Student Experiences of Implementation of Accommodations

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Abstract

Teachers want their students to learn, and they want that learning to be equitable, with opportunities for all students. But not all students have the same needs for success. Therefore, classroom accommodations are provided through Disability Offices within universities. These accommodations are intended to be implemented in each course the student takes. Yet the actual enactment of accommodations relies on facilitation and implementation by each instructor in collaboration with the student, which may lead to variance in the level of accommodations. This project examined student interviews and student and faculty survey data to construct a narrative analysis of students’ experiences when they discuss their accommodations with their instructors. This manuscript reports a characterization of these interactions and how these interactions shape students’ success in the classroom, with recommendations for both students and instructors.
Keywords

Disability Studies – Disability Studies in Education – narrative analysis – inclusive education – accommodations

1 Introduction

Achieving equitable educational opportunities for all students is a worthy goal. However, equity does not imply that all students require the same support for success. Students with disabilities may request more support to realize their educational goals and participate in an equitable education system. In the United States, the *Americans with Disabilities Act* requires institutions to accommodate the needs of individuals with disabilities, i.e. individuals with impairments that substantially limits their major life activities (*Americans With Disabilities Act*, 1990). Institutions of higher education are included in the mandate to provide reasonable accommodations so that individuals with disabilities may access educational activities. This generally requires tailoring specific accommodations to each individual with a disability. For example, students with physical disabilities, such as limited mobility, may require assistance with transportation around campus. Students with mental disabilities, such as ADHD, may need accommodations such as a distraction-free examination environment. These students must request these accommodations, which are not retroactive, through an interactive process by providing documentation and following each institution's accommodation process to secure documentation of the need for appropriate accommodations.

This medical model operates from a deficit framework; it assumes that the individual is lacking in some area and requires compensation for that insufficiency. More recently, advocates have suggested that institutions adopt a social model of disability. This approach assumes that the disability is a failure of the institution to function for all individuals (Titchkosky, 2022). Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles put this framework into practice by structuring each classroom so that learning opportunities are accessible to diverse learners and the need for accommodations is minimized.

Research has discussed how disability accommodations are determined and whether they have successfully enabled students to meet learning goals (Table 1). Yet, the actual implementation of these accommodations often relies on the individual actions of the instructor-of-record and student, which may lead to variance in the enactment of accommodations. Thus, it is necessary to explore students' experiences discussing their accommodations with their
instructors, and how these interactions shape their success in the classroom. Some previous work has examined the general experiences of students with disabilities (e.g. Francis et al., 2019; Anderson, et al., 2017), but none have focused on the interactions between student and instructor. This work explores the experiences of students who were awarded accommodations by their university and sought to have those accommodations enacted by their instructors in the classroom, addressing these research questions: What do students experience when they discuss their accommodations with their instructors? How do these interactions shape their classroom experiences?

2 Setting and Data Collection

This study was conducted at a large, public, 4-year university, with primarily undergraduate enrollment in the midwestern United States. There was little prior work to document students’ experiences at this stage of securing
accommodations, so we began our inquiry by surveying with open-ended questions. We extended an invitation to take the survey to all students who had received accommodations from the institution’s Disability Support Resources office (DSR). The survey received 75 responses out of 1705 registered students with accommodations. This response rate was consistent with the low response rates for previous studies of college students with disabilities (O’Shea & Meyer, 2016). The survey provided a broad description of students’ experiences but could not offer the depth that open-ended conversations could achieve. Therefore, each survey participant was also offered the option to participate in a follow-up interview. Of the 75 participants responding to the email survey, 4 accepted the interview invitation (Table 2). The survey responses were used to generate the semi-structured interview protocol. Interviews were conducted

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<th>Table 2</th>
<th>Demographic sketches of participants</th>
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<tr>
<td>Lacey (she/her)</td>
<td>is a STEM major in her sixth year. Her DSR memo is for extended test times and a student note taker. She has had a DSR memo since her first semester. She is in primarily lecture courses that require notes, mental visualization, and timed assignments.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Katie (she/her)</td>
<td>is a STEM major in her fourth year. Her DSR memo is for extended test times and a student note taker. She did not have a DSR memo until her second year of college. Her classwork is project and portfolio based in small classes.</td>
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<td>Deb (she/her)</td>
<td>is a STEM major in her third year. She did not disclose the reason for her accommodations, but her memo provides extended test time, recorded lectures, and a copy of the instructor’s slides. She did not have these accommodations during her first semester. Her coursework consists of lectures with timed tests and laboratory classes.</td>
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<td>Pamela (she/her)</td>
<td>is a humanities major in her third year. Her memo requires closed captioned lectures with support from various software depending on the mode of course delivery (online or in-person). She has had some variation of this DSR memo since her first semester. In her coursework, she is assessed with portfolio-based projects and her classes frequently utilize group discussion.</td>
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by video teleconference (Pratt & Yezierski, 2018), ranging from 50 to 80 minutes in duration.

