Enhancing Accessibility and Disability Inclusion
in McMaster's School of Social Work
Fall 2015

Table of Contents

Executive Summary

While social work students with disabilities share many commonalities in our experiences of access and inclusion, we also have individual experiences and ideas. This report has been compiled to address various concerns related to the School of Social Work raised by individual students and groups of students with disabilities. We are very passionate about disability/accessibility and want to collaborate with Faculty in order to nourish a more disability positive and supportive learning environment for ourselves, our fellow students, students who enter the program after we leave, and for service users who will be recipients of service from social work students.

This report draws on feedback from students who felt comfortable disclosing our experiences and suggestions to each other. We recommend that an anonymous option for submitting concerns and ideas related to accessibility be offered in the near future.[1]

Consultation Process

This document has been compiled by Alise de Bie in collaboration with other social work students with disabilities:

- A group of social work students with disabilities (membership: 18) met on three occasions between March-May 2015 to discuss our experiences in the School of Social Work. We have also shared our experiences with each other through various informal conversations over the 2014-2015 school year.
- In the spring of 2015, two social work students offered feedback on inaccessible course design/processes for a Universal Design project being conducted through the President's Advisory Committee for Building an Inclusive Community. Some of the social work-specific ideas gathered for that project have been included here.
- Students in 3DD6 in the spring of 2015 discussed disability inclusion in the School of Social Work during class and a couple shared thoughts via an impromptu survey.
- A draft of this document was circulated at the McMaster University School of Social Work Students Association (MUSSWSA) meeting on September 21st and in the meeting minutes (membership: 32). Some of those members offered written feedback.
- Members of the Disability Action Group offered feedback at a meeting on October 1st (attendance: 6) that was incorporated into this document.
- Students in SW 3S03 (Social Work and Disability) audited the School of Social Work website and offered various suggestions for improvement (enrollment: 75).
- A draft of this report was also sent to the Disability Action Group and Social Work Students with Disabilities listservs for additional feedback and students offered feedback via conversations and written ideas.
- A draft of this report was made available to SW 3S03 students and some offered written feedback.
- 3 TAs offered feedback.

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[1] The Disability Action Group has been working on an anonymous survey for some time that is almost ready for submission to the Research Ethics Board/to launch. This survey will collect anonymous feedback from students with disabilities about accommodations and accessibility in the School of Social Work.

- Suggestions were also drawn from this MSW report: Ditkofsky, H.J. (2011). *A Question of Rights, Safety, and Full Participation: A Critical Disability Analysis of the Experiences of Students with Disabilities in the McMaster University School of Social Work*. Unpublished MSW thesis, McMaster University. Retrieved from https://macsphere.mcmaster.ca/handle/11375/9006.

Organization of the Report

This document has been divided into the following sections related to accessibility and disability inclusion in McMaster's School of Social Work:

1. Admission and navigation
2. Placements and "professional suitability"
3. Accommodations
4. Universal Design in assignments (with an Appendix that includes further details about a few particular assessment processes)
5. Feeling welcome as a student with a disability

Each section includes a description of difficulties students with disabilities are experiencing and then a list of suggestions.

Priorities

Overall, suggestions could be grouped into three priority areas: (1) policy enhancements; (2) essential requirements and Universal Design in the classroom, and (3) increasing attention to disability in the School.

Policy Enhancements

A number of access/inclusion concerns could be partly addressed by creating transparent policies/commitments within the School of Social Work related to:

- Equity Admissions;
- Accessibility and Accommodations;
- Confidentiality;
- Internal Grade Appeals; and
- Adding protections for students with disabilities to our Professional Suitability Policy.

Essential Requirements and Universal Design in the Classroom

Identification of the Essential Requirements for each social work course and the incorporation of Universal Design principles into course design and evaluation processes would have a significant impact on access and inclusion.

Increasing Attention to Disability in the School

Students offered many practical, concrete suggestions that would help the School of Social Work feel more welcoming to students with disabilities. For example, we could increase the amount of disability-related event information shared on social work listservs, remove some furniture from the Social Work lounge to make it more accessible, rephrase the School of Social Work philosophy statement to include options other than "health" and "ability" that recognize various

experiences and politics related to disability/madness/service use, and add further disability content to the School of Social Work website, student handbooks, and course curriculum.

