



# Supporting Students with Invisible Disabilities

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# Today's Topics

What are invisible disabilities?

How do invisible disabilities impact students in educational settings?

Invisible disability inclusion and support in instructional spaces

# Presenter Positionality & Description

White

Female

Heterosexual

Cisgender

Middle aged

Highly educated

Have invisible disabilities (well managed)

Easily pass as non-disabled

Parent of two children with invisible disabilities

# Please note: I am not an expert

*...but I'm really interested in  
disability issues.*

*I am still learning and hope  
to learn from you, too!*



What is a “disability”?

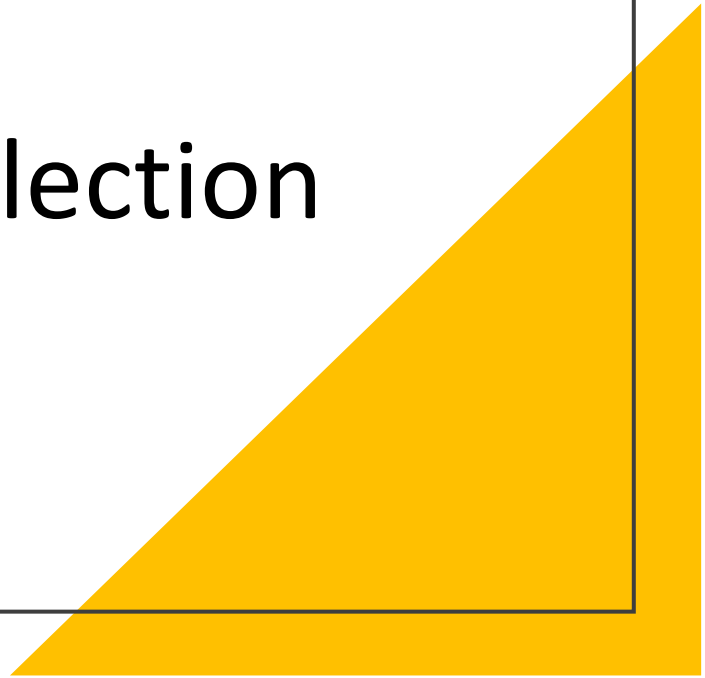
How do you know if  
someone is disabled?

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*Activity:*

Partner / Group / Individual Reflection



There will be 3 questions.

Feel free to:

- discuss the questions with others  
or
- write/journal/think about the questions  
individually  
or
- You can share in the chat



**When you hear the terms, “disabled person” or “person with disabilities,” what images come to mind?**

**Did you have any significant experiences related to learning about disabilities?**

**If so, how did those experiences impact you?**



What was it like to talk about this topic?

# Language Issues



CHAT POLL: which is better?

#1. Person First Language  
“Person with a Disability”

or

#2. Identity First Language  
“Disabled Person”



Unsatisfying Answer:

It depends!

# Invisible, Hidden or Non-Apparent Disability?

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Which term is best?

*Ask or notice what someone  
prefers!*







A few definitions:

What is a disability?

What is an invisible disability?



According to the  
Americans with  
Disabilities Act  
(ADA):

“...a disability is a physical or  
mental impairment that  
substantially limits one or more  
major life activities.”

<https://adata.org/>



According to  
the Invisible  
Disabilities  
Association,

“...an **invisible disability** is a physical, mental or neurological condition that is not visible from the outside, yet can limit or challenge a person’s movements, senses, or activities. Unfortunately, the very fact that these symptoms are invisible can lead to misunderstandings, false perceptions, and judgments.”

Can you think of a few examples of invisible disabilities?

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Put some in the chat?



# A Few Examples:

- **Dyslexia**
- **Anxiety Disorders**
- **Chronic Pain**
- **Chronic Fatigue Syndrome**
- **Depression**
- **Diabetes**
- **Schizophrenia**
- **Agoraphobia**
- **Chronic Dizziness**
- **Multiple Sclerosis**

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**Autism Spectrum Disorder**

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**D(d)eafness/Hearing Loss**

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**Sleep Disorders**

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**Bipolar Disorder**

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**Asthma**

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**Brain Injuries**

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**Crohn's Disease**

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**Epilepsy**

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**Fibromyalgia**

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**Lupus**

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**Chronic Dizziness**

- **Lyme Disease**
- **Metabolic Syndrome**
- **Myasthenia Gravis**
- **Narcolepsy**
- **Personality Disorders**
- **Rheumatoid Arthritis**
- **Ulcerative Colitis**
- **Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder**

Why is this topic important?

