Jay Dolmage | Ableism, Access, and Inclusion: Before, During and After Covid-19

JAY DOLMAGE: Hi there, my name is Jay Dolmage and I'm a faculty member in the Department of English at the University of Waterloo where I teach writing and disability studies. I'm excited to be back with you at OCAD. I've worked with faculty and staff at OCAD in the past around accessibility and building a more inclusive campus culture. And this is a great opportunity to kind of extend that conversation.

So in my talk today, I want to begin by acknowledging that I'm coming to you today from the Haldimand Tract. So, this is the traditional territory of the Attawandaron, Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee people. University of Waterloo and where I live are situated on the Haldimand Tract, which was land that was promised to the Six Nations that includes 10 kilometers on each side of the Grand River. And you know, the theft of this land built the foundation for where I live and work, and I as a settler, you know, I'm implicated in that history, but also I want to find ways to correct this injustice and shape a different future, and I believe that part of that is understanding that in Ontario, and especially at a public institution like the University of Waterloo, that is located on this stolen land, we have a responsibility to that history and to shaping a different set of relations for the future.

This is a zoom talk obviously, and I am going to break it into three chunks with a little break each time so that there's an opportunity to get up and move around or grab a cup of tea, or you know, whatever you need to do, each chunk is going to be around 10 minutes long. Hopefully we stick to around 30 minutes and then hopefully there are opportunities for us to engage after you've been able to watch the video, and if you have questions, hopefully there's some way for us to follow up.

This talk is about ableism, access and inclusion, and it's those three chunks I was talking about. I'm going to try and break the talk up into before COVID, during COVID, and after COVID. I do have some slides that I'll be showing. You'll be able to see me speaking. There is going to be a transcript, and my notes will be shared. There will be closed captioning and I'll describe the slides as I go.

So first I'm going to lay out some of the ways that disability has been - excuse me - historically constructed within our universities, asking how has ableism come to kind of inflect the culture of higher education and the metaphor that I commonly use for this is steep steps. And so I'm going to show you an example here. There we go. Here are some steep steps at OCAD. And you know, you'll probably recognize these steep steps and I'm going to talk about them briefly in a second.

The second piece of the talk will be looking at the ways that we can work around inaccessible steep steps and inaccessible features of the physical, but also the social, digital, the educational environment in which we work so that we can provide access, and in that part of the workshop we're going to work to explore how to identify what I call retrofits. Right, that the temporary means we're given to kind of overcome the fact that we work within an inaccessible environment. This is also going to be where we're talking about what we've done during COVID, and I want to examine some of the ways we have pretty quickly pivoted or adapted our teaching to a new reality. In some ways, we've advanced access in that pivot, and in other ways we've not.

And finally, then I'm going to look at ways that we can reshape what we do as teachers moving forward, right? In this world, potentially after COVID, where we can talk about what we need to change permanently about higher education now that we've been offered a chance in a way, a kind of rare chance to reevaluate our priorities.

So these steep steps here that I'm showing you, this is an image of a spiral staircase at the OCAD entryway. And it's a beautiful spiral staircase. And while it might kind of, via this architectural statement, ignite imagination, there's a sign behind the staircase that says, ignite imagination. And the staircase itself is, you know, it's concrete and steel. It wraps around one full 360 degrees to take people up to the second floor.

There are metal railings all along the side, both sides of the staircase. And there are frosted glass panels that follow the staircase all the way up. So this this, you know, staircase is the first thing you see when you enter the main entryway to OCAD and I'm imagining that lots of you will have some associations with this staircase. And of course it exempts some people who can't use stairs in this way, right? And people with disabilities.

And so I want to talk about that and I want to admit, of course, that my own University, University of Waterloo, we've got lots of staircases just like this one. That's - universities are built in this way. In fact, at the University of Toronto, every fall they have what they call a Great Barrier hunt, which is where students go around and identify inaccessible features of the architecture on campus and activities like that I think highlight the ways that traditional campuses and new ones right are designed only for a certain range of bodies. As I said, even new features like this inspiring spiral staircase on your campus, they exclude students with disabilities from the key aesthetic, cultural, artistic and intellectual centers and messages of University life.

