

# What about Field Placements and Real-World Learning Experiences?

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### Abstract

*Field placements represent complex challenges for post-secondary campuses seeking UDL implementation. They provide an opportunity to scrutinize disability service practices in higher education within the contexts of the program and the field. How does UDL serve us at this juncture when addressing the specific access issues of students entering field work? Can the model still be of use? This exploratory study discusses an initiative comprising multiple stakeholders including faculty, disability service providers and students to untangle a complex knot of frustration and misunderstanding experienced by all. Outcomes include several practical solutions already being implemented on the campus in question, but also a rich reflective exercise on the need for ethnographic processes in higher education disability service provision, particularly when it comes to UDL implementation, and the importance of multi-stakeholder collaboration at all levels of this implementation.*

### Keywords

UDL, field placements, real world learning, professional degrees, multi-stakeholder collaboration.

### INTRODUCTION

The Disability Service (DS) unit of the McGill University has been in existence for approximately two decades and its mandate has been forged through a historical desire to facilitate access to students with traditional sensory, physical, and mobility disabilities. In this respect, it has been relatively successful in creating awareness of and access for, students with very specific needs, where none previously existed or had yet been conceived.

More recently, the unit has committed to the implementation of the social model of disability (Barnes, Mercer, & Shakespeare, 1999) and Universal Design for Learning (UDL) (Gordon, Gravel, & Schifter, 2009), but it has never firmly secured the resources or examined the practical impact of this commitment. In September, 2011, the unit launched a structured and momentous push for tangible UDL implementation. The first phase of this task has focused on emphasizing the importance of this paradigm shift, not just for faculty but also for crucial campus partners: Teaching and Learning Services (TLS), the Social Equity and Diversity Education (SEDE) Office, the Sustainability Office and, of course, senior administration.

Students have also been involved through consultation, quality assessment exercises and formal training on the impact and application of this theoretical framework.

During the aforementioned phase of our change process, with the specific focus of creating awareness with course instructors, the issue of field placement became prominent in our discussions related to UDL implementation. Typically, departments managing field placements for their students remained committed to a medical model approach to disability, relying on disclosure, labelling and retrofitting. These departments also varied in their openness to discussing barrier-free access when the purpose of field placements was interpreted as an opportunity to gauge the student ability to demonstrate core skills in the work environment. The mission to reflect on the compatibility of UDL and field placements assumed a greater sense of urgency.

### CONTEXT

Field placements provide an excellent opportunity to examine UDL implementation practices, as they are intrinsic to the relationship between disability services, educational programs, and real-world opportunities. Three issues emerged that required our ongoing attention: (a) the juncture of field placement and UDL, representing a difficult transition for students who need to adapt strategies that may no longer be effective in a new environment (b) as experiential learning gains prominence in academia, field placements force us to reflect on whether issues and concepts related to UDL implementation are shared by the post-secondary world and the employment sector (c) in many ways, field placement resembles a no-man's land where students are on their own, yet may require support that is unavailable in either setting.

As we increasingly embrace the Social Model of Disability (Barnes, Mercer, & Shakespeare, 1999) in higher education, where we discuss external barriers to education and access, and where environment-focused models such as universal design become implemented (Gradel & Edson, 2010), we should be asking whether environmental barriers extend into real-world contexts (Burgstahler, 2008). The notion of a smooth, seamless transition to the field for students with disabilities seems utopic (Harrison & Ip, 2012). Yet, the current models of service provision inadequately prepare students for this complex transition. It is this frustrating observation that led us, Dr. Fiona J. Benson, of the

Office of Student Teaching; Dr Tara Flanagan, from the Department of Education and Counselling Psychology; and Frederic Fovet, from the Office for Students with Disabilities; all at McGill University, to form a collaborative research project regarding field placements for students with disabilities.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The literature in the area of disability and field placement is strikingly limited. The few references on the topic are relatively outdated and, unfortunately, tend to refer to a medical view of disability rather than to the social model or to UDL. In teaching and social work, there is a growing body of literature on professional dispositions and performance related to recruitment and retention (Guarino, Santibanez and Daley, 2006; Rinaldo and Slepko, 2012; Watkinson and Chalmers, 2008). Further, although much of our anecdotal data seem to suggest a link across a variety of professional programs, there is scant information on disability as causal factor in retention and early-career attrition (Corbell, Osborne, & Reiman, 2010; Johnson, 2004).