## Invisible Disabilities Are Common

No exact consensus on numbers or percentages, 10-20% of population

You probably know many people with one of these conditions

Many people with invisible disabilities do not identify as being disabled

- 1 in 4 people in the US have a disability
- 1 in 10 (or more) people are estimated to have an invisible disability
- Approximately 20% of students in higher education are disabled
- Only a third of students with a disability inform their college
- Many disabled people do not go to college and do not achieve the same level of professional success, even if they do
- Disabled people are at higher risk for depression, isolation, poverty, violence, health inequities, lack of access to transportation, and financial insecurity
- Disabled people face daily struggles with accessibility, microaggressions and prejudice

Available Data:

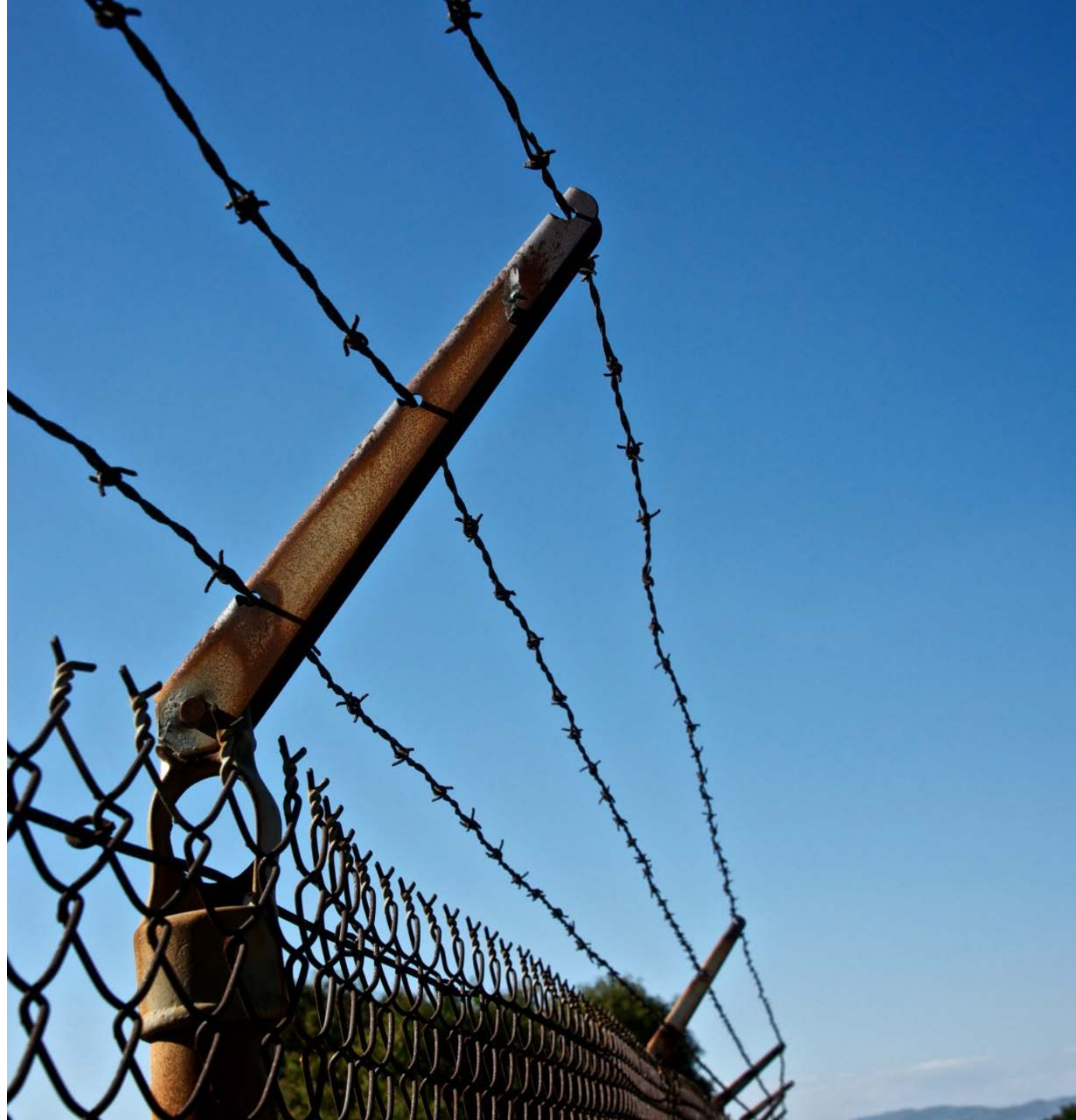
National Center for  
Educational Statistics  
2021/2022

- 7.3 Million students aged 3-21 received services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)
- 15% of all students in public schools
- Approximately 75% of the 7.3 million students served by IDEA have invisible disabilities



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What barriers do  
invisibly disabled  
students experience?



