# We All Get Old And Sick And Then Die: Universal Design, Diverse Learners and You

**Presentation by Beck Wise**

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## [title slide]

\*\*announce circulating documents\*\*

I was asked today to talk with y’all about accessibility – which might seem like a bit of a jump given that I’ve spent the last half hour talking with you about how super fun technology is, how the DWRL has the best toys on campus, and how we want to share them with you. The connection is that accessibility is one of the core values of the DWRL, starting with the Lab’s founder, John Slatin, who in the earliest years of the lab used computers to teach writing classes to visually impaired users in really innovative ways. Since then, the DWRL has worked with and on accessibility in a variety of different ways – we were involved in developing accessible websites for the Department and other units at UT, our researchers have developed accessibility software, we just made y’all an accessible syllabus over the summer, and we’re kicking off a really cool accessibility mapping project next year.

So I suspect that when I was asked to come in and give this presentation, it was to tell y’all about how technology can make things more accessible and how you can use technology to adapt to any accessibility requests you might receive. And I will! But that is a very small part of what we’re going to cover today. I want to teach you how to *not* have to adapt to accessibility requests. And the reason we’re going to do that is: Because we all get old and sick and then die. Which is to say, we *all* need accommodations to succeed, and when we design for access from the outset, everything turns out better.

## Other modes (how this talk will go)

First let me tell you guys how this presentation is going to go. It’s pretty talky, and the slides are pretty text-heavy. As I’ve said, I’m circulating copies of my presentation – which I’ll try and stick pretty close to – for people who prefer to follow written text. All of this is online, and the URL is beckwise.com/udl

I really welcome questions. Please feel free to flag me if you’d like to ask a question at any point in the presentation. There’ll also be time at the end. If you prefer to write your question, there’s index cards going around too. Pass them up to the front if you have a question you’d like answered on the spot; otherwise hang on to them until the end. I’m also available to you for questions anytime – I’ll put up my contact details and office hours at the end of the presentation.

## So this is about student accommodations, right? (your legal obligations)

I’m going to skim pretty fast over required accommodations, as I know a representative from Services for Students with Disabilities is going to visit 398T this semester, but you may get hit with this on the first day of class.

Some students have documented and legislatively protected disabilities that you’re legally required to accommodate. These students will have a letter from their SSD coordinator that details what accommodations these students require, and after you get that letter, you’re legally required to comply. Student disabilities are confidential – they might disclose to you voluntarily, but they don’t have to. SSD will never discuss it. Accommodations don’t affect the rigour of the course, and if you’re worried about it, call the SSD coordinator and talk to them. Your ADs can help you with this, too.

## welp, that sounds easy [but that’s not the whole story]

The problem is that a lot of people fall through the net. Some students have letters and don’t bring them to you in a timely fashion, or at all. They want to make it on their own (because there’s a lot of stigma attached to disability), or they’re nervous about telling a professor what they need (because they’re, you know, 19). Some students don’t have documentation – testing is PROHIBITIVELY expensive. And some students don’t have legally protected disabilities, but still benefit from accommodation, even if it’s “just” for a different learning style.

## Some info about disabilities [who is disabled]

And there are a LOT of people who need accommodation. 1 in 5 people are disabled at any given point in the US. 1 in 3 experience periods of physical disability during their working life. *70%* of people are physically disabled by the time they’re 80. Looking at mental health – 1 in 4 people experience disabling mental illness during their lifetime. Two thirds of those people do not seek or receive treatment. It is genuinely safe to assume that in any audience you ever address, there is someone who will benefit from accommodation.

Some circumstances make that a certainty – one of our former DWRL staffers taught a wildly popular 309, the Rhetoric Of Harry Potter. Every semester, 50% or more of her students presented her with disability accommodation requests. More disclosed disabilities. It turned out to be because these students had early registration as part of their accommodations – they signed up fast, and she had to design her class accordingly (I can link you to her discussions of this if you want)

## What is universal design?

Universal design means designing things – courses, here – from the ground up to be as accessible as possible to as many people as possible, whether they’re currently able or disabled, old or young, a visual learner or an auditory learner. Universal design assumes difference is the norm, and doesn’t segregate or stigmatise based on points of human difference

## [universal design is good design]

This term has come into common use in a lot of different spheres over the years, and pretty much everywhere people have settled on the idea that UNIVERSAL DESIGN IS GOOD DESIGN. Everyone benefits when we work to make things accessible, usable and convenient.

The term also gets criticized because, well, “universal” is an unattainable pipe dream. But we need dreams.

## learners are radically diverse [diverse learners]

So that’s why I’m talking about universal design instead of accessibility. I’m also going to talk about “diverse learners” instead of “students with disabilities”, because universal design is not just about disability. Students bring a huge range of experiences with them to the classroom. They all have different strengths and weaknesses, different approaches, different backgrounds. Some of these are visible, some aren’t. Some are protected classes, some aren’t. Some are medical diagnoses, some aren’t. Some are permanent, some aren’t.

## Universal design strategies benefit … [who benefits]

And when we pay attention to that difference, and take it as our starting point, we all benefit. Users with disabilities – or, as some people prefer, users who are disabled by barriers to access – get full(er) access to the course. As I’ve said, that’s a pretty good number of people. Users with different learning styles can engage with the material in a way that works for them – and that’s *everyone*. And you benefit as a teacher – you’re prepared in advance, your students are better able to engage with the material, and did I mention that adaptation is the worst?

