

**Transcript for Accessibility Bites: Supporting Post-Secondary Students with ADHD**  
**BCcampus webinar hosted on September 25, 2025**  
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**Host: Helena Prins**

MEG INGRAM:

Hello, hello, folks. Lovely to be joining you today. This is Meg speaking. For those who might not be able to see me, I'm a ginger, fairly fem presenting person with big green glasses on today and a navy blue shirt. I use they/them pronouns, and I am presenting on behalf of Untapped Accessibility, which is B.C.'s leading accessibility consulting firm, with our motto is to do accessibility that moves beyond compliance. And so even though the Accessible B.C. Act has emerged in the last few years, and there's been a lot of legislative push towards those compliance measures, we have a real goal to move beyond those things, and I'm super excited to be talking today about how that might apply to the classroom, to engaging folks in the post-secondary sector, and to moving into spaces that are accessible and brave and safe and supportive as much as they can be within these institutions that have so many inherent flaws to them sometimes.

I want to begin by also saying that Untapped Accessibility offices are on the unceded traditional territory of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh Nations in so-called Vancouver. And we extend our thanks, honour and respect to our hosts. I myself am joining from so called Guelph, which is on the Haudenosaunee and Attiweronk territories, and I'm very excited to be here with you folks.

Just some brief accessibility notes for this session. There is captioning available. If you're wanting to view me and the slides and you're struggling to get both of those up on your screen at the same time, you should be able in the top right corner to toggle to Gallery view in Zoom, and that should be able to let you see things side by side. Slide deck was also sent in advance, and there's multiple modes of engagement available to you. Please feel empowered to put thoughts in the chat. I might not get to them, but I will try and keep an eye on them. And please also, if I'm going too fast, please speak up. Please let me know how to slow down. You can use the little Zoom thing that indicates to slow down, or you can just speak up and say, Please, because in service of this meeting, I will further self-position myself before we get into the content. I myself am multiply disabled. I have a connective tissue disorder, that means I'm a part-time cane user that comes kind of charcuterie board of comorbidities, as it were. I'm also neurodivergent. I myself have an ADHD diagnosis that I got as an adult, fairly recently within the last six months actually, even though that has been a part of my life for years, and I'm also the child of a mother with a disability. So accessibility work has been a part of my life as long as I've been on this Earth. I've also been an instructor in post-secondary settings at the University of Victoria and at Queens University in Kingston. And so this is a really brief and quick and let's get to it version of some of those things that I've learned through being a neurodivergent instructor that I have further honed through Untapped.

We've just done our quick little introductions in access. We're going to blast through some key definitions, talk a little bit about multimodal learning and cognitive load, talk about flexibility and accountability, and then wrap it all up with a call to action.

Key definitions. First, accessibility. This is the intentional and proactive work that we do to identify, prevent and remove barriers for disabled people. It's about designing spaces, programs, services, and

communications so everyone can access and use them with dignity, independence, and ease. So you'll hear me throughout this presentation, referring to the academic environment. When I'm talking about accessibility in the academic environment, we're talking about all of the different accessibility pieces.

Beyond the classroom, moving into learning management systems, the way that people interact with the registrar, how folks engage with content and learn even when they're outside of the classroom, outside of the LMS. And so accessibility work in an academic context really involves identifying and removing and preventing barriers in all of those different sorts of pillars, and then intentionally designing spaces, programs, services, communications, in our case syllabi likely to be flexible and adaptable to different engagement styles, and then clearly communicating that accessibility information.

A phrase that we like to use here at Untapped is that sometimes you can't make things accessible, and in that case, it is important to name what you know. What you want to do is give people the information that they need to make decisions about how they're going to engage, even if it means them navigating the fact that it's not accessible in the first place. This is related to, and exists in kind of attention sometimes with, Academic Accommodation. These are adaptations that aim to reduce or eliminate barriers to participation which arise when a student with a disability interacts in the academic environment. And as I said, the academic environment is all of those pieces, classroom environments, assessment practices, learning strategies, all of those.