A survey about providing accommodations to students with disabilities was concurrently delivered via email to all faculty members at the institution. This survey received 182 responses, approximately an 11% response rate. Because the lens of disability studies requires bringing the experiences of people with disabilities to the foreground, the primary purpose of this data was to provide additional context for the student participants’ experiences. Therefore, these surveys were used as a method of corroboration and clarification during the analysis of the student-participant data.

3 Data Analysis

This work began with self-reflexive memos about the researchers’ individual biases and assumptions. The faculty researcher and undergraduate student researcher who initiated the project recruited the director of the Disability Support Resources office to join the research team in order to provide diverse perspectives from the institution. One key assumption that researchers held during this study is that instructors intend to offer equitable educational experiences for all their students. However, the myriad ways in which diverse individual students may need support may be obscured from instructors by their own academic privilege (Hogan, 2022). That is, in their own education, the instructors may have experienced invisible advantages that prevent them from understanding the difficulties of students with disabilities (McIntosh, 1995). One way to help people develop conceptions of people with disabilities is through the power of story (Middleton, et al., 2009; Ressa, 2021).

A story is a form of communication that employs narrative structure; it is particularly effective at making the communicated information accessible and memorable to the audience (Egan, 1986; Graesser, et al., 1994). In this case, the narrative analysis focuses on the students’ lived experiences as they implement their designated accommodations (Murray, 2000; 2008). Through the back-and-forth of the semi-structured interviews, the researchers elicited the participants’ experiences. Then, interview transcripts were produced verbatim.

Narrative inquiries are useful in understanding processes as they explain abstract, complex processes in a concrete, linear fashion (Bruner, 1986). Because the interviews ranged across topics and utilized probing questions to circle back to previously described events, the interview transcripts were not linear and did not represent a narrative. Therefore, the transcripts were refashioned
to remove distractive utterances and interviewer comments (Page, 2011) and then reorganized by considering the context, chronology, and causality of the events into cohesive narratives (Casey et al., 2015; Law & Chan, 2015).

The first two authors carried out these steps to transform the interviews into narratives for two of the four participants. Then, they each evaluated the narrative of the others, offering edits and negotiating corrections until both researchers were in agreement about the authenticity of the narratives. The narratives were then shared with the participants with a solicitation for further input or corrections from each participant. One participant provided additional information that was then incorporated into their narrative.

After the researchers arrived at a consensus on the narratives and participants had an opportunity to provide feedback on their own narrative, each narrative was examined carefully by the researchers to determine which aspects of the personal, interpersonal, and social contexts of the narratives seemed to predominate. The participants disclosed little about their identity as a disabled person; nor did they expound about the classroom organization or physical setting. Their primary focus was on the course content policies set by their instructors, and their interactions with their instructors. Therefore, the analysis proceeded through consideration of not only the internal experiences of the participant, but the interactions they have with others in their environment and the entire social context of those interactions (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). To facilitate this analysis, researchers employed the student-teacher connection model (Gillespie, 2005) and the dual-concern model of conflict management (Jamieson & Thomas, 1974) as theoretical frameworks and embarked on another deep reading of the narratives to analyze the relationship between student and instructor according to those frameworks. This analysis provided a focus to develop an understanding of the issue while still allowing complexity in the presentation of participants’ experiences. The results are presented below.

### 3.1 Limitations and Trustworthiness

When participants present their narratives, they may do so with the intent of presenting a message (Murray, 2000). This particular limitation was not an obstacle for this project because these research questions focus on the students’ perceptions and experiences. However, participants may feel restricted in what they share due to their consciousness of being interviewed (Murray, 2000), particularly because one of the researchers was a university professor, and thus they may moderate their descriptions of their instructors to avoid causing offense or filter their responses in some otherwise unanticipated manner. The researchers attempted to counter these potential issues by...
clarifying the voluntary nature of interviews and openly discussing their purpose. Furthermore, the researchers were careful to reflect on their relative positions and biases (faculty member, undergraduate student, and director of disability support resource office) when designing the study. For example, the undergraduate student researcher was responsible for recruitment of participants and scheduling all interviews. He also played the largest role in conducting the interviews in an effort to minimize participants’ perceptions of engaging in a student-professor relationship with the researchers.

