

## Access Checks

### How can the Social Model of Disability help us think about accessibility?

Where some views of disability frame disability as a problem located within particular people/bodies, a social model of disability looks at the ways that barriers are created. An example of this is stairs—when U of T built stairs into the classrooms at Sid Smith, people who cannot use stairs become disabled through the physical design of the space. This view rejects the idea that disability is an individual's failing or inability, and moves the focus to how systems render people unable to access the spaces and supports they need to succeed through their design and policies. In other words, this model says that people are disabled by barriers in society, not by their impairment or difference.

### How should I understand some key concepts?

- **Accessibility:** Accessibility refers to the design of products, devices, services, or environments for people who experience disabilities.
- **Barrier:** A barrier is a circumstance or obstacle that keeps people apart. For people with disabilities in university, barriers can take many forms including attitudinal, organizational or systemic, architectural and physical, informational, and communicational, and technological.
- **Disability:** Disabilities is an umbrella term, covering impairments, activity limitations, and participation restrictions. All of these can manifest in many ways, both visible and invisible, and so it is important to consider disability as not just a health problem, but a complex phenomenon, reflecting the interaction between features of a person's body and features of the society in which they live.

### What is an Access Check?

An access check is a way of opening up space for students to let you know if they need any accommodations because something about the space is a barrier to their participation. This could be a small thing ("I cannot read the PowerPoint slides because of the colours", "I cannot hear because there is noise in the hall") or a large thing ("I cannot access the room because there are no ramps"). Regardless, Access Checks give you a chance to make accommodations where possible, and even when you cannot change the barrier, at least you can collectively acknowledge that there are barriers to equitable participation, allowing you to try to build alternatives.

### Why should we do an Access Check?

1. You can address some things. Removing those barriers will enable more people to participate well.
2. Normalizing accommodation is a productive process for students that can welcome disability into the classroom and make it a collective responsibility. We all can contribute to making our classes more accessible through this.
3. Such practices can de-stigmatize the need for accommodation. In regularly asking students if they need access, we reduce the need for students to go through formal accommodation processes, which can take months or years to have their needs met. This also opens space for students who are temporarily disabled to have their needs met. Assuming everyone will need an accommodation at some point helps us move toward more universal design.

### When to do an Access Check?

You can do an access check any time. Some people do these at the beginning of every class, while others intersperse them throughout the year. Access checks do not have to take a lot of time, becoming a regular part of your course process, alongside your agenda and learning objectives.

### How to do an Access Check?

You can begin with a statement on disability and accessibility so that students understand the context, the terminology and the intention:

“We understand access to be a shared responsibility between everyone in this space. We will strive to create an accessible space that reduces the need for you to disclose a disability or impairment for the purposes of gaining an accommodation. In doing this together, we strive to welcome disability, and the changes it brings, into our space.”

You can also ask students questions about the space and identify their needs to which you may be able to respond:

- Is there anything about the space (light, sound, temperature, layout) that we should address now?
- Are there any other access needs that might effect your participation in the workshop that we could also address?

If you can, identify potential barriers to participation (“There is an echo in this room which may distort my voice. Please let me know if you have trouble hearing me.” Remember, the main objective is to normalize the conversation about accessibility.

### What if I cannot accommodate someone’s request?

We cannot always make the accommodations that people need. It can be helpful to acknowledge the barriers with your students, and to engage a conversation about why you cannot, why the barriers are in place, and what you might collectively do to change the barriers. Often, barriers are made invisible to people who do not experience them (e.g., as a person who doesn’t use a wheelchair, I may not notice when a room does not have a ramp), and so bringing your class into a larger conversation about accessibility and how buildings/policies/etc. are made inaccessible can be a productive process that highlights the social model of disability.

### Interested in exploring further resources?

Dolmage, J. T. (2017). *Academic ableism: Disability and higher education*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Price, M. (2010). *Mad at school: Rhetorics of mental disability and academic life*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

McMaster, C. and Whitburn, B. (forthcoming). *Disability and the University: A disabled students’ manifesto*, Peter Lang.

Kerschbaum, S.L., Eisenman, L. T. and J.M. Jones, 2017. *Negotiating Disability Disclosure and Higher Education*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.

Special Issue of *Curriculum Inquiry* (forthcoming). Disability as Meta Curriculum: Epistemologies, Ontologies, and Transformative Praxis.