Findings

Admission and Navigation

Due to inaccessible assessment processes (e.g. a focus on written assignments or exams), poorly implemented academic accommodations, and different life situations (e.g. needing to spend time attending medical appointments), our grades are often negatively impacted. As a result, an application process into the School of Social Work that focuses heavily on grades disadvantages us. The Social Work Admission Test can also be difficult for students with disabilities, even with accommodations. It privileges written communication and is completed in an exam context (time limited, exam room) that can be very stressful. Many other Schools of Social Work across Canada offer equity-based admissions processes that allow for supplemental documentation such as a personal statement (that is not written during an exam), references, an interview, and/or examples of community involvement.[2]

Many students who enter the School of Social Work are isolated and do not know how the School operates or who to turn to with questions. This is especially an issue for students with disabilities experiencing access issues in the School who often worry about discrimination should we try to ask for things we might need.

It is not always clear to students how accessibility/disability concerns are being addressed in the School or what the channels are for having needs met. Students worry that our confidential information (re: accommodations, grades, classroom needs) will be/has been/can be disclosed by Instructors to the Undergrad or Grad Chair, Director, Field Placement Coordinator, other faculty, and/or department admin staff without our knowledge or permission. We worry that we are being discussed at faculty/committee meetings – by name or with details that could make our identities known. Concerns about confidentiality lead to general uneasiness/decrease our sense of trust in members of the School community.

   a) Drawing on the strength of our Social Work admission process for Indigenous students, we would like to see an equity-based admission process for students who are often

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[2] For example, see:

Dalhousie's Affirmative Action Policy as it pertains to admissions:
http://www.dal.ca/faculty/healthprofessions/socialwork/programs/affirmative-action-policy.html
Windsor's Equity Admissions Policy: http://www1.uwindsor.ca/socialwork/BSW-Application#Equity
Manitoba's Educational Equity Initiative: http://umanitoba.ca/student/admissions/media/sw_bulletin.pdf
UNBC's consideration of equity-seeking groups during the application process:
http://www.unbc.ca/sites/default/files/sections/apply/undergraduate/applforadmissionbsw2015_0.pdf.
Thompson Rivers University and Algoma reserve 25% of their seats for equity admissions:
http://www.tru.ca/hse/social-work/bsw/admits.html
http://www.algomau.ca/future_students/programs/community_development_and_social_work/bsw/application_procedures/application_form/
McGill applicants can write a letter to explain the circumstances that led to low grades:
http://www.mcgill.ca/socialwork/prospective/bsw#APPLICATION
UBC boosts equity-seeking applicant submissions by 5%: http://socialwork.ubc.ca/prospective-students-2/undergraduate-2/bsw-application-evaluation-process/

disadvantaged by our current admissions procedures and are underrepresented in our School (e.g. students with disabilities, working class students, racialized students).

b) Greater awareness of and use of Faculty Advisors could be helpful. Faculty Advisors could email and meet with students regularly (at least once per term?) so that students know who our Faculty Advisor is and what their role is/when to approach them with questions. If a student does not connect well with our Faculty Advisor, there should be a process for requesting a different Advisor (especially when our Faculty Advisors are on sabbatical). A number of students told us they did not know they had a Faculty Advisor or who their Advisor was/their role.

c) Develop a School of Social Work policy for internal grade appeals.[3] Students occasionally experience difficulty with a TA or professor and need to know the School's process for navigating these relationships. Social Work 1A06 has employed a grade appeal process internal to that course that could be reworked to apply to all Social Work courses.[4] A separate process should exist for students with disabilities who want to appeal a grade or request a re-write/re-completion of an assignment based on receiving inadequate accommodations. Right now, the only students who benefit from these options are those who have the resources to advocate directly with Faculty. These options should be made more widely/transparently/accessibly available.

d) Students need to know who the Undergrad Chair and Director are and appropriate reasons for approaching them with concerns as well as alternative options for raising concerns when we do not feel comfortable speaking individually with the Chair/Director. A description of these roles and examples of issues students may discuss with the Chair/Director could be made available in student handbooks.

e) Students with disabilities need options for identifying and addressing access/inclusion concerns in the School. Ideally, a Faculty member/staff person other than the Undergrad Chair/Director (who are very busy and primarily responsible for the School as a whole vs. advocating for particular students) who is knowledgeable about accessibility/disability could be designated and promoted as a contact person.[5] This person could support and advocate for students experiencing accessibility/disability-related difficulty in the program. The Dalhousie School of Social Work, for instance, has appointed one of their Faculty as an Accommodation Officer and offers this person workload credit for assuming these responsibilities.[6] There should also be a way for students to give regular, anonymous feedback about accessibility/inclusion and seek consultation without having to identify themselves.

