

Transcript for Accessibility Bites: Let's Talk About Learning Disabilities
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JENNIFER FANE:

Thank you so much, BCcampus. It's a short period of time, so I'm going to get going right away.

If you don't know about the Conference Board, we're a national not-for-profit research organization. If you'd like to know more about that or research we do, please follow up with me afterwards.

Wonderful. I just wanted to start by positioning myself in this research and this work. I am an educator and researcher. I've been a classroom teacher. I've worked in post-secondary as an instructor and faculty, and now I do research, as well as working in the not-for-profit sector and neurodiversity, as well. So I've done a little bit of everything, and I'm really pleased to be here and speak on this topic with you. I was the director of education at the Learning Disabilities Society of Greater Vancouver for three years, where I just had so many opportunities to work and learn with individuals with learning disabilities. I'm also autistic and dyslexic myself as well too. So I bring sort of a combination of lived experience, research, and practice to this topic.

So speaking of research that I do draw on findings from a national research study that I led last year that looked at neurodiversity and post-secondary education. Learning disabilities are one aspect of neurodiversity or neurodivergence and also co-occurring, neurodivergent identity for many neurodivergent folk. I will talk a little bit about neurodiversity, but then very specifically drill down on learning disabilities. So if you don't know, there are more neurodivergent students than ever in post-secondary education. That is why it's a combination of more inclusive pathways through K to 12 education, better awareness of neurodiversity, and diagnosis, and as well as more inclusive post-secondary education. However, though, unfortunately, neurodivergent students are less likely to graduate than their neurotypical peers and also it takes them much longer. That might be because they chose to take a slower pace. But often that's because of a lack of accessibility and inclusivity of post-secondary education, which makes it quite challenging to move through courses and programs due to those access challenges. Learning disabilities and their impact on neurodivergent learners are often less recognized or discussed than other neurodivergent identities. We're often thinking about ADHD, we're thinking about autism. We should definitely be thinking about that. Those are very important. But individuals with learning disabilities learn differently and certainly need different types of supports and strategies to be successful or to be and feel successful in post-secondary education. Here's where we are today. Faculty instructors and support staff, so advisors and those in accessibility services play a really vital role in this and the goal of this presentation is to hopefully teach you or help you learn or learn a little bit more about learning disabilities and then actionable takeaways for classroom and learning environments.

So sorry, to keep moving. What is a learning disability? Like any other neurodivergent identity, it is a brain-based difference. This brain-based difference is lifelong. People do not grow out of learning disabilities, much like you do not grow out of autism or ADHD. Learning disability affects the acquisition or ability to learn or use skills in a specific academic area. Generally, we see this in reading, writing, and mathematics, but of course, reading is also required in science and engineering as well. So they're learning disability in reading is not only going to be a challenge in say language-based courses. Now, what is quite important to know about a learning disability and how it is different from an intellectual disability in case you don't know is that learning disabilities, to be diagnosed with a learning disability, an individual must be at average or above average intelligence, but have a specific, unexplained, persistent difficulty in an academic area that cannot be explained by something else such as lack of access to education, a language perhaps new to the language, or some other factor that would explain why this individual has such a persistent challenge in this area that is not seen in other areas. As I said, it is lifelong, individuals don't outgrow it. Ideally, they just learn a lot of strategies and get the support so that it's not a persistent challenge throughout their education and lifespan. Now how common are learning disabilities in Canada? There's a lot of different stats and it's really difficult. Stats Can doesn't collect silo data on disabilities. But our best guess is generally 15-25% of the population would have a learning disability or learn differently. And in a sample of 400 neurodivergent post-secondary students, 14% of the sample reported a learning disability. However, I do want to highlight that of that 14% of students, 66% of them, more than half, also reported another co-occurring neurodivergent identity, likely ADHD or autism, sometimes a mental health challenge. While learning disabilities themselves it's important for you to know about them and how they present, be aware though that many of these learners have co-occurring identities, and then challenges that exist that mean that we can't really talk about learning disabilities siloed from other aspects of neurodivergence when it comes to post-secondary education. And I think this is interesting, especially for educators.