This is part of a kind of philosophical underpinning, I think, in which we've come to believe that the university is the place for the very most able. Not only have people with disabilities been traditionally seen as objects of study in higher education rather than as teachers or students, not only his disability been a rhetorically produced stigma which could be applied to other marginalized groups to keep them out of the university, but the university is seen as performing

the societal and cultural function of pulling some people slowly up the stairs, and it arranges others at the bottom of this steep incline.

So I want you to think about how this sort of "steep steps" mentality has shaped your own education. Who and what helped you get up the stairs? Where were they the steepest and most difficult for you? What pushed you back? Where did you start on the stairs, based on your own privilege or lack of privilege? Of course, the reality is that disability is always present. There is no perfect body or mind. There's no normal body or mind. More literally, in North America, 1/5 of the population is disabled.

We live in an age when, despite physical and medical efforts to avoid it and psychological and medical efforts to disavow and pathologize it, we will all become disabled at some point in our lives. So we all need to care about disability and we need to care about it now.

Anywhere from 6 to 9% of Canadian undergraduate students report having a disability. And 35% of these disabilities are learning disabilities, so we need to think about the physical inaccessibility of space, but also ideological, cultural, pedagogical ways that we find these same kinds of sets of steep steps.

We should also assume when I give statistics like this that many students with invisible disabilities pass, hiding their disability or attempting to overcome it. For instance, 24% of first year universities self-declare as having a disability. Most commonly related to mental health and mental health takes up 14%.

That 24 percent is in stark contrast to the number I gave you earlier - that 6 to 9% of students who get help, right? Who get accommodations, for example. And I want to make this point really clearly. I believe that we have a generation of students who are much more likely to experience higher education as disabling and much less likely to seek help. And surveys like the National Health Survey, National Students Engagement survey show this trend. I'll give you a really alarming statistic from the United States. In the states. If you have a learning disability in high school, 94% of those students get help. They get assistance or accommodations. But only 17% of those same students, when they go to college or university, those same students with learning disabilities, only 17% of them seek help in higher education at the university level.

So I believe we have a crisis of help-seeking around disability and it has to do with the stigma, right? It has to do with the way that we've built our spaces and not made space or allowance for the idea that disability is definitely present, and part of our culture. The university, you know, in this way can be allowed to kind of sort the population by a medicalized and legal, legalistic definition of ability, and it can do so pretty effectively unless we challenge it.

Universities continue to function to keep certain groups of individuals out of the workforce and away from status positions, away from knowledge and dialogue and power, and not just through admissions. Nearly 2/3 of students with disabilities are unable to complete their

degrees within six years and disabled students are also likely to have up to 60% more student debt by the time they graduate.

A very modest estimate based just on the students who get accommodations suggests that 10% of people with disabilities leave postsecondary institutions before obtaining their desired credentials, but I think this could be much more like 30% of disabled students leave without getting the credential that they want. To extrapolate, that tells us that, you know, at least 100,000, and probably more like 200,000 Canadian postsecondary students need accommodations right now, but will never seek them.

In the United States, some studies show that 2/3 of college students don't receive accommodations simply because they never disclose their disability. Their university doesn't know, and those who do seek help are likely to do so only in their third or fourth year of school, only after they've reached crisis point. So whatever the numbers and whatever statistics tell us about, you know how bad the prospects are for disabled students. They only speak for the ones who seek help. Looking at these steep steps that students experience, right, in a world in which COVID has changed how we think about does buzzwords like community is jarring. In a world in which the prevalence of overt and systemic racism needs to be foregrounded in all that we do, we also have to understand that these steep steps disproportionately impact students of color.

I know that OCAD U has been working hard to address racism on campus, as has my own University, all across Ontario. We've been working on this. Yet there, you know, there have been specific incidents, but there are also systemic issues. For example, we know that black males are disproportionately placed into categories of special education that are associated with extremely poor outcomes at the K-12 level.

Yet Joy Banks has shown that black students with disabilities, quote, "experience, difficulty, accessing disability support services, and appropriate accommodations at colleges and universities. So for the same group of students in K-12, getting a disability diagnosis is really negative, right? And then we need to understand that those students are going to have even further barriers to seeking help when they come to University, right?

A recent higher Education Quality Council of Ontario report on the Toronto District School Board showed that having special education needs in high school means you're just less likely to go to university and that this has been getting worse over time and not better. In interpreting the extra time and space and hoops and barriers that minority students may need to navigate - these steep steps - and thus the teachers need to anticipate in our course and curriculum design, William Sedlacek suggests that minority students have had to develop specific skills and expend considerable energy coping with racism, looking for allies, and forming their own community, and protecting their identities.

