When Active Learning Isn’t Accessible
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The research on students’ learning outcomes students achieved through active learning seems irrefutable. While the research presents a compelling case for the adoption of active learning practices across all disciplines, my own experiences in the classroom often left me wondering about the range in learning outcomes among students in class. I used to chalk this variation among students’ experiences and outcomes primarily to individual students’ willingness to engage in educational approaches with which they may be less comfortable. This attitude, however, assumes that the classroom is an equal playing field in which learning opportunities are equally accessible to all students. Paying attention to the presence of disability in the classroom, however, helps us recognize that, as with all pedagogies, some students are privileged in active learning spaces. For students with a range of disabilities, active learning classrooms present unique educational barriers that are often addressed in traditional disability accommodations (Gin et al. 2020).

Earlier this semester, I had the opportunity to present the initial findings from an ongoing research project with some of SHSU’s wonderful disabled students enrolled in ENGL 1301 and ENGL 1302. In our hour-long interviews, these students are helping us understand what it is like for them to participate in a variety of active learning practices and what kinds of access barriers these practices present. These barriers include:

- **Time.** Because so much of active learning takes place synchronously for all students during class, disabled students may need additional time to complete tasks associated with active learning and, at times, attempt to mask or hide the fact that they need more time to complete a task in order to keep up with their peers.
- **Distraction.** The collaborative nature of many active learning practices presents opportunities for students to engage with their peers, but it also presents increased classroom noise and stimulation, which can be distracting to the point of creating additional roadblocks to students’ engagement.
- **Comprehension.** When active learning involves small or large group discussions, students in this study reported increased difficulty in following the conversation and in understanding what they should be taking away from discussion.

Given these potential access barriers unique to the active learning classroom, it can be difficult to determine how to move forward. If active learning isn’t always accessible, what should we do? What if one student’s access barrier is another student’s access affordance (thus creating competing access needs). The disabled students in this study by-and-large identified both barriers and unique educational opportunities of active learning. Despite the complexity of

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1 I am intentionally using identity first language (“disabled students”) over person first language (“students with disabilities”). To learn more about the use of identity first language within disability communities and advocacy, you can check out articles from the [Autistic Self Advocacy Network](https://www.autisticsav.org) or the [University of Kansas Special Education Program](https://special.ku.edu), among others.
educational barriers and access needs, there are steps that instructors can take to support more accessible active learning classrooms, such as:

1. **Acknowledge and embrace the presence of disability in our classes.** At least twenty percent of undergraduates in the United States have a disability. Whether or not students disclose their disabilities to us, we will have disabled students in our classrooms. Their presence isn’t a wrench being thrown at our perfect active learning practices; rather, listening and responding to disabled students’ experiences can help us create better learning environments for everyone.

2. **Solicit feedback from students about classroom accessibility.** Instructors do not—and should not—wait to receive an Accommodation Request Form to take steps to improve classroom accessibility. Inviting students to provide anonymous feedback about any access barriers they are facing can help us identify access concerns that we are not aware of and strategies for creating more inclusive learning spaces.

3. **Use a variety of active-learning practices.** Classrooms that become overly reliant on one or two active learning methods may unintentionally create classrooms that are uniquely inaccessible for some disabled students. Consistently offering a variety of classroom activities will create opportunities for a variety of students to engage with course material in ways that are meaningful to their learning needs.

4. **Learn about and implement universal design for learning principles.** While there is not one universal design for learning that will meet all students’ needs, UDL offers a framework for expanding access and promoting inclusive learning.