And crucially, there's a sort of tension that emerges here between accommodations and accessibility, and we do need both always. Sometimes when we talk about accessibility, there's an idea that if we make everything like quote unquote fully accessible, that we won't need accommodations. And that's just not the case because every human being is completely individual, and has different ways of existing in the world. And particularly when we talk about neurodivergence, the way that neurodivergence shows up, and we'll get into that as a definition, is so different for everyone. And so I'll talk about this for a second. Accessibility is that proactive and systemic piece. It requires organizations to identify, remove, and prevent barriers. So this is the point of an accessibility office, though often flawed. They are a great start to that. It requires the university to shift policies and for instructors to shift practices. Planning and design is public, often includes consultation, and it aims to improve access for everyone across the entire enterprise or organization. This is in contrast with accommodations, which are reactive, they're individualized. They require individuals to identify their barriers, and we see this especially in university contexts as a confidential process that needs to be requested by the person with a disability. This is the accommodation office process where a student has to submit their medical documentation, request the specific requirements that they need in order to have barriers removed in the classroom. Go through an entire ordeal to justify those decisions and while necessary, often because some of those accommodations can only be individual, it does ultimately improve access for just one person. Accessibility in an academic sphere often gets taken up in a very specific framework. Accessibility is often condensed to universal design for learning. We'll talk about that a little bit more when we get to cognitive load.

Before we do that, I want to define some terms around ADHD. ADHD is a neurodevelopmental condition affecting attention, impulse control, and executive functioning. I think we generally have a more common sense understanding of what it means to have your attention or your impulses affected, but executive functioning is a little bit more of an umbrella term and can have some differences and understandings for people. It includes a really wide array of things, including planning and organization,

working memory, task initiation, and follow-through, interoception, and emotional regulation. It's all of those pieces that allow us to intake information, understand that information, decide what action we're going to take, and then follow-through on that action. That ranges widely from a student doing an assignment to a student also making ramen. Executive functioning impacts everything. ADHD emerges in the classroom in some stereotypical contexts. We often understand it as being an attention and impulse disorder that causes people to speak up or to not follow the norms of the classroom. But it's also something that really impacts, as I said, how people organize their life. And how people understand information, how they show up in relation to it. And in the classroom, barriers for folks with ADHD can include long lectures with limited interaction, really complex assignments with unclear steps, rigid deadlines with little to no flexibility, overwhelming learning management systems that are hard to navigate and minimal feedback loops. And something that helps us understand ADHD as something beyond a deficit-based approach or something that is inherently difficult or a struggle for folks is to move towards the concept of it as part of neurodivergence. Neurodiversity emerged as a term in the late 1990s, and it proposes that neurological differences like ADHD are natural variations in the human brain rather than disorders that need to be cured. And this paradigm shift really moves us away from the idea of wanting to fix an individual person or a student and towards supporting more broadly ways of engaging with material.

And these are some terms that I also use. Neurodivergence is the state of being neurodivergent. Neurodivergent means having a mind that functions in a significantly different way from what's considered or valued as "normal" in a given society or context. Neurodiverse describes the limited diversity of human minds across a group, and neuroinclusive refers to environments, practices, and attitudes to actively welcome and support neurodiversity. Ultimately, what we're getting at today is creating neuroinclusive classrooms for students with ADHD.

To do that, we're going to learn about multimodal learning and cognitive load.