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[3] See the University of Victoria School of Social Work policy on reviewing grades here: www.uvic.ca/hsd/socialwork/home/home/policies/grades/index.php

[4] To our knowledge this policy existed in the 2013-2015 course iteration and may have existed before/after.

[5] This already happens informally but only for students already connected to particular contact people.

[6] For further info, see http://www.dal.ca/content/dam/dalhousie/pdf/healthprofessions/School%20of%20Social%20Work/Accessibility_and_Accommodation_Policy.pdf.

f) Update the Undergrad, MSW, and PhD Handbooks to include information about accommodations, multiple trajectories through the program,[7] the School's commitment to accessibility, student groups, and other relevant resources for students with disabilities (beyond just listing Student Accessibility Services).

g) It would help to have periodic (once per term?) updates about how and where disability/accessibility issues are being discussed within School of Social Work administration (e.g. at which committee meetings, and who the contacts are for those committees) and the work being done to address these issues. This would help us know that our concerns are being taken seriously and would alleviate some of our worries over how we're being discussed. If we knew where/when/how conversations were happening that pertained to us, we could also connect directly with the people involved to hear further updates or share our perspectives. It may help to form a Faculty Working Group to address accessibility issues that could keep note of and translate activities/progress to the School body.

h) Develop a School of Social Work confidentiality and privacy policy so that we know how our information (assignments, email communication, accommodations, self-disclosure to individual people, Faculty observation/perception of us) is being protected and how it might be shared.[8] If our information is to be passed on from one person to another for relevant and appropriate reasons, then we should be informed about this before it happens.

i) Suggestions for updating the School of Social Work website:

    a. Create a separate main link for Social Work student groups. Right now, these are hidden under the tab "About Us" and then "School Organization".

    b. Add diverse equity-seeking groups to the list of Agencies Connected to the School's Goals.

    c. Continue to update and include disability-related news and events to the School's News/Events page.

    d. Faculty research interest in disability is currently being categorized on the website under "Health". There should be a new category made for disability.

    e. Link to McMaster's Accessibility website and other disability/accessibility resources on campus and not just Student Accessibility Services.

    f. Advertise SWAT accommodations/accessibility options for students with disabilities.

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[7] See suggestion 2(h) for further context/discussion of this point.
[8] See the University of Victoria School of Social Work confidentiality policy here: www.uvic.ca/hsd/socialwork/home/home/policies/confid/index.php.

Placements and "Professional Suitability"

Some students with disabilities who already have social service worker diplomas feel they are discouraged from desiring a 3rd year field placement. Some students with disabilities are being encouraged to delay placement/are being told we aren't "ready". (We worry this is disability-related and that there are assumptions we will never be ready because we will never be able-bodied.) There are few placement options related to critical disability or consumer/survivor movements. We imagine that many placements are not particularly welcoming/accessible even though most of them say they are on Community Connections. We worry about being deemed "unsuitable" for social work due to our disability when we feel we have not been given the support we deserve to demonstrate our abilities/suitability.

a) The School needs to continue their active work with Field Instructors and agencies to ensure that students with disabilities have access to welcoming and accessible placement options. We hope productive conversations on accessibility/accommodation/supporting students with disabilities take place at the Fall 2015 Gathering for Field Instructors.

b) Disability/accommodation/accessibility should be included in Field Instructor training in a meaningful way. All Field Instructors should be completing Level 1 training prior to taking on a student. Field Instructors should be encouraged to take refresher courses as the Field Instructor training gets revised (e.g. as the School of Social Work develops policies around accessibility).

c) Community Connections could be updated with more useful and honest descriptions of the placement environment related to access/accommodation and placement availability.

d) Members of the Disability Action Group could be given a seat on the Field Instruction Committee, the Undergraduate Studies Committee, the Graduate Studies Committee, the Community Professional Advisory Group, and any other committees internal to the School of Social Work – similar to how we are given a seat on the Anti-Oppressive Education Committee.

e) The School of Social Work should amend our Professional Suitability policy to include protections for students with disabilities.[9]

f) It would help students with disabilities to plan our placements months in advance rather than just before school starting. Opportunities to shadow potential Field

[9] In the University of Windsor School of Social Work accommodation policy, for instance, this provision is made:
No student with a disability, once admitted, will be required to withdraw from his or her educational program for reasons of professional unsuitability related to any medical, physiological, psychological, or psycho-social condition which is proven to affect an individual's ability to perform as a social worker until and unless appropriate accommodation has been in place for a sufficient time to allow for thorough assessment.
See p. 4 here:
www1.uwindsor.ca/socialwork/sites/uwindsor.ca.socialwork/files/Social%20Work%20Equity%20Policy%202009.pdf

