SIMPLE SOLUTION TO COMPLEX PROBLEMS: HIDDEN DISABILITIES IN THE COLLEGE MUSIC CLASSROOM

Shannon McAlister

Abstract

The word *simple* is defined by Merriam-Webster as "having few parts: not complex." The word *complex* is defined by Merriam-Webster as "a group of things that are connected in complicated ways." Although there is nothing simple about hidden disabilities, there are simple solutions that college music instructors can implement to make a complex classroom environment more inclusive and accessible. I argue that the solutions proposed in this article can aid students with documented hidden disabilities, students who have non-disclosed hidden disabilities, and through Universal Design for Learning (UDL), will optimize growth, further equity, and increase accessibility for the entire classroom.

Keywords

Hidden disabilities — Universal Design for Learning — Music Pedagogy — Music Education — Accessibility — Inclusion — Accommodations

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Introduction

From 2020 to 2023, I have been an instructor of undergraduate music students while working towards several graduate degrees in music theory and history, as well as graduate certificates in college instruction and disability studies. In addition, I have worked at The University of Connecticut's Center for Students with Disabilities with a team of individuals who are just as passionate about making education accessible for college students as I am. As a dedicated music theory and history instructor at the University of Connecticut, I have engaged in many conversations with my colleagues about the need for enhancing accessibility within our college music classrooms. However, these conversations are not limited to discussions with my colleagues at UConn, as I have interacted with instructors of all levels across many universities that are having similar recognitions. This collective awareness highlights the importance of fostering accessibility within the college music classroom, considering the ever-evolving population of students that we interact with at our institutions.

Through my experiences teaching, studying, and working, I have observed a significant prevalence of hidden disabilities, also referred to as invisible disabilities, which loosely define a

category of disabilities that are not immediately apparent to other individuals.[1] Types of hidden disabilities could include, but are certainly not limited to, mental illnesses, learning disabilities, and some physical conditions like chronic pain and fatigue.[2] Although individuals with hidden disabilities may not experience the same blatant stigma and discrimination as individuals with more apparent disabilities, they may have greater difficulties finding support.[3] This can be due to the fact that in most cases, individuals must provide proof of their disability in order to be considered or approved for accommodations.[4]

In the United States, the National Center for Education Statistics conducts the National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS), which collects data on various aspects of higher education, including information on disabilities. The most recent data available from the NPSAS pertains to the 2015-16 academic year. According to the NPSAS report that year, approximately 19% of undergraduate students in the United States reported having a disability.[5] When considering this statistic, it is important to note that many students may choose not to disclose their disabilities due to a variety of reasons, such as concerns about stigma, privacy, or a lack of knowledge about available support services.

These students with disabilities are at a much higher risk of facing additional physical, emotional, and academic stressors when compared to their peers without disabilities.[6] For my current work, I will be focusing primarily on mental illnesses and learning disabilities. In the occurrence of mental illnesses alone, a 2021 study of college students in the US showed that about 88% of students experience moderate to severe stress, 44% of students report moderate to severe anxiety, and 36% of students report moderate to severe depression.[7] In light of these statistics and through my observations of the students that I work with, I became aware of my responsibility to provide enhanced support for those navigating complex situations. These striking statistics emphasize the need for postsecondary instructors to recognize and accommodate students with disclosed and non-disclosed disabilities.

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[1] Shanna K. Kattari, Miranda Olzman, and Michele D. Hanna, "'You Look Fine!': Ableist Experiences by People with Invisible Disabilities," *Affilia* 33, no. 4 (November 2018): 478, accessed January 3, 2023, _____.

[2] Michael J. Prince, "Persons with Invisible Disabilities and Workplace Accommodations: Findings From a Scoping Literature Review," *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation* 46, no. 1 (2017): 75, accessed October 30, 2022, _____.

[3] Kattari, Olzman, and Hanna, "You Look Fine!", 478.

[4] Dana S. Dunn, and Erin E. Andrews, "Person-first and Identity-first Language: Developing Psychologists' Cultural Competence Using Disability Language," *The American Psychologist* 70, no. 3 (April 2015): 255, accessed January 3, 2023, _____.

[5] National Center for Education Statistics, "Fast Facts: Students with Disabilities," Institute of Education Sciences, May 2018, accessed June 2, 2023, https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=60.

[6] Simpson and Spencer, College Success for Students with Learning Disabilities, 8.

[7] Jungmin Lee, Hyun Ju Jeong, and Sujin Kim, "Stress, Anxiety, and Depression Among Undergraduate Students During the COVID-19 Pandemic and Their Use of Mental Health Services," *Innovation Higher Education* 46, no. 5 (2021): 519, accessed October 30, 2022, _____.