So cognitive load theory. Before we learn new information, we ultimately have to process it in our working memory. Our working memory has a limited capacity, and if we overwhelm that capacity, we can't process new information. And so making sure that we're not overloading that working memory is a key factor in making sure that we can actually learn in the classroom, that we can intake more information. And lots of things can take up space in our working memory. For example, worrying about where you're going to sleep or find our next meal. That leaves less working memory capacity for us to process information. If any of your biological needs aren't met, it's much harder to learn when you're distracted, hungry, or stressed. If you're juggling a bunch of different activities as academics requires us to do, you're taking multiple courses, you're working a job, you're doing all of these different things. All of those can work towards overwhelming our working memory. And this is something that is also impacted by the cognitive capacity and neurotype of a person. Processing information in our working memory is energy intensive. And so beyond ADHD, students who are disabled, who are neurodivergent may have to ration their energy throughout the day and might decide not to engage with a certain kind of communication or a task or an activity if it looks like it'll be too demanding on them. Additionally, people with certain disabilities like ADHD, traumatic brain injuries, dementia, might have a smaller working memory capacity at given times that's more easily overwhelmed. And so something that disabled activists and disabled, the disability community has used to understand these energy pieces is something called Spoon theory. You might have heard of it before. The idea is that every person has spoons at the start of their day and you kind of allocate a spoon to each individual activity. It comes from this person trying to explain their energy levels to a friend in an actual university cafeteria and

pulling out a bunch of spoons in front of them to demonstrate. And for many people, you might have a whole cutlery drawer full of spoons. If your working memory is good, if you've got a lot of sleep, if you're not neurodivergent, you might have 20 spoons for a day and you can allocate them nicely to activities and move on. But if you have ADHD, if you haven't slept well, if your medication isn't working the way you want it to, if you have too many things to juggle, all of these things reduce more and more the amount of spoons we might have in a day. You might have six spoons and you need to use one of them on showering, one of them on eating, and one of them on taking transit to campus. So then you have three spoons left for the rest of your day. This is what we're trying to get at with cognitive load theory is the ways in which learning, engaging, and even interacting with the pieces that move us towards learning impact the energy that we have available to us and how much we can even begin to take in.

So there's lots of strategies to reduce cognitive load, chunking content into smaller digestible units, giving clear direction with strong action words, things like Read this text, reflect on this, really laying it out what is specifically supposed to be done so that you don't use working memory trying to figure out the activity. Using plain language where possible, simplifying LMS navigation and clearly labelling materials, offering examples and checklists, one of the big ones is offering multimodal learning with multiple means of engagement.

Multimodal learning is an educational approach that aims to offer engagement with the different senses to engage students and improve learning retention. So hearing and looking and touching and moving our bodies, somatically, cognitively, these are all of the different pieces that we're wanting to pull in. And this is because offering multiple forms of sensory engagement and input gives students different ways to retrieve and access working memory. So engagement and input that's visual or auditory or tactile might give students different ins to content, to activities that is a lower cognitive load on that working memory. And so this is a way of giving options to students that can reduce cognitive load or at a minimum, if they still have to do the same amount of work, gives them a chance to choose how they're spending their spoons. What activities feel the most fulfilling if they're going to use their energy and their working memory.

This brings us to multiple means of engagement, representation, action, and expression. Multiple means of engagement, multiple means of representation, and multiple means of action and expression are three of the principles of universal design for learning, often abbreviated to UDL, that emphasize offering information and content in multiple formats, a variety of activities, choice in autonomy and support. So these first two bullet points often get taken up the most sort of concretely in a post-secondary context. They're things that you can really sort of do. So for offering information and content in multiple formats, this might look like on your syllabi in your week instead of having four different journal articles that students are reading, having one journal article, one book chapter because sometimes the language choices that are made in those are a little bit different in ways that people process differently, a podcast and a video. All of these things are offering students different avenues into the same content or giving students different opportunities to engage in ways that make sure that that key point, the learning objective or focal point of your lecture can actually be accessed by folks. Building different aspects into our syllabi is a crucial way of doing that. That includes also learning and assessment practices. So again, instead of having one mid-term exam, one final exam, and maybe a couple of discussion posts in the middle as part of a syllabi, it means offering a bunch of different options across the entire semester. We'll get into this a little bit more when we talk about building in flexibility and accountability. But it means making sure that there are multiple means of engagement, representation, and action throughout. Sometimes we get stuck in those first, too. We think about all of