Trustworthiness of research can be evinced by use of thick description, crystallization of data, multivocality, and the practice of member-checking with participants (Tracy, 2010). Thick description has been carried out through our use of quotations from the interview participants throughout our results section. Crystallization was accomplished by including researchers from the institution’s faculty, student body, and administrative structure on the research team, where each could bring their own experiences and expertise to the data analysis. Multivocality was accomplished by including narratives from multiple student participants and a comparison of interview data to the student and instructor survey data. The themes present in the open-ended survey responses of both students and instructors were strongly aligned with the narratives generated by the interview process. The credibility of the data results strengthened through member-checking with the participants after the transcription of the interviews and construction of the narratives. Participants indicated that the data and analysis was an accurate representation of their experiences. The disability support personnel provided further crystallization by confirming their role in aiding students’ navigation of experiences that were similar to those presented in these participants’ narratives.

4 Results

Gillespie’s model of student-teacher connection is useful for identifying ways to support at-risk students and reasons that a student-instructor relationship might falter (2005). In this context, the student and instructor must work together to communicate about and ensure a useful enactment of the accommodations. Because this process does not always yield the accommodations the student needs, a careful examination of the student-instructor relationship in this context may yield actionable recommendations.

The key characteristics present in a connected relationship are knowing, trust, respect, and mutuality (Gillespie, 2005). When these characteristics are present in a student-instructor relationship, the two are more likely to engage
in a relationship that produces learning. In order for this model to be useful in interpreting the narratives of the participants in this study, each of these characteristics must first be defined (Table 3).

At the university where this research was conducted, students receive a memorandum (memo) from Disability Support Resources (DSR) that details the accommodation that they require. For example, a student with dyslexia may be accommodated by extending the time limit on in-class assessments, allowing 75 minutes for an exam that other students take in a 50-minute time

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<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Application in Context</th>
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<td>Knowing</td>
<td>The quality of looking beyond the surface and seeking to understand and empathize with the whole person</td>
<td>The instructor recognizes the difficulties students with disabilities face in the classroom; the student understands that facilitating accommodations may require collaborative work for the instructor</td>
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<td>Trust</td>
<td>A consistency and transparency within interactions that allows both teacher and student to focus on their intended role</td>
<td>The instructor is explicit about their role in providing accommodations and instruction; the student is explicit about what they need to have and do to meet learning goals.</td>
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<td>Respect</td>
<td>The tacit recognition that every person has inherent worth and innate abilities</td>
<td>The instructor sees students with disabilities as worthy of their time and attention, not as a drain on their finite resources; the student sees their instructor as a whole person.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mutuality</td>
<td>The requirement that each of these characteristics (knowing, trust, and respect) is bi-directional</td>
<td>Both instructor and student exhibit the previous three characteristics.</td>
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slot. However, the students must first relay those accommodations and provide the memo to the instructor of each class in which they want accommodations to be implemented. Students can provide the memo during office hours or through email. Thus, many of the narratives began with this part of the process.

Katie: I like to email my DSR memo to my professor. I knew that it was only between me and this person. They see what they’re saying, and I see what they’re saying. Everything is typed down, it’s very clear communication. There aren’t any hiccups in it. Also, I don’t have to see them make a face. Sometimes they act uncomfortable, or irritated by the memo, or surprised, like I don’t look disabled enough or something. So, I usually email them. If I don’t email them, I see them in class a lot and I’ll ask if they can stay after for a minute and I’ll make sure that the room is empty. Those are kinda the only scenarios that I really talk about it with professors. I just want to make sure it’s a private setting.

Katie’s narration exhibited a marked lack of respect on the part of the instructors she encountered, as evidenced by her reluctance to disclose her need for accommodations in a face-to-face conversation with her instructors. Her ability to perceive their discomfort during these conversations also indicates her heightened knowing. Lacey’s narrative also detailed how she presents her memo to her instructors.

Lacey: I always provide my DSR memo even if I do not think I will need it in case they have pop quizzes or anything comes up. I either provide my DSR memo via email or in person after class. Email has worked well to convey all the information I want to say conveniently, and the professor cannot lose my paper DSR memo, which has happened before. Telling them about my accommodations in-person allows them to put a face to a name, though, and I can explain my disability and why I need my accommodations if they seem hesitant. I am very open about my disabilities, and I’ve found explaining why I need DSR makes the process smoother. Still, it is not the professor’s prerogative to question my DSR. My doctor and DSR advisors were the ones who decided I need these accommodations.