## For example …

So in practice, if you’re giving a lecture and you circulate a transcript for people who need or prefer it, you help

* People who are Deaf or hard-of-hearing
* ASL translators or CART operators, who don’t know your jargon
* People who process information better by reading it than hearing it
* That girl who woke up with an earache but still came to school (germs, gross)
* The person sitting next to that dude who just will not. Shut. Up.
* Yourself

## [strategies title slide]

I’m going to assume I have y’all persuaded that universal design for pedagogy is smart because, you know, rhetoric. So let’s move on to some concrete examples of how you can use universal design strategies to be a more effective teacher

## Make inclusion a clear priority

It is incredibly important that students feel welcome in class. When you make materials accessible to all, you’re making it clear that everyone’s presence and being in the class is equally important. I am personally really vocal about having an ethic of inclusion in my classes – among other things, I tell my students up front why I’ve chosen the texts I have, why they’re in particular formats, why they all have to tell everyone their name and pronouns at the start of the semester rather than have me call the roll, why they pick which content and trigger warnings we use and why we use them at all. I’m not saying you have to do it that way, but I am saying that being intentional about your pedagogical choices goes a long way to producing effective pedagogy.

## Think about outcomes, not products [outcomes]

So y’all have heard a lot about learning outcomes and course goals over the last couple of days, right? I’m about to complicate that a bit (sorry, DRW), and ask you to think about what *really matters* when you teach a course. You might think about this one a bit more when you’re setting the goals for your 309 than right now, in the last moments before you start teaching 306. Is it important to you that a student produce a perfectly formatted essay, or would a perfectly structured audio file demonstrate that they can make an argument? What counts as participation? Does someone have to talk to be engaged with the course? Could they pass you a note on an index card? Could they host a class movie night and write a paper about it? (One of my students hosted a class screening of Tank Girl a few years ago. I still don’t know why she didn’t claim it as participation.) And ASK YOUR STUDENTS. This is one of my favourite icebreakers: what makes a course a success? What makes you successful? What can *we* do?

## Change the environment [environment]

Space is a big barrier to access for people with mobility impairments, but it changes the way people interact (this is why, you know, architecture is a thing). Change the space around – move the tables. Move the students. Move yourself. One of my students took this “move around” thing on board during his presentation – he said it calmed him to walk, and it would help other people to hear him, so he did laps around the room. And around, and around, and around … we had to ask him to reverse direction because people were getting dizzy. (This is the universal design versus adaptation thing acted out, actually.) You’re assigned to a classroom, but think about where you want to hold your office hours, and what the affordances are. FAC 16 is physically accessible, but not super private. The fourth floor of Parlin is quieter and has windows, but it’s only accessible by stairs – and I think the fire alarms don’t work, so you’re in danger of dying a grisly death. Maybe you want a less institutional, friendlier environment – set up at a coffee shop. Just know that spaces change relationships!

## help students plan ahead

When you let students know what to expect in advance, they can come to class better prepared. That’s why we have a syllabus, right? So first things first, make your syllabus accessible – we did this for you this year, and Regina’s provided some guidance for you on how to do that for yourself next year. But then think about what other information can help students come prepared. Are you going to be lecturing? Maybe someone will prefer to sit right up front so they can hear better. Group work? Maybe that person wants to sit on the opposite side of the room from their bestie, who they just love, but who is incredibly distracting.

Do think about providing content or trigger warnings if you’re discussing strong, sensitive or distressing material. There’s a lot of moral panic in the news about students using these to get out of work. All the evidence suggests that students actually use these to engage with material on their own terms – working themselves up to reviewing material, examining texts while in spaces where they feel physically and emotionally safe, putting support structures in place. And let me be 100% clear: a student who is triggered by material is *in no way* able to engage with the material. They don’t learn anything by being blindsided. Be kind.

Setting or circulating an agenda gives the class structure – it helps you keep things on topic and on track, and lets students know what to expect as the class period progresses. I like to have students make an agenda with me – collaboratively in a Google doc as homework or at the end of class. Or hand out index cards at the end of class – “what’s your lingering question” – and then build an agenda from there.

And finally, upload or identify your materials early. That lets students who need to get them in different formats do that – it takes SSD *time* to produce an audio version of whatever rare book you’ve assigned. It also lets students take the time to get cheaper copies, which I know we can all sympathise with.

## Pay attention to form and format

A few best practices for dealing with media – which is to say texts

* Provide electronic access to anything you circulate on paper
  + This gives people a back-up, as well as manipulable text and images
* OCR and format documents before uploading
* Select texts with multiple formats
  + Videos with captions or transcripts
  + Audio with transcripts
* Describe any images you show

## Create accessible documents

the dot points here are just the high points – for more details on creating accessible text documents, Regina’s uploaded a how-to on your Canvas site, and for accessible websites, I’ve linked to the W3 Accessibility Standards and tutorial at the end of the presentation (or just run your site through any of a number of online accessibility validators)

For text documents – syllabi, prompts, etc

* Use styles to format headings, so that your texts are navigable using screenreaders
* Use high-contrast fonts and colours
* Leave white space!

For websites

* Use high-contrast fonts and colours
* Use descriptive link text
* Provide alt text for images
* Use appropriate html tags

## Be responsive and realistic

above all else, though – and this is true of literally everything ever – you’ve got to be flexible. Check in with people. Mix things up. Try some shit. And BE KIND.

I’ve framed universal design throughout this presentation as fundamentally being about kindness – you are doing a Good Thing when you design for access. But you have to be kind to yourself, too. I have *laid it on* today, with a pretty rapid fire list of things you might like to think about it. You can’t do everything. You don’t have to do everything. Indeed, as I said at the outset, you don’t *have* to do anything, but really you don’t have to do everything. Take what works for you, or the one thing that sticks in your head, and go from there. I’ve got a couple of slides of resources that I’m just going to skip right by because nobody’s writing down the URLs and y’all have online access to this, but let me reiterate that I and the DWRL are a resource for you on this

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Questions?