the things that we are doing, that we are doing as an actor, how we can change the different sort of forms of activity and content that we're engaging with. And we kind of forget that there's a student who's intaking that information. It sounds counterintuitive because obviously we're making these decisions because we want to support our students. But really sort of broadening out and imagining that bigger picture piece is crucial to doing this well, because ultimately, in offering all of these options, what you're trying to give is choice in autonomy and support to your students, this means not applying value judgments to which kinds of content they might choose to engage with or what kinds of activities they might choose to engage. It means making sure that they have that choice in autonomy and that you're not prescribing in just a different format, the sort of same system. And then offering support. Sometimes I think folks think that if they've offered all of the different options, if students have choice, then they can just kind of step back and leave it. But it's really important for support to remain a part of the experience for students and to check in with them and to continue to have open and honest conversations. I'll talk about this a bit more. Ultimately, the goal of all of this is to offer multimodal learning multiple options for engagement with the senses while supporting student agency and dignity. This takes us to how do we actually do that?

What does any of this mean in practice? So first, it means cultivating and accepting space with no shame. Students who are disabled or neurodivergent have encountered a lot of shame in their lives, and we do not need to add to that burden. Something that I notice all the time as an instructor is that students want to over explain and over justify why they might need a certain accommodation. They feel an inherent guilt and shame in even beginning to ask for accommodation. And so cultivating and accepting space, making things really forthright, making it clear that you are a safe space to come to is crucial to doing any of this. And we'll talk about that a bit more because one of the key ways, I think, to do that is to proactively invite students to share with you. And one way of doing that is an accessibility statement on your syllabus, which is our final call to action today. This practice of creating an accepting space also means opening clear lines of communication and emphasizing trust and rapport, again, reminding students that they don't need to justify existing in this world as a human being and that communication is really the key fact here. This includes being open about the fact that you're a human too. I'm a neurodivergent instructor. I'm open about that with my students. I say, communicate with me like a human, I will communicate back with you like a human, and we can sort these things out. We often have a tendency to act like robots when we're in university and that's just not how good learning happens. That's not how we open up space in cognitive load and working memory. It also means, again, as I've indicated, offering flexibility in the classroom, but also in building in accountability throughout the semester. We'll start with flexibility first.

Flexibility can arrive in our syllabus and in our courses in a variety of ways. One of the obvious ones that jumps to mind is flexible due dates, specific late policy practices that can sort of encompass that are things like you can have a week to two weeks after the deadline as long as you communicate with me, regardless of whether or not you have a diagnosed disability or an accommodation through the university. Really building in grace periods and encouraging students to communicate with you is a key part of this. Something I've done as an instructor is saying there's no late penalty. You can take as much time as you need after this due date as long as you communicate with me. Every day that it's late without you sending me an email or talking to me, I take off 1%. So adding in those pieces for that really emphasizes that communication and self-advocacy is welcome. Flexibility also includes multiple means of demonstrating knowledge. Obviously, to exist within academia, there are certain skills that we need to learn, but making sure that those skills don't dominate the entire assessment practice is really important. So I'm from the social sciences background. You do have to know how to write a paper. This



is the truth of the matter. But making sure that students are supported in that practice and that they have other ways of demonstrating their learning up to a final paper, perhaps, whether that's through video submissions, whether that's through podcast recordings, whether that is through shorter little written pieces, making sure that even if you do have to teach a skill, that there are still other ways for students to engage. Where possible, recording lectures is great for self-paced review. I know that different schools have different policies around AI and recording and what becomes the property of the university. This one is very, very variant, but is an option. Time-buffered assessments, making sure that there is space between assessments, and that you're also attentive to when student slumps are around reading break, around the end of November, trying where you can to make sure that there's gentleness in time. And also assessments with multiple segments to select from. I took a course myself in undergrad, years and years ago now, where you had to submit two assignments, 50% and 50%. And then there was an option of four other assignments that you could choose from to change the weighting of your grades. And this is another great option in introducing flexibility for students.