It might be argued that these are tasks that might require strategic silence or reticence, cunning, code-switching, self-care, and a wide range of abstract and contextually varying skills. These skills do not always sync with traditional pedagogy and teaching and assessment. At the

same time, students in 'majority' groups can concentrate on interpreting and categorizing information in ways that sync with test-taking, reasoning, and other more straightforward academic areas, they get straight in the front door and they get straight up the steps, right? And disabled students have to come around the back. They have to navigate so much more just to be able to access the curriculum. And minority students have even more than that, right?

So that's one of the ways that I want us to think about these steep steps, right? I think we have to understand that these differences in the ways that students encounter space and curriculum that we need to respond by changing the social and educational geography on campus.

I also want to mention, you know, this applies for faculty as well. A recent study showed that academics in Canada received little institutional support in obtaining disability accommodations, only 42% of Canadian universities have a written disability accommodation policy for faculty. And so it's from the top down and it's from the bottom up. Faculty have a really hard time obtaining the assistance that they need just to be able to thrive and participate and do their jobs well, and students face the same kind of environment. And I think I want us to think very carefully right now about the ways that this is cultural, right.

Why is it that at high school you can ask for help and in university you're not allowed to, right? Or students just simply aren't doing so. Why is it that even amongst ourselves with our colleagues we're not getting the help that we need? What is the culture that's keeping us, you know, at the bottom of these steps, right, or dealing with an architecture that's kind of hostile to this difference? I think that I want to mention, you know, that steep steps have been a huge part of back to campus planning around COVID-19 as well. All of a sudden, administrators have to look at buildings very differently - in six-foot increments that don't easily fit in crowded stairwells and don't fit it all in elevators.

And the steps of going back to school have also forever changed. Who will have a choice about teaching or learning in person on campus when we do go back? Who will get to choose to work and learn from home? What social and student-centered spaces will replace physical ones like these steps, and who will be included? How has teaching changed right now just by moving the steep steps online?

With the same demands of student time and productivity, but without the overhead costs of buildings and classrooms. And I want to show you another example here of just how we've moved these steep steps online. This is a screenshot and this is from, and I apologize for the quality of the capture here, but this is from one of four dense small fonted pages of rules given to students taking a midterm at Laurier University just down the street from me in Waterloo, and this was at midterm, it was administered just a few months ago. Basically, the scan says that students must not use touch pads or touch screens for their test. They have to use only an external mouse, keep their upper body in view for the entire exam, Keep all work surfaces visible by arranging a webcam to view them, and if they need to go to the washroom - this is perhaps the silliest part - you know, they have to shout into their camera "I need to go to the washroom and I'll come back quickly".

All of this just so that the instructor can give a test that's not been properly adapted to online learning. The attitude towards students situates them all as potential cheaters, not all as potential learners, community members or co-constructors of knowledge, and nobody would want to have to take a test under these circumstances. None of us would ever want to have to do that, right? The four pages of instructions, all of which must be followed, or else the test result will be invalidated, they're kind of a perfect distillation of the ways the - negative ways - we've adapted our steep steps to COVID, maintaining, retaining, and adding to them rather than trying to remove them, creating more barriers rather than taking them away. And even before we transitioned online, we knew already that more and more students were taking online courses.

Nearly all postsecondary institutions were offering fully online courses and one in five students in Canada took at least one online course. We also knew that there were mental health related disabilities in postsecondary online courses and programs and there was limited Canadian research that examined factors affecting learning for that population, let alone the mental health of that population. And since COVID, I think we may be paying slightly more attention. And yet at the same time so many of the community supports that used to be in place on campus are gone when we move online.

As a recent Maclean's article on students with Disabilities and COVID-19 concluded, barriers have changed with an emphasis on change, they're not gone, they've simply changed. Around 3/4 of graduate students reported that COVID-19 has negatively impacted their ability to conduct research and graduate students increasingly reported experiencing anxiety, depression, helplessness, loneliness, feeling overwhelmed. 26% are now considering taking a long term leave of absence.