Lacey’s preference for digital delivery of her DSR memo was rooted in a lack of trust. She did not trust the instructor could carry out their role of maintaining records for accommodations. Her feeling that she needed to explain her
disability and why she needed specific accommodations indicates that she felt a lack of knowing on the part of the instructor. She recognized that she could improve their knowing by disclosing details about her disabilities. When she said it is not the professor’s prerogative to question her disability, Lacey was describing her feeling that a professor should respect each student’s learning needs, regardless of whether that student has provided justification for those needs. When Lacey pointed out the injustice of the instructor’s tacit requirement for her to relinquish her privacy, Lacey was providing evidence of lack of respect. A weak connection between Lacey and her instructors meant that Lacey was at risk of not receiving her accommodations.

Although Lacey and Katie’s narratives described how a weak student-teacher connection could jeopardize the implementation of accommodations, Pamela’s account provided evidence that strengthening the student-teacher connection could result in improved outcomes for the student requiring accommodations.

Pamela: I always disclose my accommodations with the first week or two of class. I know that’s what I need to do, and then I can be just as successful as anyone else in the class. Since a lot of my accommodations require additional technology, I sometimes worry that the professor won’t know how to do it, and I end up having to teach them. Usually, if a professor forgets my accommodations, it gets resolved quickly. I might need to remind them the first two times and then the rest of the semester is fine, and I don’t miss things. I have had two professors for more than one class, and after the first time, they knew me and my accommodations, so they just remembered it.

Pamela identified that her instructor’s ability to provide a knowing connection was an obstacle to receiving accommodations. (She demonstrated her own contribution of knowing by describing the technical difficulties that instructors faced in providing accommodations.) She recognized that as the instructors’ knowing increased over the course of a semester and in subsequent courses, her access to accommodations improved.

Deb’s narrative provided another example of a strong student-teacher connection.

Deb: I know my access to healthcare is like a privilege so a lot of students who can’t afford it, they are not getting the accommodations they need to succeed in those classes. I have had some professors who
made it clear they would accommodate you if you struggled. They made a note in the syllabus about their willingness to help, even with things like mental health and well-being. They made it clear they were there for their students. They gave details about how to communicate them about our DSR memo—how to set up a time to talk to them privately about it. Sometimes you go to office hours, and there are 4 other people there, and it’s just not very private. It’s nice when a professor is willing to meet one-on-one at the end of class, too. When they show that they are ready to take my memo, I can be confident that they will make those accommodations. I’ve appreciated those professors so much, because it just gave reassurance that I wasn’t going to be on my own. I felt comfortable asking for help during office hours and asking for clarification. I felt like as long as I communicated properly with them, I would be able to perform the best I could in those conditions. It just made all the difference in the world. It allowed me to thrive instead of barely pass.

In Deb’s account, instructors included provisions for accommodating mental health and even well-being. She noted that this level of empathy, or knowing helped her to feel their support. Previous work on instructor experiences has also highlighted the necessity of knowing, where instructors stated the beneficial impact of understanding disabled students’ experiences (Bunbury, 2020).

The instructors who gave details in advance about how to discuss accommodations were explicitly defining their role, which promotes trust that the instructor will provide what is needed. In her description of not being “on [her] own,” Deb indicates a feeling of mutuality, an acknowledgment that both student and instructor are partners in a functioning, connected relationship. Deb also explained how she reacted to instructors who did not provide those assurances.

Deb: Sometimes when I think a professor will react negatively to my memo, I try to explain more what my specific struggles are. I’m not trying to give them my whole life story, but I also want them to have an awareness of why I need certain things. I know professors are so busy, just constantly, so much work and grading. I don’t want to be “that student” who was asking too much or causing trouble. I wanted to ask as few as questions as possible but, sometimes I just don’t understand the material, so I had to decide between keeping quiet and alienating myself from my peers and the professor. Some professors
made it clear that you can ask questions, but I know that I would be
taking up the valuable class time that other students are paying for.
I try to write them down, but sometimes there's not enough time or
I won't remember to ask in office hours.

One professor announced to the class how distracting it is for stu-
dents to come in late or leave early. My memo allows me flexibility
in arriving late and leaving during class. Even after I told her about
my memo, I felt super anxious and rude when using my accommo-
dations.