And flexibility needs to be accompanied by accountability for students with ADHD because you want to reduce that cognitive load. You want to give folks opportunities to engage with working memory, but also executive function sometimes hate decisions. And so what you can do is offer different pathways forward and then different accountability supports to make sure that whatever path does get chosen, there's clear decisions being made for, there's a clear path forward. And so this includes rubrics, clear expectations, nothing super, super vague, making sure that students know what the expectation of them is. This includes weekly check-ins or many deadlines of sorts. Even if it's just a little progress tracker in your learning management system or check in at the start of a seminar. These can be great ways to make students feel like they're supported. Non-graded feedback and peer-review opportunities are really excellent options for this as well. They give students the ability to write sooner than they would maybe want to write, often having a due date or a deadline for students with ADHD is super helpful. And so shifting that non-graded feedback opportunity. So there's an accountability to having something done sooner, but not having it graded is a super great process. Progress tracking tools, again, learning management reminders, checklists, worksheets, all of those pieces. And scaffolded assignments, assignments that build on each other. So if you have a paper due at the end of the semester, maybe the first assignment is a proposal. The second is an annotated bibliography in some capacity. The third is a literature review that can maybe be done textually or in a video format or as a mind map, and then you end with that final paper. You're still building towards the same skill, but with some scaffolding there.

And so just some final myth busting before we move to our final call to action and rap. Flexibility does not mean a lack of standards. I think that there's often this idea that if we're introducing different forms of student engagement and assessment into the academy, that this is somehow at odds with their skill building or having standards, and that's just not true. Giving students the ability to engage and the ability to learn actually ultimately ends up in them producing better work and learning more effectively how to communicate, which does result generally in better work even in those areas that they might not super align with in terms of maybe writing or speaking or presenting. Accountability and scaffolding is also not coddling. These are things that we often have available to us in the workplace. We often have an idea of what our boss expects of us. We have a project management tool like Asana. These are all things that students are going to engage with anyways. And so making sure that this is a key sort of aspect as well is important. Accessibility is also not more work, and it can actually reduce your workload if you're strategic. Something people are often concerned about is having extensions for students, screwing up their marking. Are you really going to mark everything within the first day of submission?

I'm certainly not. Maybe that's because I'm a neurodivergent instructor too, but having it so that 50% of the class ends up submitting in that first week and 50% the week after is actually beautiful for me and reduces a lot of my stress. And having all of these flexibility pieces built in ultimately means that students show up with busy work questions and concerns and office hours in ways way less and also with way more intention. People can fidget and listen at the same time. Nothing more needs to be said about that, and not all folks with ADHD are the same. There's as much in-group variation as out-group, and this is why flexibility is so important. And so we've hit 12:30.

I'm going to add one more call to action before I wrap, which is this, which is adding an accessibility statement to your syllabus. If you are in charge of writing a syllabus or if you run a tutorial or if you run a lab, making sure that students proactively know that you are willing to share and that you are willing to engage with them is such an important thing that invites this kind of support. It can be really simple. If you use time-managed supports or access accommodations, please reach out. I'm happy to collaborate on a plan that works for you. And so my call to action for you is that at some point, maybe before you go home at the end of the day tomorrow before the end of the week, just jot down a couple of sentences that you could add as an access statement.

And thank you very much.

HELENA:

Wow. So many good tips in there, Meg. Thank you so much. There was a specific question about how can you support students of RSD? I actually had to go looking up at the Rejection Sensitive Dysphoria. Is there some specific tips you might add for that?

MEG:

Yeah. Something that I have done in the past is specifically named that in the classroom where I can and said, if you're neurodivergent and you struggle with receiving feedback, for whatever reason, emotionally or in terms of actually knowing how to comprehend academic feedback, please come speak to me. And folks will often self-disclose, and then I just collaborate individually with that student on what that looks like for them. Sometimes with students, it's like, can I have my letter grade or my percentage that you're assigning completely separate from the feedback that you're going to give me so I can understand and internalize the grade I'm receiving and then approach the feedback at a later time. For some students, it's that reading it makes it feel harder and so having a conversation in office hours feels a little bit more manageable. And where possible, actively collaborating with your student on what works best for them is helpful and the only tactic that I have tried thus far. It's fantastic insights. Thank you. Thank you so much, folks.