- Ableism and stigma

- Inaccessibility

- Social challenges

- Lack of support

Educational and other institutions generally use “accommodations” to provide support for disabled students.



*Please note:*

\*\*\*Accommodations only address inaccessibility issues.

\*\*\*They do not help with stigma, social impacts and the lack of other supports.

Accommodations are based on the “Medical Model” of disability

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Disability needs to be “cured” or fixed so that disabled folks can function closely to “normal” as possible

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Accommodations are given to help disabled people gain access to resources (but they often don't work)

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Disabled people must rely on disclosure of their disability to get assistance/support

# A Few Common Accommodations



Extended time on exams and assignments



Exams in quiet/alternate space



Modified assignments



Accessibility technologies for work/exams



Lecture notes provided



Oral (or other) exam option




Availability of recorded lectures



Sound cancelling headphones

Although accommodations do help many people, many others are not supported by disability services offices.



# Why?

- No diagnosis
- Can't get all the paperwork necessary
- Process too long or hard
- Still on the waitlist
- Accommodations were not approved
- Instructors could not or would not provide accommodations and there was no support or enforcement
- Instructors have no training
- Didn't declare disability
- Didn't know what to ask for
- Technology broken or isn't compatible/appropriate
- Other factors interfere with even getting to class/work (lack of transportation)





What challenges could invisibly disabled students experience in your class?



- Accessibility tools don't work as expected
- No technical support for accessibility tools
- Materials are not accessible
  - Chat, PDFs, Equations, Images of text
- Expectation of reading something quickly in class
- Expectation of interacting with others
- Cold calling
- Requirement to present to class
- Attendance requirements with no virtual option
- No asynchronous resources, notes, recordings, handouts
- Physically inaccessible spaces
  - Includes scents, lighting, temperature, noise
- Inflexible modes of communication
  - (no anonymous options)

Let's find ways to support disabled students  
better.

# "Social Model" of disability

- Disability is caused by a society planned and built for non-disabled people
- Society and institutions should be designed to include everyone
- Accessibility is a matter of justice and inclusion

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# Making Instruction Accessible



1. Implement Elements of Universal Design for Learning

<https://udlguidelines.cast.org/>

Based on Universal Design (UD) in architecture by Ronald Mace (1980s)

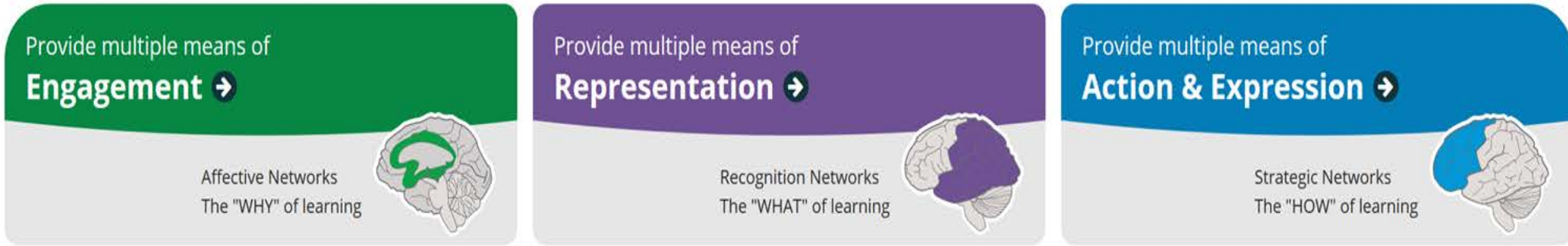


Goal: make buildings, spaces, and products usable by everyone  
Aligns with the “social model of disability”: society is designed in a way that excludes disabled people and can be designed to include everyone

Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST) developed UDL in the 1980s

Goal: make learning accessible to all students  
Premise: different brains function and learn differently; instruction and education can be designed for all brains. UDL involves both cognitive and emotional aspects of learning

# Basic Principles of Universal Design for Learning



- ***Multiple means of engagement:*** tap into learners' interests, put learning goals in context for students to increase motivation
- ***Multiple means of representation:*** give learners many ways of acquiring information and knowledge
- ***Multiple means of expression:*** provide alternatives ways for students to show their understanding



## 2. Limit Content

# Avoid overwhelming students



Be realistic about what you can cover



Communicate clearly about content and trajectory



Focus on skills that are the most relevant to session goals



Check for comprehension (do not assume no questions means “we get it”)

3. Make Content/Space/Activities Inclusive and Accessible

Students do not all engage or learn in the same way.  
Forcing them to do so can exclude many students.



