

Synopsis of
“Feeling lost in a sea of accommodations”
By Elisabeth Staal

Presented at the Berklee Institute for Arts Education and Special Needs
ABLE Assembly 2020

Thesis: No one does their best teaching when overwhelmed, and receiving a lot of information about accommodations and techniques can be overwhelming, especially while managing a classroom. Arts educators feeling this way will benefit from taking a step back, taking a breath, and revising how to determine which strategies to use and how to make intaking a lot of new information feel manageable.

Goals:

1. Reset perspectives about arts education for students with disabilities
2. Adjust the standards we hold ourselves to as we approach creating inclusive arts education experiences
3. Feel more confident in identifying barriers and implementing accommodations in a way that is manageable and realistic

Process:

1. Reset perspectives with a mindset reset focusing on a few key points: First, you cannot be every student's 1:1 aide, and that is okay. Second, you cannot master every skill at once, and no one, especially yourself, should expect that of you. And third, let go of the fear of doing things wrong, and focus on finding what works and knowing that it will be a process. That process might be messy and that's okay.
2. Revisit the basics of how we approach arts education spaces:
 - a. Recognize your role: To help prevent educators from falling into a habit of trying to be everything for everyone, it is helpful to recognize your most basic role in the classroom. Is it to teach dance? Music? Art? Is it to provide a safe learning environment? Whatever you identify your role to be, will also lead you to the basic goal of that class. To use myself as an example, if I am the lead teacher for a dance class, then I cannot also be an Occupational Therapist and an aide or teaching assistant. I have to let myself do what I am there to do, and that is to teach dance. Rooting myself in this purpose aids me in my planning by helping me find the line between trying to be everything for everyone and providing realistic support through my role, it also keeps me focused on the goal of our class.
 - b. Planning: Refocusing on how we can approach adjusting pre-existing lesson plans and incorporate new strategies as we learn about them whether it be from peers or conferences. As we approach lesson planning, I want us to remember that disability is diversity, and diversity needs to be something we expect and plan for. If we do this, then it will be harder for us to feel surprised by a student who needs something different because

we won't be assuming all our students will respond in the same way . Instead of us thinking that some students need something different, I encourage you to think about how all your students will approach a lesson in their own way. I ask you to think once again about your role in the classroom. If it is to introduce students to a style of dance, to continue with my example, then what is the ideal outcome for students in class? If it is for students to leave the class having participated and learned about this style, then that can look very different for each student. Keeping this in mind can alleviate me from being caught up on everyone doing or achieving the same thing, and focus on the authentic participation from each student.

- c. Identifying barriers: What are neurotypical and/or able bodied students receiving? Once we identify the experience neurotypical and/or able-bodied peers are receiving, then we can identify the barriers. Knowing the barriers enable us to build backwards and think about how students with disabilities can also receive that experience in a meaningful, authentic way. To facilitate this thought process, I incorporated it into a planning tool that helps me as I do my own planning.
- d. Planning tool example: The planning tool I use is focused on building accommodations as I plan, and works in tandem with my template that has the greater scope and sequence of the class. I know you all have your own planning templates and tools, and mine is by no means the end-all be-all. I primarily want to share my tool with you to provide an example of how we can consider planning for the different abilities of our students from the beginning. At the top of the planning tool I have the class as well as the overall class goal. Sometimes how we are thinking of "success" might be a barrier to our own teaching, and this is where going back to the basics of what our goals are comes in. The goal reminds me of what success would actually look like. If the goal is to participate then it is okay for participation to look different, all participation is valid, and all participation would mean students are being successful in class. In this example, the goal of my musical theatre class for grades 3-4 is for students to engage in the process of learning a song, choreography, and putting it together as an ensemble. This means I need to stay focused on the engagement and participation, not on them mastering lyrics or choreography. Below that, there is a section for me to keep track of notes about a specific student or group of students. Here I have retracted the student's name, and replaced their name with the word "Student." I simplify my notes into two categories: what is challenging for Student, and what has worked well for Student. First, under "challenges Student has