But how do students with LD differ, sorry, I'll shorten learning disability to LD just to make sure that's really clear. How do they compare to students with neurodivergence? Students with learning disabilities actually disclose at a much higher rate than students with other aspects of neurodivergence. You can see here that for learning disability, it's over 60% compared to all other identities, which is about 40%. If you're curious to drill down here a little bit, Here's ADHD compared to ADHD only autism only. You can see here and then here's that line of learning disabilities, a 61 that goes across. You can see that they're actually disclosing much higher. That is likely possibly because they're used to the academic accommodation process in K to 12 and or have been identified. Learning disabilities sometimes are easier to identify than other aspects of neurodivergence, but they often also go missed and undiagnosed and unnoticed as well. But also, I think I just want to highlight here that stigma highly plays a role in disclosure, which is why we see autism only has the lowest rates of disclosure compared to students with more co-occurring or more complex profiles, likely just because they're not able to mask and try to get through without supports. The more co-occurring conditions or learning challenges differences, students have the more likely that they do need to go through accessibility services, which explains students with learning disabilities being a higher rate.

But as I skip to the next slide, that's not really helping them necessarily. Despite highest rates of disclosure and then access to accessibility services, students with LDs are actually less likely to agree that they're supported in the classroom by teaching staff than other neurodivergent students, and they're also less likely to agree that the alternate testing processes and locations are meeting their needs. We actually have this micro-population in the larger neurodivergent student population that is disclosing at higher rates than anyone else, trying to access services at higher rates than everyone else, but actually experiencing poor outcomes or reporting poor outcomes than other students. So it's quite interesting and, you know, as the researcher who led this, I think it really comes from a lack of understanding about learning disabilities and what it looks like. So moving quickly, I know.

Students with learning disabilities. What do we know about the population? They've had repeated negative learning experiences throughout their career. Absolutely. If you learn differently, that means that someone has likely been unsupportive, and we hear these types of things: you're stupid, you're lazy, you need to work harder. You need to apply yourself. These are extremely harmful comments that are said to individuals with learning disabilities generally throughout their life, whether it be from teachers, parents, or other family members. Processes like having the child stand up and read out loud in the classroom, those types of things that we see less and less in K to 12, thankfully, but they still are happening and happen every day in schools in British Columbia. This means that students with learning disabilities might have trauma like responses to new learning environments or new teachers or teaching faculty because they're braced and ready for something bad to happen. That means they're coming with fear or apprehension and being found out that they might not be capable. This is what we know about neurodivergent students in general. They don't want to disclose, they don't want to go through accessibility services because someone might find out that they shouldn't be there and they're just really hopeful that things are going to go well and everything's going to be fine. That comes from a lot of internalized shame and ableism of that positioning. Another thing I really want to highlight about students with learning disabilities, but also neurodivergent students broadly, they might still be actively learning about their brain and their learning needs and their support needs. They might have just gotten a diagnosis. They might be self-identified and trying to figure this out and access supports, but they might know about as much as the faculty member might know about learning disabilities at the same time. Here's where I think there can be some shared support for students with LDs with faculty and teaching faculty just being willing to learn to engage and to try new ways of learning and support.

Another barrier as well too is that neurodivergent students, which of course, includes students with learning disabilities have spiky skill profiles. So what that means is that neurodivergent individuals have exceptional talents and strengths that go beyond a neurotypical profile. This is a neurotypical profile in here. That neurotypical means non-neurodivergent. Neurotypicals are really great all-rounders. If they're good at one thing, they're generally pretty good at the other associated skills. Whereas a neurodivergent student is going to have exceptional strengths, but then they're going to have challenges, deficits, the troughs, whatever wording we want to use

here that are really impactful in learning environments. These troughs, the low parts are often around executive function skills, which are exactly the types of skills students need to be successful in post-secondary education. The big takeaway from this graph is that often neurodivergent students, students with LDs, we focus on what they're not good at, what they're not doing, what does not come easily, but there's no focus on the strengths and the skills that they have. When you are talking to a neurodivergent student, just remember, please, that they have these skills that are not generally seen or not known or not accessed and often we're only focused on the deficits and that creates again, more cycles of shame and internalized ableism.