### **Universal Design for Learning in Higher Education**

Confronted by the increasingly changing and varied nature of disabilities in higher education (Bowe, 2000; McGuire & Scott, 2002), disability service providers across North America are progressively moving away from targeted remedial assistance focusing on the disabilities of students to a less frontline role involving the sensitization of faculty to strategies that seek to broaden access and develop awareness (Sopko, 2008). Universal Design, with its extensive use of technology and focus on the implementation of optimal conditions in the classroom that reduce or eliminate the need for later remedial work with students (e.g., Rose, Harbour, Johnston, Daley, & Abarbanell, 2006), is hence the model of choice (Burgstahler, 2006).

How does the UDL model fare when faced with learning components that occur in the field and involve real world partners, or when components assessed in the field constitute skills that are considered essential to the practice of a profession and thus access to its membership? Does the idea of barrier-free access become overly idealistic in these contexts? There doesn't appear to be any research findings on the compatibility of the UDL model and field placements. Likewise, case law in Canada provides no further leads on the possible legal dimensions of this complex issue.

### **Field Placements and Real World Learning**

Programs increasingly include a practice component with the aim of providing real-world experiences in authentic settings (Bogo, 2010). Thus, many students participate in field placements in their area of study. This new focus on real-world experiences in post-secondary education challenges the traditional philosophy of service provision, allows us to examine the implementation of UDL from a

variety of vantage points, and provides an important opportunity for reflection and change (Tynja-la, Va'limaa & Sarja, 2003). Student profiles, perspectives, and expectations are changing as rapidly as demands in the field and those of community partners (Pardeck, 2002). Are field placements as the nexus between both of these worlds any less fraught with access issues than traditional approaches to education? Are UDL principles being implemented in this context and are these access solutions meeting the needs of students with disabilities and/or of field and community partners?

### **Multi-Perspective Narratives and Ethnographic Processes in Disability and Inclusion**

Although ethnographic methodology has established itself as a valid and rich research process in many dimensions of the social sciences (Whitehead, 2004), it has yet to be applied in any significant way to fields of higher education disability service provision and/or UDL implementation. There has been some application of ethnographic processes in the domain of disability, but solely in the care professions, such as nursing and social work (Roberts, 2004; Hartman, Little & Ungar, 2008). Such a methodological approach seems particularly suitable to the issue at hand as it involves complex, subtle and extremely personal dimensions within a common, central context..

## **METHODOLOGY**

The study relied on the analysis of qualitative data (e.g., Warren & Karner, 2005) collected from a group of Program Directors and Field Coordinators involved in field placements, and a group of students using the services of the Office for Students with Disability.

We used semi-directive questionnaires (Bryman, 1988) to interview a combined group of 18 Program Directors and Field Coordinators. Two focus groups were also employed to trigger data rich discussions on the difficulties being experienced by the departments involved. Themes and sub-themes were extracted through a coding process (Saldana, 2013).

We were eager to mirror the multi-stakeholder structure of the study in the diversity of the research methods itself. For the nine students of our disability service provider volunteered to participate, rather than impose on these users a methodological process that might be intimidating or alienating for students already feeling marginalized (Bathmaker & Harnett, 2010), we chose to explore data collection processes that were empowering and congenial to the student participant (Charmaz, 1999). Their interviews were unstructured and became lengthy life narratives (Goodley, Lawthorn, Clough & Moore, 2004). Therefore narrative methodology (Webster & Mertova, 2007) was used to collect this part of the data. We recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using a coding process (Taber, 2000).

## FINDINGS

This exploratory study is unique in the sense that it has sought a multi-perspective, ecological approach to the issue. (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). The innovative aspect of this research project is that multi-dimensional, cross-sector collaboration has allowed for the collection of data simultaneously from program directors, field coordinators, and students in an ethnographic user-centered format through the Office for Students with Disabilities (OSD).

### Professional Program Directors

The data snapshot offered by this study drives home the fact that professional program directors feel overwhelmed and disempowered. It should be noted that most of these professionals do not see the OSD as a likely source for solutions given what they perceive as the realities and demands of the field. There is also evidence that the growing friction caused by access issues may lead to the loss of some field partners and a shortage of already highly competitive opportunities. The following are some anecdotal comments collected from program directors that illustrate the sense of frustration and disempowerment expressed by program directors:

- “Every year students seem to present more and more with disabilities especially mental health and learning disabilities which affects their work and ability to function in the field.” (A Social Work Director).
- “...good time management is required which may be an issue for some.” (A Nutritional Science Director).
- “...sometimes they ask to not be placed in hospital settings...but we can’t accept such requests...” (A Dietetics Director).