According to OCUFA, 62% of students and 76% of faculty members feel that online learning has negatively impacted the quality of university education. And among faculty, the high areas of highest concern where the ability to adequately teach and support students. So we're frustrated that we're not being given the tools to support our students. Among faculty, a full four in five agree that the university's pandemic response has had a negative impact on their teaching ability.

So during COVID we see a different relationship here between disability and teaching, one in which I hope we can better understand the disabling impact of the decisions we're making around teaching, around education. And I think the key is to advocate for changes that are long lasting and far reaching rather than temporary. We want structural change and not just retrofitting. I'd argue that we're all much more becoming much more aware of the health impacts in the mental health impacts of the teaching that we do. So that's my challenge to you.

And we're going to take a one minute break right now, but I just urge you to think about, what are some of the barriers you've experienced in your own history as a learner, as a teacher, right,

how might you map out those steep steps in your own pathway? But also, what are the barriers? What are the steep steps that are there for you as you attempt to teach in this new context, and what barriers are there for students?

[BREAK 19:48 – 20:35]

Okay, so I'm just coming back from our break here and we're going to make a transition now away from talking about these steep steps and talking about the environment that we had pre-COVID, to talking a little bit more about what's been happening during COVID.

So as I said, I think we're all becoming a little bit more aware of this thing that I call retrofitting right? And retrofitting is simply a way of taking an inaccessible physical environment, you know, something like steep stairs. And adapting it, and to do that, we do things like put a ramp around the back of the building, right? We ask people to go and use a freight entrance instead of a set of stairs. And these fixes are kind of often halfhearted and temporary, and they signal that not everybody can come in the front door.

I think in COVID-19 we have lots of examples of this right? Our restaurants and businesses have plexiglass walls built. Tables and chairs are now a certain measured distance apart. There are new laws and regulations designed to make both spaces safer, but also to allow them to remain open. And perhaps rightly so, some of these retrofits have been criticized. Some are wise and well thought out, others seem simply performative like a mask over someone's mouth but not over their nose, right? On university campuses, retrofits can include ramps that are placed around the back of a building or buildings in which the only elevator is a freight elevator.

Also on the syllabus and within the curriculum, we can create access, but only in minimal ways. And often in ways that can actually further stigmatize students. The image I'm showing you here comes from a popular social media kind of game of capturing and taking pictures of what are called curb cuts to nowhere. They are ridiculous ramps and entrances and curb cuts that defeat the purpose of trying to provide access.

These become a metaphor for the very real, very useless, very costly ways that architecture and public space often get adapted for disabled people. And this happens quite often. So, in this image you see there's a stone wall -- a retaining wall -- and we're looking up a relatively steep hill with the sidewalk along the side of the retaining wall. There are two ways to get up onto the sidewalk, both of which have ramps, curb cuts cut into the concrete, and yet when you come when you come along those ramps what you're led to is the bottom of a set of stairs. So instead of ramping the whole thing, it's only been partially ramped. There's probably been thousands of dollars spent on this retrofit, and it still leaves people unable to get up those stairs.

These kind of retrofits, I think, are rhetorically and concretely constructed in ways that can actually enhance and rationalize inclusion, and I think the way I want to apply this to our teaching is to remember that you know, in terms of accommodations, that students might seek

if they actually do want to disclose their disability. There's a really, really limited range of accommodations that we even offer at our universities.

More than 3/4 of the accommodations offered are the exact same accommodation, which is extended time on tests and exams. And if, like me, and I believe there's lots of people like this at OCAD U. If like me, you don't offer tests or exams very often, and never in a timed way, you know, I think that's good, but if we keep working with disability services and they keep offering only that accommodation of extended time, then we can kind of short fuse the process and the usefulness of it. And that ramp can lead students nowhere. So I want to suggest we need a much broader repertoire of accommodations.

In classrooms like the one where I work where I rarely give tests and I rarely lecture, I know I have to expand the range of accommodations that can be offered to students. Many other teachers argue for innovative teaching methods that move beyond lecturing, testing, and rote learning, but continuing to work with this narrow range of accommodations while at the same time advocating for a broader range of literacies and skills and modalities can be really problematic. The accommodations stays stuck in a Fordist educational regime, where rigidity and uniformity -- and above all else -- timing reigns supreme.