What am I talking about when I'm talking about learning disabilities? In case you don't know, there are seven, however, the most common three are dyslexia, which is also known as a specific learning disability in reading, dyscalculia, specific learning disability in math, and dysgraphia, which is also known as a specific learning disability in written output. That's the language that assessors are using now from the DSM5, but these are also accurate labels. But you might also not know about processing disorders, including auditory, language, and visual, which also impact the way learners learn and nonverbal learning disabilities which highly impact social and communication skills.

So while we have these seven completely separate categories, that, of course, would be diagnosed by a psychologist. When it comes to an educator perspective or classroom perspective, I think it's actually easier to think about the specific challenges that a student would have depending on what LD diagnosis they have. When it comes to reading and writing, we can think of challenges around reading speed. It might take a dyslexic student two, three, four, five times longer to read an assigned article than a neurotypical student. If we think about that in terms of student equity and fairness and what is reasonable for students, it really does give us perhaps a pause to think about what a reading load might be. When they're reading, the reading comprehension skills might be quite low, so they might have to reread something three, four, five times and still struggle to pull up the key information. Might be difficulty with spelling, proofreading, and editing, word retrieval, and language learning, slow writing speed or illegible handwriting speed that can really impact in-class assignments, in-class tests, those types of activities, and also difficulty organizing thoughts and ideas in writing. They might have it up in their head and they know what they want to say, but the second it comes down to writing it down on paper, they're drawing a complete blank. When it comes to math, that might be the ability to recall basic math facts, remember formulas for completing math operations, understanding concepts like place value, mental math. But this also goes much broader in terms of skills around estimating, money management, directions, and identifying patterns. Estimating is a really big one. It's not just about math, that's about how long it's going to take me to do this assignment. A student with dyscalculia or ADHD, and often those are co-occurring, might think, Oh, this assignment is going to take me two hours and it actually took 15. That estimation piece is actually really important, especially around executive function skills like planning, organization, and prioritization. The last challenges I want to highlight here around processing visual or auditory information, especially in busy or noisy classrooms,

maintaining focus and attention, but also spatial reasoning and hand-eye coordination. That might be a little more applicable for labs or courses where students are doing hands-on work. What I also want to highlight here is that every single learning disability will have a spectrum within it. Dyslexia, for example, will have very, very different presentations. I'm dyslexic and my son is dyslexic. For him, it really impacts reading, decoding, and being able to discriminate between sounds. For me, I'm actually hyperlexic. I'm a speed reader. I read much faster than almost anyone I know. However I spell at a grade four level. For me, it's really spelling that's impacted. What that meant for me before I knew I had dyslexia is that I would be a prolific reader and writer. But every time I handed something in, I'd be like, Oh, needs to be proofread, needs to be edited. You didn't edit your work. Why aren't you editing your work? Don't hand me in something before you're editing. I thought I was editing. I thought I was proofreading, but my skills are lower in that area and I didn't know. That's sometimes what happens for students with LDs. They're trying their best and they're getting feedback. But the feedback doesn't match with what they're doing and it's really confusing to understand what the problem is and how to do better. So a lot of students with LDs are presenting with varied skill sets even within post-secondary, but also within their diagnosis, and that is confusing for them as well as challenging for instructors.

So what does this look like? Again, that's going to look like anxiety or fear around engaging in work or tasks or submitting work, struggling to keep up with the pace of assigned work and learning, or seemingly unedited or proofread work. Inability to take sufficient notes. Can you imagine if you have very slow handwriting speed and it's very difficult for you to handwrite and you're listening at the same time in a busy room, and you're responsible for taking all your own notes so you can retain this learning. That is absolutely not the same difficulty level for a student without a learning disability. So having students required to be able to take sufficient notes while listening and attending to learning is not as easy for all students and you can imagine how tricky that would be for a student with a written output challenge. Inability to perform basic math operations without a calculator. This is a huge accessibility challenge. A lot of accessibility advisors report that faculty have said absolutely no to calculators and will not move on this. But a student with dyscalculia absolutely cannot do math without a calculator. It's not possible for them. It's really an important issue to be thinking about is what is an equity levelling device versus what is an assumption about what a student should be able to do to be able to take a class or a course, and that is a really significant challenge for students with LD. Time management prioritization challenges, trouble following multi-step directions. For a student with an auditory processing disorder, that would be verbal instructions, might be very challenging. If they have a visual processing disorder, visual information might be very challenging. Again, you might be thinking, Oh my goodness, what do I do with all these different challenges? I will get to that, but understanding that tasks are not the same difficulty level for students depending on their neurodivergent identity is really the big key step here. And I want to follow up the end around communication and social challenges. Neurodivergent individuals prefer to socialize differently. They have different social understandings, and they also have different skills in this area. So this is significantly challenging in group work, as you can imagine, group work is challenging for everyone. It's a particular extra layer of difficulty for