Instructors/placements prior to submitting our rankings/preferences could also be beneficial.

g) During the Info sessions about placements, it may help to have students present about our experiences delaying placement. Delaying a placement can be a good decision for some students but it can feel better when we decide this for ourselves rather than have it feel forced on us/suggested to us by Faculty. It may help to know that this is a legitimate option (a determined and self-aware choice vs. others thinking we're "not ready" or shame over feeling not ready) and to know of other students who have done this. Connecting students who may be considering delaying placement with other students who have done so could be beneficial (in a group, or one-on-one). A number of students involved in giving suggestions for this report have offered to speak to students about our experiences delaying placement and having personal life situations/distress arise for us while in placement and how we have dealt with this.

h) Possible routes through the BSW/MSW/PhD program could be articulated at orientation and in BSW/MSW/PhD handbooks. The "standard" route could be more nuanced to normalize the various ways and timeframes students (especially students with disabilities) follow so that we don't feel like we're not progressing "normally" or are "falling behind".

i) A list of agencies where students are in placement should be made available to the School community each fall and spring so that social work students accessing services know where they may run into a fellow student. Developing a School confidentiality policy that includes how placement students will protect the confidentiality of fellow social work students using services would be beneficial. For instance, in most cases, social work students should not be reading client files or participating in team discussions about service users they know from School and they should not be bringing up these experiences in their Seminar class. Running into service users they know could be discussed in Seminar class as a potentiality and strategies could be put in place around this to attend to the needs of service users.

Accommodations

It is difficult navigating the School to access accommodations. The accommodation process feels inconsistent/different depending on what class we are taking, who the Instructor is (especially if they are tenured or sessional), who the student is, and what accommodations are offered/available. Sometimes it feels as if the accommodations we can access depend on our willingness to disclose personal information/tell a desperate story. Part of the inconsistency is related to our different access to documentation (different access to healthcare providers and what they will write down) and our different workers at Student Accessibility Services (SAS) and what they will write in an SAS accommodation letter. Things also feel inconsistent depending on how respected we feel by different Instructors and thus how comfortable we feel asking for support with our learning.

Some students have good experiences with SAS. Others do not. Some students are not able to register with SAS for various reasons. SAS is not always an option or a good option for students and Faculty cannot simply send us there for any accessibility-related concern. It is unhelpful to refer students to SAS without providing alternatives for those who cannot pursue this option. Many students who may be deemed "students with disabilities" do not necessarily take this on as an identity and may not disclose our experiences. We need to feel supported in our learning in ways that don't require categorizing us as students with disabilities.

Difficulty accessing accommodations puts a lot of additional stress on our relationships with other social work students, especially other students with disabilities. Sometimes we work to have our access needs met by fellow students or we learn about possible accommodations that may assist us through other students. It would help us develop community in the School if our needs were better met institutionally (e.g. through accessible course design, with accommodations), requiring less reliance on our individual relationships with each other and fellow classmates.

   a) Develop an internal School of Social Work policy on accessibility/accommodation. This could help make clear various processes for arranging accommodations and the responsibilities of faculty, staff, and students in ensuring an accessible and welcoming school environment. A policy would also articulate the role the School designates for Student Accessibility Services in these arrangements.[10][11][12]

   b) Each course should integrate Universal Design principles – especially as they pertain to learning activities, course material, instructional style, and assessment of knowledge.

   c) Accommodations/a more accessible learning environment should be offered to students based on what we need and could benefit from and not based on registration with Student Accessibility Services or what is written in accommodation letters from SAS.[13] Students should be able to access accommodations without feeling pressure to disclose details of our situation/disability/tell a convincing story.

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[10] See the Dalhousie School of Social Work accommodation policy: www.dal.ca/content/dam/dalhousie/pdf/healthprofessions/School%20of%20Social%20Work/Accessibility_and_Accommodation_Policy.pdf.

[11] See the University of Windsor School of Social Work policies on accessibility/accommodation: www1.uwindsor.ca/socialwork/sites/uwindsor.ca.socialwork/files/Social%20Work%20Equity%20Policy%202009.pdf.

[12] See the University of Victoria School of Social Work policy on students with disabilities: www.uvic.ca/hsd/socialwork/home/home/policies/pwdis/index.php.