That brings us closer to what we might call malicious compliance, where following the letter of the accommodation law will hurt the student in our more innovative classrooms. You know, the nose is coming out of the mask in that situation. You know, when I ask you, imagine what accommodations might be offered to the student taking that ridiculous exam at Laurier University? The Disability Services Office would have to take weeks to figure out a work around and all just to support the practice of a kind of hostile teacher trying to control the students' every movement.

So my argument is that we need to allow for an environment in which students can claim difference without fear of discrimination. And this environment has to include disability. The question then is, you know, what are some of the ways we do this already? What are some ways that in higher education we've taken accommodations that were made over time and turn them into mainstream pedagogical techniques? What do you do in your classroom so that you don't have to give temporary accommodations? And how could we do more of this? We've had an opportunity over the last 10 months to redesign higher education in ways we never have before. Yet, unfortunately, we haven't really been talking about accessibility as part of this process. In fact, we spent more time and more money investing in surveillant test proctoring software than we spent developing alternatives to outdated teaching models. Disability services offices were rarely even consulted in the rollout of online classes. With no new parameters for accommodations in the new environment, just as disabled people were left out of COVID social support programs, at the same time we're being spoken about as disposable citizens, disabled people were not at the table when plans were made for emergency online teaching.

There's some irony, of course, that the ableist demands for physical attendance and participation that teachers used to cling to so tightly have now been so easily left behind.

Asking to have a grade converted to credit, CR, rather than a numerical grade, which is something that we offered to students in the winter term of 2020. Asking for extended deadlines, getting extra time on a research grant or a tenure deadline as faculty have been able to do. All of a sudden, anyone who wanted these things could have them. And you know, disabled people can hardly count the number of ways, times that they were denied these things and stigmatized for even asking about them before COVID.
Most of these ableist demands, unfortunately, will likely slide right back into place, while others may be gone for good. And the advocacy of actual disabled people, unfortunately, based on the patterns we've seen, is unlikely to be what determines this future. So my challenge to you though, is to think about the barriers students might be facing right now during COVID, and also explore how they get accommodated. What are the work arounds? How have we built accessibility into our pivot to online learning? How will we need to retrofit and change our teaching in ways that remove barriers when we return to campus?

Okay, so finally I want us to make a transition to thinking about what teaching might look like someday after COVID, and I have a third spatial metaphor to share and that is the architectural concept of universal design. I'm going to show you another example here. So we had steep steps. We had retrofit - I'll go past these slides, I'm not going to talk about them today - and I want to talk about an alternative and that is thinking about space through the perspective of Universal Design.

This is the Canadian Museum of Human Rights in Winnipeg. And instead of the stairs we saw in previous images, the center of this space architecturally, but also aesthetically, is a level entrance way into the center of the space. We can see this level entranceway in this slide. The building itself looks like a large spiral with ribbons of stone wrapping around it and narrowing towards the sky, but everyone comes in the same way on the ground level, and this spiraling and ribboning can be mirrored by the ramps throughout the space. On the interior, showing this image now, there is a series of ramps that criss-crosses the space, and they provide a central metaphor for the argument the building is making, the stories it tells. Excuse me. This slide shows an overhead view of these criss-crossing ramps made of wood and stone.

The ramps take every visitor through the same journey. On the museum site it suggests that, quote, "Universal Design is not a design style, but an orientation to design based on the following premises: one, disability is not a special condition of a few. Two, disability is ordinary and affects most of us in some part of our lives. Three, if a design works well for people with disabilities, it works better for everyone. And four, usability and aesthetics are mutually compatible", so universal design then becomes our third metaphor today, and it's a way of thinking about spaces and the messages they send metaphorically. That these things can be centered on the idea that everybody comes in the same way, everybody uses the space in the same way, and that that makes the space more accessible for everyone.

In Universal Design for Learning, we've adapted these architectural principles around designing for all bodies to think about how we can teach the broadest, you know, the broadest group of learners, right? And in so doing, make the classroom more accessible for everyone. There are

three tenets, then, of universal design for learning, and they are multiple means of representation, and that just means in away redundancy, right? Giving a talk and giving the script and having closed captions, coming back and repeating ourselves. All of these things just give learners various ways and moments and opportunities to acquire information and knowledge.

Multiple means of expression for students means providing learners with alternatives for demonstrating what they know, not just a test that everybody has to take in this really rigid way. If the goal is for students to learn things from us and for us to see that learning, then we want to give a variety of ways for students to show us what they've learned.

