

Shift Happens: Reframing Disability and Reconsidering Paradigms

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Abstract

This paper will discuss a current paradigm shift in how we frame disability. We'll demonstrate how business as usual is not an option and that accessibility should be seen not as a matter of compliance but as a matter of social justice. We will explore what's wrong with the status quo, where our field is headed, and how you can bring your colleagues and your institution with you on this exciting journey. We will present a case study in making the paradigm shift, providing the reader with tangible changes that were made, including office name, mission statement, and tag line. Other changes, such as office structure, documentation guidelines and job descriptions are on our website, which will be provided. All of these are changes the readers could replicate in their own institutions and environments.



Introduction

Get ready to take a few steps back and reconsider assumptions you've worked under for years. The way you and your colleagues frame disability may be in need of an overhaul! There is a paradigm shift happening that is changing how many of us do our jobs. A simple way of conceptualizing a paradigm shift is to think of looking at the world through different lenses. There is such a paradigm shift happening in the area of disability. The way things have always been done is just not good enough any more. This paper will explore what's wrong with the status quo, where our field is headed, and how you can bring your colleagues and your institution with you on this exciting journey.

Historically, society has viewed disability in a negative light. In this view, the disability is a "problem" that exists within the person and the goal is to "fix" the person. This paradigm is often referred to as the medical model of disability. A newer paradigm is referred to as the social model of disability. In this paradigm, disability is viewed as "the systemic mismatch between physical and mental attributes of individuals and the present (but not the potential) ability of social institutions to accommodate these attributes" (Schriner & Scotch, 2001). As institutions of higher education begin to make the shift from the older paradigm to the new, we will see changes in policy and practice that reflect this new perspective. Business as usual is not an option and accessibility is seen not as a matter of compliance but as a matter of social justice. It becomes clear that good design means, among other things, that a product, process, or environment is, to the greatest extent possible, usable by everyone.

The Disability Resource Center at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock is a case study in making this paradigm shift. The DRC underwent some radical changes beginning in 2007, moving from medical model to social model. Those changes, including mission statement, office structure, documentation guidelines and job descriptions, will be shared in this paper. In addition, we will share our vision for our whole university in regard to the social model, and will explore what changes you can make in your own institutions and environments.

So let's take a step back and consider why we do what we do. Why is accessibility important? The old rationale was that we were concerned about accessibility in order to be compliant with the law and avoid an OCR complaint. The new rationale is that we are concerned with following not just the letter of the law, but the spirit of the law. The ADA is civil rights legislation! Accessibility is a social justice issue, not just a compliance issue.

Messages We Send

The manner in which we conduct business sends messages to students and to the whole campus. What messages do we want to send? We'd like to send the message that we value all students. We welcome input from everyone. Collaboration is the way to get things done. Students are the experts on their own disability. And barriers in the environment are what we should be working to reduce – that is where our efforts are needed.

But we may unintentionally be sending messages that don't reflect our values. For example, when we place so much emphasis on documentation, we send the message that we are closed to input from students about their own disability. When we use language like 'specialist' to describe ourselves, and 'impaired' to describe the student, we are providing subtle commentary on the hierarchy of the involved parties. When 100% of our efforts are focused on individual accommodations, rather than working to make the environment more usable, we are sending a very medical model message that the problem resides within the individual.

The Social Model of Disability leads us into thinking about how we do what we do. The focus becomes more on universal design, and less on individual accommodations. Universal design is a concept that emerged from the architectural field that is now being applied in other arenas. There is a growing national trend to develop and apply this concept in educational settings. One of the pioneers of this effort is Frank Bowe (2000, p. 45), author of Universal Design in Education. He defines universal design as it applies to the educational setting as "the preparation of curriculum, materials and environments so that they may be used appropriately and with ease, by a wide variety of people." Many educators have embraced the concept of universal design because its application enhances instruction for all students. When environments are designed based on the principles of universal design, everyone benefits, and individual accommodations become much less necessary.

But what does that look like? Here are two examples.

Example 1:

A university establishes an emergency notification system for faculty, staff and students, and it consists of voice messages calling land lines and cell phones.

This system fails to take into consideration the wide range of needs reflected in a diverse college community. It requires that work-arounds be established to meet the needs of students, faculty, staff, and administrators for whom a voice message is ineffective.

Here is the same situation, but rethought considering the principles of universal design:

A university establishes an emergency alert system that includes voice calls as well as text messaging.

Who is now included that wasn't included in the original scenario?

- Deaf and hard of hearing students
- Younger students for whom texting is part of their culture
- Everyone! This is not simply a disability issue. It is a design issue. This new system is much better designed because it considers the needs of **all** users. The authors of this paper pose that we would never answer a voice call during a class or a meeting, but we would surreptitiously check a text message. And if there is a shooter on campus, we want to know right away, not when the class is over. That is universal design. The system is designed with everyone in mind.