Deb’s description of feeling like a “nuisance” indicates that the instructor did
not demonstrate an acknowledgment of Deb’s value as a person, i.e. a lack of
respect. This was also exhibited by the instructor who insisted that students’
unplanned entrance or departure from class would create a disruption. The
instructor was tacitly devaluing the humanity of their students while elevating
the value of the time spent in class. Like Katie, Deb understood that the
connectedness of the student-teacher relationship might be improved with
an increase in knowing, and so in the case of lack of connection, she would
provide the instructor with more information about her disability. However,
Deb seemed sensitive in demonstrating her own knowledge and respect by
acknowledging the constraints and pressures that instructors face. In fact, one
might think Deb was overly sensitive in her claim that instructors thought she
was taking the effortless way out. Although Deb’s specific instructors could not
provide their response to this claim, some of the instructors responding to the
email survey that was deployed prior to the student interviews corroborated
Deb’s supposition that instructors believed a DSR memo offered an “easy way
out." Some instructors implied that students procured DSR memos to obtain
the advantage of extended time on exams or that it was too easy for students to
acquire DSR memos. Other instructors pointed to their colleagues’ perceptions
of students’ abuse of DSR memos as an obstacle to providing accommodations
in their own classrooms, that pressure from suspicious colleagues forced them
to take a more restrictive stance on providing undocumented accommodations.
Instructors’ suspicions that students request accommodations to gain an
unfair advantage have been documented in previous research (Nielson, 2001).

During the interviews, participants described difficulty in using the
accommodations that their university authorized them to receive. These
accommodations included: receiving extended time on assessments, having
flexibility in class attendance, using note-takers, wearing headphones in class,
viewing captioning on videos, and taking assessments in an environment that
minimized distractions. It was not possible to interview the students’ instructors in these cases to determine all of the barriers might have prevented the instructors from more readily implementing the students' accommodations. However, it is evident from the students’ narratives that a lack of connection between student and instructor may have been a contributing factor to the difficulty of implementing classroom accommodations. Therefore, it is important to also examine what occurs in these instances, i.e. when the concerns of the instructor and the concerns of the student are in opposition.

The dual-concern model is a method of modeling conflict resolution (Jamieson & Thomas, 1974). It characterizes problem-solving choices along two dimensions: prioritizing one's own needs (represented in Figure 1 along the y-axis) or centering the other party's needs (represented along the x-axis). Participants who wish to satisfy their own concerns are said to be assertive; those who seek to satisfy the other party are cooperative. From these two dimensions, five different approaches for conflict resolution can be defined (Figure 1). The competing approach is defined by exclusively focusing on one's own concern, neglecting the other party's concern. The avoiding approach ignores both one's own and the other party's concerns. Accommodating meets the other party's concern while ignoring one's own concerns. Collaborating is an approach that meets both parties’ concerns. Finally, compromising meets some, but not all concerns of both parties. These were used to characterize the student participants’ decisions when a conflict arose with their instructor over the issue of providing accommodations. Lacey’s narration offers an example of two different conflict-handling modes:

Lacey: I get extended time on any in class assignments, including exam and quizzes. Usually, professors compromise with me to get my test times extended. Early in my college career, I had one professor who
was very reluctant to give me extended time on tests. The class began with a quiz followed by lecture. She would have me leave the class to take the quiz, which cut into my class time, and made me miss the start of lecture. Eventually she stopped giving me extra time. I tried talking to her but she would not work with me. I did not know what to do, or how to advocate for myself. I ended up failing the first exam and dropped the class.

First, Lacey described a compromising approach, where she would assess the willingness of her instructor to provide the designated accommodations, and if necessary, she would elaborate on the nature of her disability to motivate to the instructor meet her concerns—a tactic which was described above as a method of increasing the knowing characteristic of connectedness between student and instructor. However, on one occasion, she encountered an instructor who was not willing to address Lacey’s concerns even after Lacey made this compromise. In that case, Lacey adopted an avoiding approach, dropping the class altogether.

Faced with a similar conflict, Katie adapted her strategy, finally using a competing approach with her instructor to gain her accommodations.

Katie: I handed my professor the accommodations memo and she said that I wouldn’t really need it and brushed it off. I said, “OK, that’s fine.” Back then I didn’t know how to advocate and say “Yes, I really do need these.” So, when test time came, I failed a portion of the test because I ran out of time. When I talked to her again, she said that it wasn’t appropriate to ask for these accommodations, even with my DSR memo. The paper says right on the first line that I need these accommodations, and she didn’t even look at it. I let the department head know what was going on and cc’d my disability advisor on the email. Suddenly, I had my accommodations. Even though I got them eventually, my professor really made it a hassle.