neurodivergent students and students with LDs, specifically those with nonverbal language, nonverbal learning disabilities who struggle to read faces, social cues, and tone.

I also just want to link back. If you didn't see the last accessibility site, accessibility Bytes session with Megan, it was on ADHD, and she does a fantastic job of breaking down executive function. And that is so essential. Students with learning disabilities are going to have deficits in executive function skills, whether that is around time management, prioritization, awareness, or emotional regulation or working memory. These are all impacted for these individuals. So if you don't know a lot about executive function yet, I'd really suggest you watch that session because it's a really fantastic introduction and opera operationalization of that topic.

So what does this all mean in terms of actually supporting learners with LDs in the classroom, in a learning environment or in post-secondary? The very first is having some awareness of learning disabilities and hopefully this session has given you that and how they impact learners. Why that is so important is because in doing research with neurodivergent post-secondary students, what I heard over and over again were examples of how their accommodation, they tried to share their learning or accommodation needs with teaching faculty or teaching staff, TAs, it was not understood, it was not validated, and it was not implemented. That of course, is not only not following legal requirements around reasonable accommodation. It also absolutely does not allow these students to participate in your class or in the learning environment like other students and that assumption that, Well, if a student needs an accommodation, they shouldn't be there or accommodations are not available in the real world, those are really harmful and absolutely inaccurate assumptions that teaching faculty and instructors sometimes make that absolutely close doors for neurodivergent students. If you have a student come up to you and share information, their access plan, please listen to what they have to say. Validate that they came to you and wanted to discuss this with you and trust that they know what they're talking about. They're talking about themselves and they're learning, they know what they need. Now, if they're asking for things without an access plan or without having gone through accessibility services, that's one thing you might then be working with that student to highlight the route they need to take in order to be able to access accommodations. But for the most part, I'm talking about students with actual accommodations and access plans that are still being denied. So I do really want to highlight that accommodations are equity levelling measures. They just make post-secondary as difficult for the neurodivergent student as other students. Everyone should be working at about the same level of difficulty. That is what is equitable. But so often accommodations are seen as a privilege, and that is really problematic because they're not a privilege. It just brings everyone up to the same difficulty level. So when you are working with students to adjust or adapt, you will likely need to be thinking about learning materials, instruction practices, and assessment. Now, if a student comes up to you and says, I have a nonverbal learning disability and I need this, this and this and you're like, Whoa, I don't know what that is. I don't know how to do this. I'm not sure what to do. That's okay in the moment. You don't need to be an expert, but you do need to respond respectfully to the student and have a think about what the next step is. Maybe that's Thank you for telling me that information, I'm going to check in with Accessibility Services to receive some guidance

on how I can implement those accommodations. That is a response that shows a student that you care, that you know that their accommodation does need to be met, and that you're actively looking at a solution, as opposed to responses like, I can't adjust this. This is my assessment framework. That's how it's always been or that's how the readings are. Again, that's not a reasonable response that I don't have to do anything because I've always done it like this. Instead, responses like, Oh, that's interesting. I hadn't considered that. Can you give me some time to think about how I might be able to support your accommodation need?

And when we're thinking about designing courses or designing assessment strategies or instructional practices that are really supportive of students with learning disabilities, we can, of course, look to UDL, specifically around representation and access and expression. So with representation, students with learning disabilities likely need things in different formats or in different ways than students without learning disabilities, and they will need to show their learning in other ways.