Example 2:

A student with a learning disability needs a notetaker in her classes, and provides a flyer from the Disability Resource Center requesting a volunteer from the class to step forward.

This is a very common scenario that is used at universities and colleges all across the country. However, it is an accommodation that must be worked out each and every time this student begins a semester. It is a work-around for this student, because the way the class is set up is not accessible to her.

Here is the same situation, but rethought considering the principles of universal design:

Faculty post their lecture notes to the web prior to each class, or ask students to each in turn take notes for the entire class that are then posted.

Who is now included that wasn't included in the original scenario?

- Non-traditional students
- Students for whom English is a second language
- Students with a learning style that differs from that of his or her instructor's teaching style
- Students with disabilities
- Any academically at-risk groups

And a wonderful side benefit of this universal design approach is that students with disabilities don't have to go through the whole 'separate but equal' experience of requesting an accommodation. The course is designed with all the diverse possibilities in mind, and everyone benefits. In this scenario, the Disability Resource Center isn't even involved, because the course was designed so well from the outset. And the instructor doesn't have to take up valuable class time to arrange for the accommodation of a volunteer notetaker. It's truly a win/win situation!

How We Express Our Values

You may not realize everything you put 'out there' that tells others about what you value. Many people think only of their mission statement when asked about what their department values. But really, how long has it been since most of us have even read our mission statement? How many years has it been since it was revised?

Case Study: The Disability Resource Center at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock

In 2007, the DRC at UALR began the process of evaluating what we do, how we represent ourselves, and how we live out our values. During this process, we looked at all of the following items and determined if they fit into our current way of thinking. We assessed how well they represented the Social Model of Disability, and if they utilized the principles of universal design.

- Office name
- Mission statement
- Office tag line
- Position titles and descriptions
- Office Structure
- Syllabus statement
- Letter to professors
- Documentation guidelines
- Terminology such as “intake” or “case notes”
- How we represent ourselves on the web
- All policies and procedures

At the end of this evaluation process, we realized we had many dramatic changes to make. Here are a few of the changes:

Office Name

Old	Disability Support Services
Problems	The terms “support” and “services” are more medical model terms. They imply that students with disabilities need “support” and they keep the focus on the student as the problem rather than placing the focus on the environmental barriers.
New	Disability Resource Center
Reasons for Change	<p>We want to create an image that is consistent with the other shifts we have made over the years. We are a resource to students and to the campus community and provide services to both.</p> <p>Often, in fact, our role is to assist the campus community in creating more usable and inclusive environments. When this is accomplished access for students with disabilities is seamless.</p> <p>The name “Disability Resource Center” indicates that we are a resource to students as well as other members of the campus community. Through the years we have taken on the role of providing resources and technical assistance even beyond the campus community, in both a routine and very regular way when our colleagues from other institutions call us for assistance and advice, and through programs such as PACE and PEPNet-South/Arkansas SOTAC.</p> <p>Some offices are choosing names that place the focus more directly on the environment—such as Center for Educational Access or similar names. We acknowledge that these names do indeed reflect social model in that they place the responsibility for access less on the student and more on the environment. However, some proponents of name changes that remove the term “disability” argue</p>

that students steer away from their office because of that term. This is a reflection of the problems of our society and the lack of acceptance of diversity. We want to change the way people think about disability rather than shrink away from the reactions that people have to that term. We hope that through our work, our campus community will begin to see the power that goes along with that term and will embrace the rich history of the disability rights movement. We hope that they will come to see disability as an aspect of diversity that is integral to our society and to our campus community.

Mission Statement

Old

The mission of DSS is to eliminate physical and academic barriers and to fulfill the Division of Educational and Student Services concept of assisting students in achieving their educational, career, and personal goals through the full range of institutional and community resources. In addition, the office was established to insure that students with special needs receive support services and accommodations to allow them equal access to all UALR programs, and that they have the opportunity to realize their potential.

Problems

This mission statement was written several years ago and the language reflects more medical model thinking. Words like “assisting,” “insure,” “support services,” and “allow” emphasize the DS professional as being the expert who is helping the student achieve access and success. The phrase “students with special needs” is considered patronizing by many people with disabilities. It also places the focus on the student rather than the environment.

New

Providing access to a diverse student population is embedded in the philosophy of the University of Arkansas at Little Rock.¹ We recognize disability as an aspect of diversity that is integral to society and to the campus community. To this end, the Disability Resource Center collaborates with students, faculty, staff, and community members to create usable, equitable, inclusive and sustainable learning environments.² We promote and facilitate awareness and access through training, partnerships, innovative programs and accommodations.³

1-Adapted from Educational Student Services Mission Statement.

