedagogy that shaped the professional development training. Students were empowered to think critically not only about the classroom activities, but also the function of the observation tool

itself. Revisions to the tool were made because students wanted to expand the applicability of the tool to both face-to-face and online learning platforms. This tool was adaptable across learning settings.

The observation and complementary dialog helped facilitate a new kind of relationship between students and faculty. The change in power differential allowed the student perspective to gain traction with the faculty cadre. Through the use of this particular assessment tool, inquiry, shared goal setting, and collaboration was encouraged; this innovative process likely benefited both faculty and students. The use of a concrete observation tool provided a method for naming the goals and providing a safe space for shared discussion about the process. This teaching observation tool was co-constructed by faculty and student observers in that faculty chose the specific items related to inclusive teaching that they wanted to have included in the observation. This processing of the experience immediately after the class with the notes from the observation available allowed faculty to work within the context of that particular day.

Implications and Portability

The feedback tools from this project have some significant implications for faculty feedback and development of inclusive teaching practices at postsecondary institutions. The purpose of this observation was less to evaluate impact on student learning outcomes and more to engage in deeper dialog about enhancing the inclusivity of teaching strategies. The tools and protocol from this project would be beneficial for campusus providing feedback to faculty across a range of topics within accessibility. Even in an abridged version, disability services offices could collaborate with faculty development centers to craft a sequence of opportunities that include training in a specific content area such as facilitating quality class discussions with students with diverse communication modalities. A cadre of students trained in the same area could serve as resources for faculty members and get a valuable student perspective. This model could thus inform training not only for the faculty, but also for students who wish to pursue teaching careers or related educational fields.

Creating a faculty learning community in tandem with student observers is not a simple task. There were many logistics challenges that came with the complexity of the content, the inquiry, and the relationships involved. Scheduling alone was often difficult and sometimes slowed the momentum of the observation process. Faculty members were also on different timelines as to when they began to implement the accessibility strategy that they drew from

the training. There were often several weeks between the start of the semester and when students had the opportunity to obseve those practices in the classroom, possibily reducing the impact that student feedback would have on that practice in the remainder of that semester. This project is also resource intensive; many campuses may need to identify strategies to reduce time and labor costs, use online platforms, and create cohorts of trained students so that the model is sustainable over a longer period of time.

Research on this feedback model could expand the evidence base for this student observation practice to support inclusive teaching practices in a number of ways. The first is to obtain the perspectives of the students who are enrolled in the class; the only perspectives collected are from student mentors who are trained specifically in the accessibility content area that forms the foundation of the project. There are also possible extensions of the data collection period from these student mentors by expanding this model so that it takes place over the course of a year, and not only within a single semester. A number of the areas that students provided feedback with include integrating technology, working with physical space, etc. – elements of teaching that may require coordination with institutional resources. It may be that three months is not enough time to capture the benefits of the formative feedback from student mentors to faculty, particularly when part of this time is the initial training period.

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Appendix
Classroom Observations Form

Your Name: _____ Date_____ Starting Time: _____ Ending Time: _____

Faculty Name: _____   Course Name: _____

Number of Students in Class Today (estimate): Total: _____   Deaf/Hard-of-Hearing: _____

What did you like about the class/online component? What did faculty do well?
(Please be specific with examples)

What did you think could help make the class/online component more accessible for students (deaf or hearing)? (Please be specific with examples)

FACE-TO-FACE: Did you notice any of the following as supporting access?

1. Lighting choices (e.g., Bright? Glare? Shadows?)
2. Pacing (e.g. Fast? Too slow? Just right?)
3. Use of Visuals (e.g. Smartboard, PowerPoint/slides, propos, video, role play, etc.)
4. Positive feedback
5. Classroom atmosphere (e.g., light, tense, free flowing, friendly)
6. What else?

ONLINE: Did you notice any of the following as supporting access?
1. Visually vs. auditorily based media (podcasts, movies, text slides, media embedded)?
2. Are there captions on video? Or transcript?
3. Lighting and Pacing of Faculty Created Media (same as above)
4. Use of Visuals (slides, graphics, etc.)
5. Opportunities to Engage (discussion posts, video chats, goReact? Voicethread? Google docs? etc.)
6. Interaction between faculty and students?
7. Positive feedback from faculty?
8. Interaction between students?

Access Strategy Use (once faculty is using it in class), What is the strategy?

1. Did the faculty member use their face-to-face ATK strategy well?

1	2	3	4	5
Not at all		Somewhat		Extensively

Explain what you saw and why you gave it the rating you gave.

2. Did the faculty member use their online ATK strategy well?

1	2	3	4	5
Not at all		Somewhat		Extensively

Explain what you saw and why you gave it the rating you gave.

What's Happening?

Activity or Focus	Online or face-to-face component?	Observed? Yes or No	Notes: Description or example of how it was used or where it was missing
Teachers			
Used different kinds of activities in class.			
Presented ideas in more than one way.			
Provided students with more than one way to participate			
Encouraged students to participate in class and respond to faculty/other students.			
Encouraged students to collaborate in group activities			
FACULTY SELECTED ATK STRATEGY			
FACULTY SELECTED ATK STRATEGY			

Activity or Focus	Online or face-to-face component?	Observed? If yes, please circle deaf, hearing, or both	Notes: Description or Example
Students			
Responding when the faculty member asks a question.		Deaf	
		Hearing	
Participating in group activities with other deaf students.		Deaf	
		Hearing	
Participating in group activities with other hearing students.		Deaf	
		Hearing	
Using their phones or computers for activities not related to class.		Deaf	
		Hearing	
Sleeping or similar disengaged behavior (in class only).		Deaf	
		Hearing	
Asking a question without prompting (e.g., from faculty).		Deaf	
		Hearing	
Other:		Deaf	
		Hearing	