And then finally multiple means of engagement, and that just means you know, going beyond the rote and traditional ways, maybe, that we were taught, right? To tap into students interests, meet them where they are culturally, and where they're coming from. And offer appropriate challenges and this, in turn, increases the motivation of students and it shares the - it gives students agency in their own learning as well.

And I want to give a couple of examples of this as I kind of conclude today. We're going to stop and have just one more minute break. And in that break I want to encourage you to think about some of the examples of universal design in your own classroom.

What are some of the things that you do in your class that create a more accessible space that aren't about students necessarily having to disclose, that aren't about students having to chase down accommodations, but that make things more accessible for everybody. So when we come back, I'm going to give a couple of really specific examples of how I've tried to do that in my own classroom.

[BREAK 32:17 – 33:07]

Okay, so coming back from that break, I've got 3 examples for you here. And this is about ways that we might be conscious of designing for a post-COVID future. A world where we, at some point, come back to campus. A world that will be obviously changed, but one where we can begin advocating now for some of the changes that we've made around COVID to become permanent, and for other ones to be replaced by pedagogical techniques and strategies that are going to be better for all learners.

I want to point out that my book *Academic Ableism*, it's a free Open Access book that you can read online, but in the appendix to that book I've got a really, really long list of universal design ideas. So, I'm hoping you can share some of your own universal design ideas. I'm hoping you can go there and look at some of those examples and maybe choose one or two of them that you want to try. And then I'm going to give 3 examples here right now that I think are ways that I'm trying to orient myself around thinking about coming back to teaching again, when we get the opportunity to do that.

So, the first thing that I think I've really learned through COVID is around help-seeking. We really need to help students access assistance. We've invested so much in all of these supports on campus and yet we see a generation of students as really reticent to seek help, or admit that they need help. I think we need to acknowledge that students with disabilities are not seeking help. The vast majority of them are not. The vast majority of them have experienced very negative health outcomes from COVID teaching, right? Mental health outcomes. Student engagement and health surveys show us that this generation experiences poor mental health in general more than previous cohorts. The other notable characteristic of this current group of students is that they seek help less, and that is a bad combination. We know this impacts students of color even more than others, so we need to develop an entrance to help, right, entrance to assistance. Entrance to belonging and community on campus and that entrance needs to look a lot more like that universally designed Museum of Human Rights entrance then it does like that spiral staircase.

We need to develop this entrance online as well as on campus, and we need to be creative. We need our services for disabled students to foreground disability justice, not just minimum accommodations, and that means asking disabled students to co-design these systems and spaces. Develop them in ways that understand systemic racism, for example, and that are focused not just on the legal minimum, but rather on the flourishing and success of disabled students, and an understanding that we need permanent, systemic changes. So that's the first piece. It's around accessing assistance.

The second thing I want us to examine is attendance and participation. We need to let students show us how they learn, and we need to reward students for helping one another. I want to give kind of the example of a door knob, and there is a door knob behind me here in my screen. So on a door in my attic. And it's not a good doorknob. So most doorknobs, you know, the traditional, regular doorknob is a pretty terrible technology. It means you have to stop - the knob only turns one way. You have to pull it to get in the door and much better doors have handles or latches or bars, you know, that you can hit with your elbow or with your hip or some doors even open up automatically. Right, because the whole goal of the door is that you'd be able to get through it. That it open and close. So doors, then, shouldn't be tests of how strong your wrists are.

You know, my question then is what can we do in our teaching that removes those barriers? That builds a kind of better doorknob so that students can participate and take part. So that they can, you know, attend and participate in our classes without added difficulty. And I want to admit that for probably 15 years I taught classes where I gave a participation grade that I didn't think very much about. It was really who spoke in class, and to be honest, there's only so much space for people to speak in class, and so I was rewarding the wrong kind of engagement.

What I realized at a certain point was - and especially as I moved online with my teaching - that there were a really wide variety of ways to participate, and I think COVID teaching has shown us we need to learn from students about all the different ways that they might create community, that they might take part in conversations that they might ask questions that they might help

one another online, and we need to be able to reward those things. And I hope that we can take that when we move back into the physical classroom and have a much broader sense of what it means to attend a class and what it means to participate in a class. In my own classes, what I do is midway through the term, students write me an email where they simply give me an inventory of all of the different valuable ways they've been able to participate, and every time I get those emails, I learn about other things that students can do, right, and that can include taking notes for other people. It can include finding contemporary cultural examples that illustrate a concept, they can be peer-reviewing with other students. It can be emailing with another group of students who might have missed a part of the class, right, to bring them up to speed.