2-Adapted from AHEAD “UDLI-endorsed” mission statement.

3-Adapted from University of Arizona’s mission statement.

Reasons for Change

The new mission statement is more consistent with new thinking about disability and with the current focus of the office. It emphasizes the collaborative role of the staff and the emphasis on changing the environment rather than simply responding to each student’s access request. When we collaborate with students we are recognizing their own expertise in resolving access issues. Words like “usable,” “equitable,” “inclusive,” and “sustainable” are

central to the concept of universal design.

Office Tag Line

Old	The Education You Want, The Services You Need
Problems	The focus is on the student's needs, not on the need for changes in the environment. It communicates that the student needs professional services to get an education
New	Creative Solutions. Together.
Reasons for Change	This can include either environmental changes or accommodations, but it has a more positive feel and emphasizes collaboration.

For a more complete list of changes we've implemented over the last year or two, please go to this website: <http://ualr.edu/pace/index.php/shift>

Where We Go From Here

We are still working toward the social model of disability in our office, and working toward universal design. We aren't done. It will always be a work in progress. But we've also expanded our focus to include the entire university. We realize that in order for universal design to be a reality at UALR, we had to involve the whole campus. We wrote a paper entitled, *A Campus Commitment to Universal Design*, that can be found at ualr.edu/pace/index.php/commitment/. It was primarily authored by Melanie Thornton, with help from Susan Queller and Sharon Downs. It states what we see as necessary steps for us all to take to achieve our vision. We have done several presentations across campus, including to the Chancellor's Leadership Group, the Deans Council, the Academy for Teaching and Learning Excellence, Staff Senate, and Faculty Senate. Our Chancellor has fully supported our efforts, which is a big step in getting us where we want to be. However, we recognize that change comes from below and not from above, and so we will continue our efforts to educate faculty, staff and administrators on universal design and the Social Model of Disability, to help these concepts become part of our campus culture. We are utilizing faculty who are very familiar with these concepts and who support what we're doing to make presentations to their colleagues. We've tied our efforts to the university mission statement and the new strategic plan.

An important part of this commitment paper is the recommendations we provide. Here is that section in its entirety.

Recommendations

The authors of this paper recommend that the University of Arkansas at Little Rock adopt the social model of disability and universal design through the following actions:

1. Adopt a formal campus-wide commitment to universal design and publish a summary statement on key web pages and in undergraduate and graduate catalogs.
Sample statement: *The University of Arkansas at Little Rock values people with disabilities as an integral part of our diverse campus community. We are committed to the creation of usable, equitable, inclusive and sustainable learning environments based on the principles of universal design.*
2. Infuse universal design concepts in faculty and staff training—especially training that relates to course design, Web design, information delivery, and service delivery.

3. Implement a campus diversity initiative and include disability as an aspect of the diversity that is an integral part of our campus community.
4. Revisit campus policies and adapt them to reflect this paradigm shift.
5. As staff and faculty orientation materials are developed, incorporate messages that promote this philosophy as a part of our campus culture.
6. Use the principles of universal design to guide construction/development of all aspects of the campus environment: the built environment, classrooms and labs, the IT environment, instruction, programs, and services. Engage faculty, staff and administrators in identifying disabling environments and reconstructing them based on these principles.
7. Hire architects who are trained in universal design principles and involve the Chancellor's Committee on the ADA in the early planning stages for new buildings and remodeling projects.
8. When we have to retrofit a process, product, or environment or provide an accommodation, consider this a signpost pointing toward the need for redesign.
9. Promote inclusive, equitable design with our vendors or potential vendors by communicating the need for products that are usable, to the greatest extent possible, by all of our students, faculty, staff, visitors, and alumni and purchasing products that meet our standard.
10. Utilize the following as guiding principles as we move forward toward this vision of a more equitable, sustainable and usable campus environment:
 - Disability is an aspect of diversity that is an integral part of society.
 - Disability is a social construct resulting from the present inability of social institutions and designed environments to accommodate individual differences. (Schriner & Scotch)
 - Access is a matter of social justice.
 - Good design means, among other things, that a product, process, or environment is, to the greatest extent possible, usable by everyone.
 - Creating and advocating for usable, sustainable, and inclusive learning environments is a shared responsibility.

Many positive changes are already occurring on our campus. The shift has already begun to take place as DRC representatives are invited to the table in the planning stages of Web development, software purchases, and other decision-making processes. It is our hope that by taking a formal position on this important issue, we can work together to create a tipping point that make this paradigm the primary lens of our campus community and will make our vision become our reality.

In Conclusion

Shift happens – we're proof! But it doesn't happen without commitment, a vision, and a plan. It is our hope that you are now dissatisfied with the status quo, and are ready to take a step in the direction of reframing disability and embracing universal design and the social model, both for your department and for your campus.

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