As I developed the tools presented in this article, a substantial focus of my planning and instructional approach revolves around integrating inclusive elements into my teaching methods. These elements effectively cater to the diverse needs of learners without compromising academic standards, adhering to the guiding principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL).[8] In the 1990s, neuroscientists at the Center for Applied Special Technology in Boston developed this educational framework. Initially adopted in kindergarten through twelfth (K-12) classrooms across the United States, UDL has now started to gain traction in higher education settings as well.[9] This framework was introduced in higher education during the early 2000s when the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Postsecondary Education started providing grants to colleges and universities after recognizing the positive effects of inclusive design in K-12 education.[10] According to Kirsten Behling and Thomas Tobin, "higher education is beginning to adopt UDL as a way to reach out to address learner variability. The impact on students is amazing. By simply recognizing that no two students learn in the same way and taking that recognition into account when designing, teaching, and assessing interactions, faculty members and designers give students a greater likelihood of coming away from courses having actually learned something."[11] UDL aims to provide all students, regardless of their individual learning needs or abilities, with equitable access to education. Further, UDL promotes flexible instructional approaches that can be tailored to meet the diverse needs of the many types of learners an educator could have in their classroom. The educational framework includes modifications that involve designing instruction, materials, and assessments in a way that provides multiple means of representation, expression, and engagement. Although the roots of UDL come from the concept of Universal Design, a concept for advocating against environmental barriers for individuals with physical disabilities, these frameworks have similar goals in not only fighting for equal access for those with disabilities but also improving accessibility for everyone in the process.[12]

The following supports outlined in this article do not replace the need for official accommodations through an institutional center for students with disabilities. These solutions are also by no means an exhaustive list of tools; however, I propose the tools in this article because they are simple and can be easily implemented in an undergraduate music classroom. I have outlined these simple solutions to complex problems into three categories: implementing check-ins, expanding the definition of participation, and breaking the stigma of hidden disabilities.

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[8] Alice-Ann Darrow, "Music Education for All: Employing the Principles of Universal Design to Education Practice," *General Music Today* 24, no. 1 (2010): 43, accessed January 7, 2023,

[9] Kirsten T. Behling and Thomas J. Tobin, *Reach Everyone, Teach Everyone*, (Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 2018), 2.

[10] Behling and Tobin, *Reach Everyone, Teach Everyone*, 27.

[11] Behling and Tobin, *Reach Everyone, Teach Everyone*, 42.

[12] Behling and Tobin, *Reach Everyone, Teach Everyone*, 2.

Implementing Check-Ins

The implementation of check-ins during a single class period with students can come in many different forms, the most basic being in the form of nonverbal communication signals. There have been several studies done to present the importance of using nonverbal communication in the music classroom. For example, according to a 2020 article by Ryan Sanford, nonverbal communication holds significant importance in the music classroom. Sanford states that "in music education, effective nonverbal communication is arguably even more critical as it becomes blended with conducting—particularly because music-making in the classroom often depends on the intricacy and effectiveness of the teacher's conducting gesture, which should communicate a wide range of musical ideas."[13] Many college music students have experienced the regular implementation of nonverbal communication in their large ensemble contexts during their K-12 education, so college educators may use these recognizable tactics to their advantage in order to build a familiar and comforting environment for their students.[14] By leveraging these established practices of nonverbal communication, college instructors can establish a sense of continuity and ease, fostering a positive learning environment, while also providing additional channels of information and engagement for learners. In the context of UDL, nonverbal communication can support these principles of multiple means of representation by providing visual cues and gestures which can create a dynamic and interactive learning environment that appeals to different learning styles. Additionally, nonverbal communication can help broaden the range of communication modalities and enhance the overall inclusivity of the learning environment.

Implementing nonverbal check-ins can be both simple and adaptable to various class sizes and student abilities. One effective method involves periodically checking in with students during a class session to gauge their response to the material by using their thumbs. Asking for a "thumbs-up, thumbs-down, or somewhere in between" is a simple way to achieve many goals. This tool allows students to participate using nonverbal communication: a low-stress form of communication that quickly conveys their individual understanding of the material. This approach also seamlessly engages the entire class, rather than the alternative of asking for individual verbal responses, which will often not produce much other than blank stares or indifferent head nodding. This engagement with the entire class, rather than a single individual, can also decrease anxiousness around answering a question in class, considering these nonverbal check-ins reduce the inherent competition present in a classroom environment. A study conducted by Julie R. Posselt and Sarah K. Lipson on the correlation between competitiveness in the college classroom and anxiety and depression supports these claims. In their study, they state that "frequent analyses revealed that 18.1% of the sample screened positive for depression and 10.1% screened positive for anxiety. Among students who perceive their classroom environments

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[13] Ryan Sanford, "Nonverbal Communication in the Music Classroom," *Visions of Research in Music Education* 37, no. 4 (2020): 2, accessed January 5, 2023, _____ .