Ensure physical access to spaces



Provide options for learning, communicating knowledge, and participating



Be aware of what can exclude students (or cause them to shut down)



Make asynchronous options for learning available

# Physical Space Issues

- Consider how hard it is to navigate to a space: can someone get there with a cane? Crutches? A wheelchair?
- Lighting can create an inaccessible space, do not use flashing lights, avoid florescent bulbs (and some say LEDs too!)
- Are electrical outlets accessible? Where are they located? Light switches?
- Are spaces designed to be flexible?
- Are there strong smells in the space? Are people wearing perfume/cologne or are there other strong scents?

# Active Learning Challenges for Disabled Students

- You may not know if anyone is disabled
- Group settings can be difficult for neurodivergent students (distractions, noises, smells, anxiety)
- Dyslexic or vision-impaired students or those with slower processing speed may not be able to read or perform tasks quickly
- Many students may not feel comfortable or be able to interact with others or “perform” publicly
- Students with physical disabilities might not be able to participate in movement-focused activities or move their seats easily
- Students with hearing or visual impairments may not be able to hear instructions or interact with inaccessible materials
- **Anxiety is a major barrier for learning**

# Considerations for Active Learning

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- Use active learning techniques carefully
- Consider how an activity could be experienced by students with different backgrounds and abilities
- Physical movement, social interaction, or reading expectations may make disabled students feel excluded or uncomfortable
- Provide options for learning and participation:
  - Asynchronous options, written options
  - Do not single anyone out

# Accessibility Issues for Digital Resources

- Videos might not be accessible to visually impaired students
- Internet links and equations often do not work with screen readers
- PDFs are hard to make accessible
- Flashing screens can be problematic for people with seizure disorders or other conditions
- Charts and graphs can be inaccessible to screen readers
- Pictures of text do not read on screen readers
- Social media is often inaccessible
- Columns on slides or documents can be problematic



# Making Digital Content Accessible

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- Do not use color as a navigational tool or to differentiate items
- Images should include Alt text ; complex images should have more extensive descriptions as a caption or summary
- Functionality should be accessible through mouse and keyboard and be tagged to worked with voice-control systems
- Provide transcripts for podcasts, recorded lectures, videos, or other media (include any “chat” questions or other questions that might be hard to hear)
- If you have a video, provide visual access to the audio information through in-sync captioning
- Provide asynchronous content (recordings, documents, notes, etc.) for students who missed some content for whatever reason

4. Don't Rush.



When students get overwhelmed or lost, many will disengage (stop listening/learning)



Check in with students for comprehension



Give more time than you think for questions



Give anonymous options for feedback/questions



Less is more

## 5. Set an Agenda



Clarify goals of your session



Helps students see how it all fits together



Emphasize relevance of each topic

6. Collect Feedback, Evaluate, Keep Learning



Communicate with students and instructors & incorporate their feedback



Read, learn, investigate, take classes, listen



Experiment with new techniques



Collaborate with colleagues



Creating anti-ableist, inclusive instruction is an ongoing, iterative process

7. Be empathetic, listen, and help



People often do not believe  
invisibly disabled students need  
support

People accuse them of trying  
to take advantage or  
exaggerating

This silences, shames, and  
disadvantages disabled  
students

- Always believe a student
  - Provide as much support to all students as you can: many have not gotten accommodations due to systematic discrimination or feel disempowered to ask for them
  - If you can't provide a support for someone, ask for help from your department, mentor, colleagues, disability services
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8. Learn how to support mental health

# Mental Health Issues and Disability

- Disabled adults experience mental health distress 5 times more often than those without disabilities (Center for Disease Control)
- Disabled people often have less access to health care and may experience bias and discrimination from health care professionals
- Many disabled people have intersectional identities and may be subject to even greater levels of discrimination and abuse.
- Educate yourself about discrimination based on factors such as race, gender, sexuality, nationality, religion, and age.

## Digital Accessibility Resources:

- Digital Accessibility:  
Web Accessibility Initiative:  
<https://www.w3.org/WAI/fundamentals/>
- CU Boulder Digital Accessibility Office:  
<https://www.colorado.edu/digital-accessibility/about>
  - DAO offers a Canvas Course on digital accessibility and other training resources, as well as consultations on specific materials
- Website Accessibility Guidelines:  
<https://www.ada.gov/resources/web-guidance/>

# Universal Design for Learning Resources

- CAST Guidelines <https://udlguidelines.cast.org/>
- Understood.org's Teachers' Guide to UDL  
<https://www.understood.org/en/articles/understanding-universal-design-for-learning>
- Coursera Course: *An Introduction to Accessibility and Inclusive Design*  
<https://www.coursera.org/learn/accessibility>

Questions? Comments?

Let's Chat!

Please contact me at

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