### Field Placement Coordinators

Field placement coordinators struggle to find solutions and are often unsure how legal protections such as disclosure apply to students with disabilities. They implement strategies with the best of intentions and care, but often apply them without coordinating with the disability service provider. Too often, this haphazard style of implementation results in exclusion. The following are some of the anecdotal comments that were collected from field placement coordinators:

- “our mentoring must include forming a relationship that facilitates his/her field experience.”
- “I believe that Field Supervisors should be sensitized to the student’s disability...”
- “Disclosure. Extra support visits.”
- “Place them in an appropriate setting so that they can succeed.”
- “I do not feel that all disabilities can be adapted to the teaching profession.”

## Students

In a recent poll of students using the services of the Office for Students with Disabilities at McGill, half of the student required to complete field placements, reported having confronted multiple barriers during their experience. A significant percentage of respondents reported changing academic paths because of the barriers that they experienced in field placements. The analysis of qualitative data collected through ongoing dialogue with access advisors highlights the following issues:

- Students generally give little thought to the changing nature of the environment or possible concerns that may arise as they embark on field placements.
- Students feel that access issues are no longer the responsibility of the disability service provider once they switch to the work environment even though they continue to be enrolled in an academic program;
- Students often experience barriers in accessing support services during the field placements (e.g., restricted opening hours, geographical distance from campus, and lack of perceived connections between disability unit and the field environment).

## DISCUSSION AND EXPLORATORY SOLUTIONS

Our findings regarding the field placement experiences of students with disabilities highlight the need to explore solutions from a variety of perspectives and to revisit and redesign our approaches to disability service provision in order to meet the varied needs of students and field partners. For the implementation of UDL to succeed, we will need to conduct more research to drive creative solutions that will improve universal access to post-secondary education and to employment opportunities. Our initial approach to this challenge was to put field placement coordinators in the driver’s seat. They represent a critical link between program and field, and provide a window through which to examine the implementation of UDL.

As a result of our research, some strategies to explore include providing training materials for field coordinators and partners, and committing to transparency early on so students have a clear sense of expectations and corresponding core skills. For example, one immediate solution that has evolved at McGill has been the creation and implementation of workshops for students preparing to begin field studies. The workshops are a collaborative effort between the Office for Students with Disabilities, the Office of Student Teaching and the department of Education and Counseling Psychology, but are delivered through the OSD. The workshops offer students the opportunity to reflect on different aspects of field placement. Through a series of open-ended questions and simple role-playing, the students are encouraged to carry out a “barriers analysis” (Swain, French, Barnes & Thomas, 2004) of their current academic environment and, hypothetically, their future field place-

ment. The goal is to help them develop an understanding of barriers through critical examination. Questions may include: a) do barriers occur on a continuum? b) do they change according to context? c) are there strategies that apply in multiple settings? Students with disabilities leave our workshop with at least three helpful strategies they can implement during transition. The workshop is also a valuable forum for students and facilitators to identify methods for maintaining access to OSD support (e.g., Skype).

### ADDITIONAL OUTCOMES

The broad range of outcomes, suggest the need for further research. Two relevant topics deserving of further inquiry, emerged; the application of the ethnographic process to the study of students with disabilities in higher education and the impact of cross-disciplinary collaboration within student services on higher education campuses.

### Relevance of Ethnographic Processes with Students with Disabilities

The application of ethnographic processes has been particularly rewarding in this projects as it has allowed for the collection of multi-stakeholder data and the construction of a truly ecological interpretation of the central issue of field placements as environments creating barriers. Furthermore, it represents perhaps a first in the collection of ethnographic data from students with disabilities in a post-secondary environment. If UDL implementation is to be analyzed and observed effectively, this is a dimension that requires extensive scrutiny. Our exploratory study sets a precedent for further large scale ethnographic research in student perceptions in the field of disability service provision in post-secondary education. Such research has already begun on this campus, as an outcome of our work.

### Impact for Student Services

Beyond the immediate practical application of the outcomes of this work, the study itself provides a shining example of cross-disciplinary collaboration. Occasions when student service personnel collaborate with faculty on research projects and share their insights into service provision are far too rare. Student services cannot purport to find systemic campus solutions if they do not intentionally and systematically cross professional boundaries to examine other campus stakeholders' perspectives through an ecological dimension. The same is true of faculty members involved in research on student behavior. Both groups have much to learn from each other. This has been a hugely enjoyable process for the collaborators in this study and we sincerely hope that others will feel compelled to collaborate on this type of research. It is our hope that disability service provision will be examined across the country using field placements as the catalyst for evaluation and significant change.

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