[14] Sanford, "Nonverbal Communication in the Music Classroom," 6

to be very competitive, however, these rates are significantly higher: 21.6% for depression and 14.1% for anxiety."[15]

Additionally, utilizing check-in tools like this can effectively redirect attention to students who may have missed important content in the previous minutes of class due to various reasons, both disability-related and non-disability related. This approach helps ensure that all students, regardless of their circumstances, have an opportunity to engage and stay connected with the ongoing lesson. Through my personal observations, my students regularly provide honest non-verbal communication on whether they understand the material or not. When I notice any students indicating a lack of comprehension based on their thumb response, I take a moment to recap the preceding concept without singling anyone out. While not all students may have signaled their confusion, by employing UDL, the intentional recap still benefits the entire classroom, fostering a deeper understanding for all students involved.

Expanding the definition of participation

There are many ways to expand what one considers participation in their college classroom to accommodate many different types of learners. The general public's understanding of participation in a college classroom involves sitting still for an extended period of time, raising one's hand, speaking aloud in class, and verbally asking and answering questions. A common issue that many educators express is that, by this traditional definition, their students do not participate enough in class. Rather than solely holding the students responsible for the lack of participation, college educators must begin to reconsider what counts as participation in order to recognize how this concept changes based on the variety of students in their classroom. Expanding the definition of participation aligns closely with the principles of UDL by encouraging students to engage in multiple means of expression. In the expansion of this concept, I have recognized that different students may have varying preferences and abilities when it comes to actively engaging in the classroom.

I have implemented numerous simple strategies to expand what I consider participation in my college music classroom. In the following section, I will delve into three of these strategies which educators can readily adopt and implement. In the first of these strategies, I engage in verbal group responses with my students. This begins with a short question that anticipates a simple one-word answer. Next, I give the students a few seconds to think about the answer, I perform a visual preparatory breath, and I cue the student to respond with their answer all at once. Students have the choice of whether to answer in this group response or to abstain, but I have observed that a majority of my students choose to participate in this way because I have implemented this tool early on in our work together. Although I cannot track exactly which students are answering or not answering with this method, I believe it encourages a safe environment where a single question can be answered by multiple people.

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[15] Julie R. Posselt and Sarah K. Lipson, "Competition, Anxiety, and Depression in the College Classroom: Variations by Student Identity and Field of Study," *Journal of College Student Development* 57, no. 8 (November 2016): 980, accessed January 5, 2023, https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2016.0094.

In addition to verbal group responses, I also actively encourage nonverbal group responses in my classroom. One technique I use to facilitate such communication involves requesting students to hold up a specific number of fingers to indicate their answers. I also frequently utilize 'yes' or 'no' questions where students respond by raising a thumb up for 'yes' and a thumb down for 'no'. These nonverbal group responses allow students to actively participate and engage in the learning process, regardless of their comfort level with individual verbal communication in a large group setting.

Lastly, during each class session, I intentionally allocate dedicated time for individual work, allowing me to engage with students on a one-on-one basis. This time is discreetly utilized for me to interact with students who may not actively participate in verbal responses for various reasons, including both disability and non-disability-related factors. As I observe my students during this individual working period, they are clearly participating by taking notes, completing the worksheet for the day, or engaging in personal discussions with me when I circulate the classroom.

By encouraging alternative methods of participation, such as verbal group responses, nonverbal group responses, or one-on-one interactions, educators can offer options that cater to different learning styles, abilities, and communication preferences. This ensures that all students, regardless of their background or abilities, have equitable opportunities to participate and meaningfully engage in class. It is important to note that I have not completely abandoned traditional notions of participation. On the contrary, I still frequently call upon individual students to contribute their responses, recognizing the value of traditional participation methods. However, I have simply expanded my definition of participation to be more inclusive by acknowledging and accommodating the diverse ways in which my students learn and interact within my classroom. By incorporating both traditional and expanded forms of participation, I strive to create an inclusive learning environment that caters to the unique needs of all my students.