It is unclear whether Katie’s instructor’s claim that she did not need the accommodations came from a lack of knowing, unaware that Katie’s disability would affect her ability to engage in the class, or it may have been a lack of trust, a challenge to the legitimacy of the disability or need for accommodations. The lack of connection that was evidenced by the instructor’s refusal to provide the accommodations may have influenced Katie’s decision to take an avoiding approach. But after she saw how her test performance would be affected by the lack of accommodations, she adopted a competing approach for her needs.
contacting the department head and her DSR advisor. Having to compete for her accommodations ultimately diminished Katie’s trust in her professor, since they could not be relied upon to perform their tasks as an instructor. Katie went on to explain that this loss of student-instructor connection led her to skip class more frequently, avoid going to the professor for help, and seek out alternative resources to meet her learning goals.

The competing approach was not described by any other students. Indeed, even though Katie chose the competing approach in this situation, she more frequently engaged in accommodating approaches.

Katie: The only time I’ve felt singled out truly though was when I wasn’t allowed to wear AirPods during my exam, and I have AirPods because: one, they are noise cancelling, which is fantastic; two, they’re really really low key, so you can fit them in your ear, and no one knows. I had a professor that was really uncomfortable with it because they’re Bluetooth and they connect to my phone. So, I have a set of soundproof earmuffs and it looks like I’m working in a construction yard when I wear them. They are huge. So when I have to put those on during a test, it feels like everyone in that room knows she’s got something going on up there, they are thinking, “Why is she wearing bulletproof headphones into class?” It’s the only time where I truly felt singled out when it comes to accommodations. The very glaringly bulky headphone situation where everyone knows. Every single person in that room knew. There was not a doubt in my mind.

Katie’s did not want to wear obtrusive earmuffs during her exams, because she believed this would identify her as a person with disability to her peers. Yet even as she expressed her own concern, her deep knowing of her instructor allowed her to identify her instructor’s concern that a wireless headphone connection might compromise the integrity of the assessment. Thus, she adopted the accommodating mode to resolve the conflicting concerns. Deb also adopted this approach during a conflict.

Deb: One time a professor called me out for taking a photo of a slide during class. “Hey, no taking pictures!” I had stitches in my right hand and couldn’t write with it. I didn’t have an accommodation for that because it was a temporary injury. I tried to write with my left hand, but was struggling to write legibly. It makes sense why they don’t want us to take pictures, but I think sometimes students just...
struggle to write everything down. If they don’t want us to take pictures, is there something else that they can do to help us? It would be nice if they could meet with us in office hours and find a way to make it work so that we don’t break the rules or inconvenience them, but we still get what we need. If we knew that the professors were willing to work with us, it might have a huge impact on how comfortable students feel in approaching professors and in comprehending the material.

Once again, the student exhibited a deeper knowing than the instructor in this scenario. Deb’s ability to identify the instructor’s concerns, and her willingness to trust the validity of those concerns and respect the instructor’s wishes led her to an accommodating mode of conflict resolution. She did not assert her own needs, giving precedence to the instructor’s concerns instead.

It is important to note that we did not observe a correlation between the characterization of the student-teacher connection and the type of conflict resolution strategy that the student adopted. Lack of student-teacher connection contributed to the conflict when accommodations were not implemented, but then Deb, Katie, and Lacey demonstrated different approaches to resolve that conflict. In Pamela, we saw yet another approach: collaborating.

Pamela: There hasn’t been a time when my accommodations have been completely ignored, but there were times when the professor didn’t understand completely what my accommodations were or they just forgot part of it, small things. For example, sometimes they’ll forget to turn the subtitles on during a Zoom meeting. It’s been really hard since COVID, with all the online meetings. People’s speech is more muffled. Some people are wearing masks, so I can’t lipread. If the professor forgets subtitles, I have to interrupt them to ask if they can turn it on. I feel like subtitles would help a lot of people, not just hard-of-hearing students, so I would rather that professors just have them on as part of the normal routine. Same for providing lecture notes and slides. It definitely helps me, but it would help a lot of other students, too.