So what I'd like you to consider if you are in a teaching role or instructor or TA, when you're designing your courses, syllabi, and assessment structures, are you testing as students learning or are you actually going to assess their ability to perform to your teaching style and assessment structure? Those are actually two completely different things that are often conflated for teaching faculty. Again, the goal is for students to learn the content and to be able to show their learning. But that can be done in many, many ways. Again, recognizing that there needs to be flexibility for students who learn differently is really essential. Again, changing things so a student can access learning is not a privilege. That is an equity levelling device. When you're thinking about readings and course material, consider volume and complexity. Are multiple formats available? Are there other ways students could access information? Are slides and documents developed with accessible fonts, clear headings, and spacing? My slides might look boring, white with black, but again, that's the most highly accessible way to share information. Do slides have good colour contrast? Are they legible? Using captioning and transcription for multimedia content. You might also think, Wow, those recommendations will be good for lots of different learners. Absolutely. Yes, if you design something for a student with a learning disability, you've likely designed something that will work for every student. So that's the goal. Also, and this is the biggest challenge I talked to Accessibility Services is around lecture notes and materials. Over and over faculty claim often that's their intellectual property and they do not have to share recordings, they do not have to share slides. They do not need to do that work. That's actually inaccurate, that intellectual property of the institution, and absolutely students will need access to those in order to learn. A student with a learning disability cannot take notes while they're listening at a speed of another student, generally. I'm speaking broadly. How are you going to support students in accessing live lecture material? There's lots of ways it could be recordings, could look at peer notetaking also slides in advance or slides afterwards. Again, the goal is not to test students on how well they listened while taking notes when you were talking. The goal is to assess their learning.

Then just additionally, a couple of other considerations and this was from Megan's presentation, but I really love her wording here is around an accessibility statement on the core syllabus. Are you inviting students to come talk to you about their learning and what they might need so that they know that you're a safe person to have a conversation? Are you working collaboratively to solve accessibility challenges a student is having? Are you connecting students with accessibility services as needing or are you seeking support from accessibility services for workable solutions? If a student has an accommodation plan and they need something, the answer can't be no. It might be, I don't know how to solve this. Let me talk to your accessibility advisor to actually figure out a plan.

The last thing quickly I want to highlight is assistive technology in AI and its role in levelling the playing field. I gave an example of myself. I spell it at grade four level. I cannot effectively proofread my work or edit it, but I can hear it. Read aloud function in Word has been life changing for me. Screen readers are also really essential for a lot of individuals with dyslexia. So whether it's text-to-speech, speech-to-text, graphic organizers are also really helpful for written output disorder. Their ideas might be really jumbled, it might be really tricky. Let's use some graphic organizers in order to chunk ideas and get started. Calculators, digital recorders, and scribe pens, again, if lectures are not recorded and available, and timers and scheduling reminder apps, and that really helps the executive function load. If students aren't yet using AI effectively, again, not all institutions have policy in this area, it's a little bit of a minefield. AI can be really helpful if students are using it to identify key ideas. Asking to support comprehension questions based on the material and synthesizing key ideas. It also can help with unsticking written output challenges for an outline, not writing the assignment, but the outline and then summarizing material. Again, it is a support, not a replacement of doing the work.

The last thing I wanted to highlight just around supporting executive function development. Neurodivergent students benefit from study skill practice alongside learning. This is a self-reflection activity from U of T's Accessibility Services and just a way of really helping a student try to think about their own learning and what they need so they can actually attend to the content and think about what might help them with that.

I actually don't think we have time for Q&A with this really busy time, but I might just check the chat to see if there is anything quickly. What are examples of skills that folks with learning disabilities excel at? Often they're visual spatial tasks for a lot of individuals with dyslexia or nonverbal learning disorders. But also it's just really varied. Each neurodivergent individual is going to have their own spiky profile and be really great at some things, exceptionally good at some things and really struggle with others. Assume competence, assume that students have great strengths, and if you're not seeing them, that's a great time to engage and question and figure that out. I'm at time, so I will stop, but thank you so much for everyone who's able to join. And if you'd like to connect with me afterwards, I'd love to hear from you and continue the conversation.