Breaking the stigma

It is crucial to convey messages to college music students assuring them that their unique ways of learning and participating will be respected, valued, and accommodated, regardless of what is perceived as the standard within higher education. In his 2016 article, John Mortensen observed that "the culture of competition and isolation so common in college-level music study may appear to foster a high-level achievement." However, as noted by Mortensen, Karin S. Hendricks et al. argues that "on the whole, such a culture is counterproductive."[16] The competitive nature often present in a college music setting can create a tendency among students to compare their individual abilities with those of their peers. As a college educator, it is vital to proactively foster an environment of inclusiveness, aiming to dismantle the stigma associated with disabilities and discourage excessive comparison of one's abilities to others. In a 2017 thesis on the effects of disability microaggressions in the college classroom, Lynsie Harris posits that "actively

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[16] John T. Mortensen, "Creating Community in the Studio for College Music Majors," *American Music Teacher* 65, no. 6 (June/July 2016): 18, accessed January 7, 2023, https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26385979.

recognizing and addressing these microaggressions within educational settings may promote an awareness and reduction of messages that put down the identities of students with disabilities."[17] Further, according to Harris, competitive culture in postsecondary music classes can be isolating and detrimental to students' health and well-being.

Microaggressions, often unintentional or subtle negative behaviors, can perpetuate harmful stereotypes, invalidating the experiences and identities of individuals with disabilities. They can manifest in various ways, including insensitive remarks, assumptions about capabilities, or even subtle forms of exclusion. These microaggressions, coming from peers or faculty, can not only create an unwelcoming environment but also contribute to the marginalization of students with disabilities.

In my classroom, I consistently implement simple yet powerful tools to cultivate a culture of respect and acceptance for all my students. For example, I provide a daily reminder to my students that it is perfectly acceptable if they do not grasp a brand-new topic when it is initially introduced. With this practice, I aim to create a safe and supportive space where students feel encouraged to ask questions, seek clarification, and express their uncertainties without fear of judgment or inadequacy. By normalizing the idea of not immediately understanding new topics, I believe I foster an environment that values growth, perseverance, and continuous learning. This small act of affirmation also sends a message that our abilities to comprehend or not comprehend material upon initial delivery do not define the comprehension we will be able to achieve through consistent practice. Through the regular implementation of this reminder, I actively counteract the competitive culture that often permeates the college music classroom. By doing so, I also create a secure and inclusive space where every student, regardless of their abilities, feels empowered and valued.

Another simple yet effective approach I use is encouraging my students to take extra steps to understand a concept if it assists them in comprehending the material more clearly. In the context of a music theory class, for instance, I encourage my students to physically write out letter names of the notes of a given harmony before proceeding with their response. When asking my students to harmonize Roman numerals in four voices using proper voice leading, I will encourage them to first jot down the notes within each harmony before placing any of the notes on the staff. In addition to the benefits mentioned earlier, I openly share with my students that I consistently employ these types of approaches in my own work due to my personal difficulties with reading comprehension resulting from my disability. By sharing this information, I not only foster a sense of transparency and trust but also help break down the stigma surrounding needing to make accommodations for having a disability. Furthermore, I consistently apply this strategy when writing on the board for the entire class to observe. By doing so, I not only accommodate students who benefit from the visual representation of the letter names for note identification, but I also provide an additional layer of clarification for those who do not rely on this visual aid. This practice closely aligns with the principles of UDL, as this tool offers multiple means of representation, ultimately allowing students to engage with the material in a way that best suits their learning style.

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[17] Lynsie Harris, "Exploring the Effects of Disability Microaggressions on Sense of Belonging and Participation in College Classrooms" (Educational Specialist Thesis, Utah State University, 2017), 55, accessed January 5, 2023, ProQuest Dissertations & Theses.

Conclusion

The presented solutions of check-ins, expanded participation, and stigma-breaking discussed in this article serve as initial steps that college music instructors can take to enhance accessibility within their diverse classrooms. These tools will not only benefit students with documented hidden disabilities and students who have non-disclosed hidden disabilities but, through Universal Design for Learning, will optimize growth for the entire classroom. It is important to note that these are by no means an exhaustive list of suggestions, and the journey towards inclusivity does not end here. Ongoing efforts should involve exploring and incorporating additional tools and strategies successfully employed by other college music educators. By sharing, collaborating, and conversing with colleagues, we can expand our repertoire of inclusive practices, ensuring that all students, regardless of their abilities, can thrive in an academic environment.

About the author

Shannon McAlister is a Ph.D. student and graduate teaching assistant in music theory and history at the University of Connecticut. Shannon is also currently working on a graduate certificate in interdisciplinary disability studies in public health. Her research interests include music and disability studies, and music pedagogy. In May of 2022, Shannon earned her MA in Music Theory and a Graduate Certificate in College Instruction from the University of Connecticut. Previously, Shannon attended the University of Delaware where she earned her BM in Music Education and pursued a minor in disability studies.

SHANNON McALISTER
shannon.mcalister@uconn.edu

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