I always disclose my accommodations with the first week or two of class. I know that’s what I need to do, and then I can be just as successful as anyone else in the class. Since a lot of my accommodations require additional technology, I sometimes worry that
the professor won’t know how to do it, and I end up having to teach them. Usually if a professor forgets my accommodations, it gets resolved really quickly. I might need to remind them the first two times and then the rest of the semester is fine, and I don’t miss things. I have had two professors for more than one class, and after the first time, they knew me and my accommodations, so they just remembered it.

Pamela’s patience and technological skills allowed her to give her instructors the information needed to address their concerns and her own. The instructor-oriented concerns in this scenario of lack of skills or resources to provide the designated accommodations were mentioned several times by instructors in the survey, too. This approach required a well-connected relationship, evidenced by the *mutuality of knowing* by Pamela’s recognition of the instructors’ needs and the instructors’ learning of her needs. A *mutuality of trust* and *respect* is demonstrated by the responsiveness of the instructors to change their habits and increase new skills, and in Pamela’s willingness to be a resource for her instructors; although student and instructor have different roles, explicit acknowledgment of the worth of each role (providing edification about accommodations and carrying out the accommodations, respectively) established a connected relationship, which in turn allowed both parties’ concerns to be met in times of conflict.

Pamela’s narration of the collaborating approach to conflict resolution was an outlier in the stories related by the other participants. Most instances of conflict were resolved with either compromising, avoiding, or accommodating, as the student participants were reluctant to assert their concerns. Although conflicts regarding the enactment of accommodations dominated the participants’ narratives—appropriately so, since conflict is a key feature of a narrative (Ware & Young, 2010)—these experiences of conflict were also in the minority when weighed against the sum of the students’ experiences enacting their accommodations. In Katie’s words, “The majority of professors don’t have a problem with providing accommodations.” It may be instructive to examine those times where student participants described the enactment of their accommodations free from conflict.

Lacey contrasted her experience with the instructor who arranged her extended time for assessments during the lecture portion of the class time.

Lacey: Now I’m in a class where the professor has been very accommodating with test time. I come in an hour early to start my test and then finish with everyone else. This way I can be within proximity...
Pamela indicated she also experiences proper implementation of accommodations. For Deb, successful enactment of her accommodations did not always leave her feeling positively about the course.

Deb: I’ve had professors who met my accommodations, but they weren’t very happy about it and I could tell. When I gave them my memo, it seemed like a nuisance more than something that I needed to succeed. It was a hassle to them. I felt like they thought I was looking for an easy way out of a difficult class. My needs were met but sometimes it was begrudgingly. Nobody was outright mean, it just felt like I was a nuisance. I didn’t feel comfortable communicating anything that was happening. I felt like I had to hide my emotions because they didn’t seem very warm. There was a significant difference in my level of struggle to meet those course requirements.

Deb’s experience underscores the importance of the student-teacher connection; even in cases of complete adherence to the designated accommodations, this may not be sufficient support for students with disabilities. This contrasts with a positive experience shared by Katie, who described a course in which she did not need to enact her accommodations at all.

Katie: Another one of my math classes was based on portfolio style homework. So this portfolio style way of doing things had no quizzes, tests, or things like that, and the homework is optional, only turned in for feedback. We do check-ins. Like, “How’s it going? What do you need from us that you need to be successful? What can we do to help you?” I appreciate every bit of that. What they “grade” if you will, is the portfolio you create of all these math problems that you do. I knew early that I didn’t need my DSR memo because it wasn’t that kind of class. I wasn’t worried about the tests because there were no tests. For the same reason I wasn’t worried about headphones. He had set up the course so students could do the material on their own without the need for DSR. I did however still provide my DSR memo. I only do that because it says I have autism right on the top and I think its important professors know that. Every once in a while, I’ll take something really really literally, and that’s not the way its intended. At the end of the semester, I asked...
for an A and I got an A, because my portfolio was good. The professor said that this method of teaching better prepared us for the real world. There are not timed tests and graded assignments in the real workforce. There are projects and problems you work on and receive feedback. You should be prepared for that.

When an alternative method of assessment was provided, Katie’s need for accommodations diminished. She felt supported by this course structure and the instructor and felt that she had met her learning goals in this class.