There's just a variety of ways to do it, and he students kind of write a reflection where they tell me the different ways they participated. They assess that themselves.

During COVID, I think we realized that it isn't fair to grade participation or even attendance based on quantity because we just don't know the context that students are learning in. My suggestion is that we really have never known right, and that some students are facing much more steep steps than others.

I hope I've illustrated that today, so I want to suggest that we should shift towards giving students options to tell us the different ways that they can contribute in a valuable way and move more to quality rather than quantity, not counting up the number of times they show up for a class or the number of things they say, and, importantly, admitting that not everyone can learn what they need to learn in a 50-minute class time.

So what are the options we're going to offer students after COVID, to learn and to show what they've learned? And how can we reward students for helping one another? That's my second soapbox thing that I'm going to be really working on trying.

The third and final thing is simply about, you know, it's in a connected way. I want to talk a little bit about assessment because it's a difficult thing to talk about. And assessing student learning, I think, has to change. My goal since COVID changed my teaching was that I had less time and less energy to spend on my teaching, and I needed to prioritize things differently.

And my goal, then, was to connect with students more and assess them less. If I was going to spend 40 hours teaching a week, 50 hours teaching a week, I needed the vast majority of that time to be trying to connect with students. Be the human presence, the person in the class who they could reach out to and talk to. Right, instead of spending all that time, simply assessing work. It was just more valuable to connect then it was to assess, and I think online we've come to understand things, you know, like zoom fatigue. But I really think that we need to understand that students are not only fatigued and unexcited by our teaching when we're on screen. There are other ways we need to reconceptualize the amount of attention we can ask for from students in the amount of attention we can give ourselves.

How can we pull back on testing and increase teaching? How can we assess less and teach more? How can we prioritize engagement instead of content? In the winter term of 2020, most Ontario universities allowed students to choose credit and non credit grading. Then for some strange reason, even though the world didn't get any less, you know, stressful or unpredictable. We took that away. So why did we let this back into our classrooms? There were also major changes in the assessment of teachers. We got extended tenure clocks. We got exempted from or we got adapted annual performance reviews and teaching evaluations. We can look at the data and it shows that we needed those things, right, because the research output for example, for female-identified faculty, has taken a huge hit, one that will likely ripple into the next decade.

So this should help us understand that we were never on a level playing field to begin with, and we're not headed towards a level playing field, and neither are students. We removed timed testing and we altered our exams only for one term. Why? Why only one term? Now universities are spending millions of dollars on complicated test proctoring services just so that we can give the same old timed exams.

So why should we ever go back to assessing one another the way that we used to? Why should we ever go back to timed tests and exams for students? Should any of the forms of Fordist assessment that hung around since the mid 20th century be allowed to hang around any longer? So that's part of my challenges is to think about how I'm going to replace that, those forms of assessment, with forms that value engagement and connection.

So thanks so much for your time today. I hope that there are opportunities for us to interact after you've had an opportunity to look at what I've said today and I think, you know, we can all agree that before COVID, our schools had too many unnecessary barriers in place for students and we were all working hard to remove them, but they're just everywhere, right? During COVID we did all view and experience new barriers, or we saw the old ones from new perspectives. And now we do have a chance, and it's maybe a once in a generation chance to build something different.

I am committed to disability rights in my scholarship, service, and teaching. My work brings together rhetoric, writing, disability studies, and critical pedagogy. My first book, entitled Disability Rhetoric, was published with Syracuse University Press in 2014. Academic Ableism: Disability and Higher Education was published with Michigan University Press in 2017 and is available in an open-access version online. Disabled Upon Arrival: Eugenics, Immigration, and the Construction of Race and Disability was published in 2018 with Ohio State University Press. I am the Founding Editor of the Canadian Journal of Disability Studies.

This keynote presentation was recorded as part of Dis/Engaged, a distributed symposium about online learning in art and design education, January 25th – February 5th 2021. OCAD University.