during class.” I list: Focus for long periods of time particularly when being stationary, or not actively being spoken to by the lead teacher, keeping a safe and quiet body when watching peers, and fatigue. Next, under “things that work well” I wrote: Core board with reminders, Particularly useful: “Quiet feet” “Nice hands” “Sit” “Stand” , Visual schedule, Poly spot. I like to have this section at the top, so as I plan specific lessons I can easily reference back to it. So below this section I begin to plan for a lesson. I write the name or descriptor of the lesson, and the date it is being delivered. Then, I write out three ways to convey this lesson, with a reminder to refer to the Universal Design for Learning principles of Engagement, Representation, and Action and Expression. At its core, this breaks down to multimodal teaching. So here I write that to begin teaching students the choreography for “One Short Day” from *Wicked*, I am going to verbally explain choreography and the steps, demonstrate, and then have them try it. Right below this section, I write “Add ways to scaffold the above activities.” So, my bullet points in blue are just that. This is where I go back and add ways to make adjustments within those activities with the notes about the student being referenced. When I am verbally explaining choreography, I am going to say Student’s name often and always show what I am saying by doing it or printing out vocab words to help keep focus. I will also let all students sit down during this part to give them a break and prevent fatigue. And I do this for each of the activities of class. I find it very helpful to think through these things ahead of time. And I am a visual learner myself so having the notes about my student and the goal right there in front of me help me both remember those things but also incorporate them in my plans. This is not a perfect tool and might not work for you. But I encourage you to think about how you can build in a similar process for yourself to make incorporating strategies and accommodations feel manageable.

3. I want to alleviate any need to know a child’s diagnosis or be an expert on, say, autism spectrum disorders or any other disability. While a diagnosis can certainly open doors for supports and services, it is not essential to provide accessible arts lessons. We do not need to find “lessons for students with [insert disability here],” we just need lessons for students, and ways of scaffolding. We do not need to take a cue from a label, that label being their diagnosis, we should instead take cues from each student’s exhibited interest.
4. Behavior can tell us so much by giving us clues to what our students need, but sometimes it can also take a long time to figure out what they need. Ultimately,

we know behavior is communication and a student's behavior is giving us clues about something. This is the reminder I want to provide to all of you. Do not discount behavior, listen to it. Ideally, a student's behavior shows us what motivates them to be in class, and we can use that to help motivate them when they are having a hard time participating. Oftentimes when we see behavior that is disruptive to their class experience that behavior is telling us they need something. Do they need a break, either sitting or going for a walk? Is it too loud and do they need headphones? Do they have a lot of pent-up energy, could heavy work be helpful? Trying to figure this out can take a lot of time, and it is a process. It is easy to get frustrated when strategies aren't working. This is where it is helpful to have a record of strategies you have heard about and liked, but maybe just haven't had a moment to implement yet.

5. This is an example of a template that I use at conferences to keep track of my favorite takeaways so I can refer to them later. It is really simple, but gets the job done, for me anyways. My focus here is keeping track of the concepts I really liked and want to remember, who presented about in case I want to get in touch with them later, some key points or notes that I find most helpful or important, and finally space for me to think of a way I could actually use this in practice. This helps me convert something from an idea to an action quickly when I still am feeling inspired and creative from whatever presentation or discussion I just engaged in. Similarly to the planning tool I shared, this may not work for you or you may need something different, but if you do not currently have a way of keeping track of all the awesome information you are hearing at the ABLE Assembly, I encourage you to give this a try to keep track of the things you want to put into practice.
6. Basic props and tools I love include poly spots as a visual floor marker that eliminates the abstract concept of standing "there." Scarves can be used in so many ways, but my go-to's are a visual for how music sounds such as fast or slow, and an access point for movement. A visual schedule is something I have in every class. There are many students who really need to know what is coming next and where we are in the lesson, and crossing off items as the class goes on can be a great reward. These three things can aid specific students with disabilities, but I use them in all classes regardless finding they elevate everyone's experience. A PT Balance disc is great for students that can't sit still, because when they sit on the disc that have to engage their core to remain balanced so it contains their body a bit. Noise canceling headphones are great for a student with sound sensitivity, and Augmentative and alternative communication tools such as a core board with pictures and/or words are really

great for students who need the visual to digest information or who communicate through visuals. I am sure at least a few of these are familiar to you, but I always think it is a good reminder that we don't always need the most expensive or complex props or strategies, often the basic solutions such as these go a long way.

7. Find your supports: When spending so much time working on supporting your students, it is easy to forget to find support for yourself. As we talked about, you can't be everything for everyone so seek out in-class support as you can and need, get information from parents about strategies that work for their kids, and find your peers, colleagues, and mentors that you can turn to.