5 Conclusions

The student-teacher connections evaluated in this project show a marked lack of mutuality, with the students carrying the burden of knowing, trust, and respect. The students were cognizant of their instructors’ situations and wanted to be sensitive to their instructors’ struggles, even as the instructor was neglecting to enact the accommodations that were rightfully owed to the student. This led to the students’ minimization of their own concerns, engaging in avoidance, accommodation, and compromise as their primary strategies for approaching conflict with their instructors. Although all conflict resolution types may have occasions where their use is proper, avoidance is not an appropriate technique when the outcome is a matter of importance (Rahim, 1997) (i.e. a student’s learning or grade achievement). Furthermore, accommodation is not an appropriate strategy when the other party is acting in an unethical manner (Rahim, 1997). One plausible reason for the students to prioritize their instructor’s concerns is the power differential in a student-teacher relationship (Jamieson & Thomas, 1974).

To address this issue, institutions should seek to reduce the role of the student in communicating or enforcing their accommodations in the classroom. The “self-advocacy model”, wherein students are seen as responsible for ensuring that their accommodations are sufficient is not compatible with critical disability theory (Osborne, 2017); it is inconsistent with the idea that disability not a problem with an individual, but a manifestation of the dysfunction of the current educational system. Whenever possible, disability resource offices should communicate the accommodations to the instructor and follow up on the implementation. Another strategy would be to provide students with specific instruction about how to resolve student-instructor conflicts regarding accommodations. Disability support offices could also provide additional support to instructors. Previous work has featured how
best to support instructors on more technical aspects of implementing accommodations (e.g. Elder et. al, 2021), but additional support on how to help students feel comfortable requesting and utilizing their accommodations would be beneficial, as evidenced by Deb’s narrative. Finally, institutions should recognize the potential for faculty to hold negative attitudes toward students with disabilities (De Boer et al., 2011; Osborne, 2017) and should support programs to help educational stakeholders break down such barriers (Freer, 2021).

Participants noted how difficult it was to procure accommodations. Deb also acknowledged that other classmates who had disabilities may not have the resources to go through the process of obtaining accommodations. Katie’s narrative provided a specific example that would mitigate this issue: course policies and instructional methods structured in such a way as to provide flexibility for all learners. The current status quo of providing accommodations to students with disabilities takes a deficit approach, i.e., the students have some deficit that needs to be overcome by providing special arrangements. Instead, the social model of disability demands a critique of the current educational structures and asks for solutions that reimage the university classroom (Titchkosky, 2022).

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a framework for providing flexible teaching to benefit all learners (Rose & Meyer, 2006). The goal of UDL is to design a classroom environment that accommodates all students, eliminating or greatly reducing the need for specific individual accommodations (Bunbury 2020). This would require providing multiple means of engagement, representation, and action and expression. For example, one of the more prevalent accommodations that our participants received was extended time during exams. Planning varied and authentic assessments such as those recommended by Villarroel and coworkers (2020) would alleviate the need for timed exams.

In addition to reducing the need to create individual accommodation plans and diminishing the number of student-instructor conflicts regarding accommodations, UDL would promote an improvement in student-instructor connection, as students perceive the empathy and value inherent in instructional practices grounded in UDL. Only when knowing, respect, and trust are present can mutuality be achieved. These are the conditions necessary for students to overcome their tendency to prioritize their instructors’ concerns and access a collaborative or compromise approach to negotiate classroom conflicts.

Finally, this research revealed another strategy for instructor professional development. Targeted training has been shown to be effective in improving
instructors’ perceptions of students with disabilities (Milligan, 2010). Future training programs could be informed by the finding that students remediate their instructors’ negative perceptions by forgoing their privacy to provide their instructors with details about their disability. Professional development for faculty could include opportunities for instructors to role-play or otherwise create narratives that center their students’ experiences. This strategy is corroborated by the student-teacher connection model (Gillespie, 2005). As an instructor’s knowledge of the student increases, their respect and trust can also increase. With increased respect, the instructor will value the student’s potential for learning. With increased trust, the instructor will be less likely to view requests for accommodations with suspicion. Universities could promote specific professional development opportunities and classroom practices to improve student-teacher relationships, such as those suggested by Hendricks and coworkers (2023). Institutions could motivate instructors to adopt these strategies by promulgating stories of students with disabilities. Altering identifying details or anonymizing these stories would protect students’ privacy, while still allowing them to benefit from the increased connection. Stories are a powerful tool for promoting mutual understanding and empathy, and this strategy has already been employed in medical settings (Moore & Hallenbeck, 2010). The narrative analysis within this manuscript is a conscious attempt to achieve deeper student-teacher connection by providing narrative accounts of students’ experiences. The participants who shared their stories were motivated by their desire for instructors to know them, and other students like them, better. We acknowledge and honor their candor and contributions to this research.

References