[13] SAS lags behind accommodation offices at other schools. For instance, York University will regularly add "alternative evaluation for multiple choice tests" to accommodation letters while McMaster will not. For social work students transferring between schools (especially those coming from college), it is very disruptive to be granted particular accommodations at one school and not another. When classes are not fully accessible/not invested in Universal Design, social work students may need access to accommodations not written in their SAS letter. These should be explored/granted by the School of Social Work.

d) On each Social Work course outline, students should be made aware of options for accommodations and support including SAS and alternatives to SAS.[14]

e) Student access to accommodations should not depend on whether we are taking a course with a Faculty member or Sessional Instructor. If providing accommodations goes beyond a Sessional Instructor's (or a TA's) hours of work, then the School is responsible for making arrangements.

f) Students should decide the length of an extension based on our situation. Extensions shouldn't be based on someone else's assumption of how long something should take. Some students have been denied extensions beyond two weeks for "Academic Integrity" reasons. Instructors have suggested that disabled students could cheat/copy the papers from fellow students who have handed in their assignments "on time" and received feedback on their submitted work two weeks later. Assumptions that disabled students are cheaters are hurtful. Limiting extensions for this reason is unfair. There are many other ways to screen for Academic Integrity issues.

g) There should be a provision for students with disabilities who do poorly on an assignment to request a re-write/re-grade. As particular social work assessment processes (process recordings, self-reflection) are often new to students, social work students with disabilities have frequently had limited prior experience figuring out how our disability may impact our ability to complete an assignment and what accommodations we may require. Sometimes we don't learn what accommodations we may require (or what may be available) until after an assignment has been completed and graded. When low marks occur due to inadequate planning related to accommodation, there should be a process in place to help us re-complete the assignment. This should apply to low marks as determined by the student and not as determined by the Faculty member. Sometimes students have negotiated re-writes if we fail only and not if we pass with a low mark. If accommodation issues are the reason why a student with a disability receives a low mark, this should be

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[14] For example, Jennifer Poole, Faculty member in Ryerson's School of Social Work includes this statement on her syllabus:

> With respect to disability, I take a critical approach in this course. This means that, if for reasons of self-identified health/mental health/madness/disability or other circumstance, students are not able to complete an assignment by the due date, be present physically or engaged intellectually in class, they are encouraged to contact me to discuss alternatives as soon as possible prior to any deadlines. It also means that all students recognize such challenges in the classroom and in work with peers. Of course, students with disabilities or health concerns can register with the Access Centre at Ryerson, POD 61. Phone: 416-979-5094, TTY: 416-979-5274; accessfrontdesk@ryerson.ca. Please note that we always welcome your feedback on accessibility issues related to this course. Please provide your feedback to your instructor or to the Associate Director, Undergraduate Program.

McMaster's Social Work 1A06 course outline includes this statement:

> I want everyone to be able to learn in the way that is best possible for them. If you have any particular learning needs due to health (physical, emotional or mental) or due to disability issues, please speak to me and your TA so we can work out the best accommodations.

More options for syllabi accessibility statements are available here: http://kairos.technorhetoric.net/praxis/tiki-index.php?page=Suggested_Practices_for_Syllabus_Accessibility_Statements.

investigated so accommodations can be altered. Receiving low marks that do not accurately reflect our abilities due to inadequate/improper accommodations can be very damaging to our self-confidence and relationships in the program.

Universal Design in Assignments

A couple of us are working on a detailed Universal Design document with feedback from students across campus and would happily offer further suggestions regarding social work assignments (demonstration of knowledge) as well as the areas of course inclusiveness, physical access, delivery methods, information access, interaction, and feedback. The points below are considered especially relevant/important to Social Work:

General Feedback

a) Instructors should identify and make available the Essential Requirements of each class so that we can figure out the many possible ways of meeting those Essential Requirements.

b) It would be great to have more options for assignments beyond traditional academic essays (group projects, photo essays, interviews, stories, etc.). We have really appreciated when classes allow for this and offer choice and flexibility (e.g. SW 3S03, self-directed learning in SW 1A06).

c) For times when it is an essential requirement to be able to write in essay format, we appreciate when there are multiple options offered for how this could happen such as writing as a case study, a discussion of main themes from the class, a topic of our choosing (e.g. options available for the final assignment in SW 2BB3).

d) We are often given very specific page limits. This disadvantages those of us who cannot write as concisely as others and so need more pages to cover the amount of content/analysis that another student could cover with fewer pages. There should be flexibility in the length of assignments (e.g. a range from 10-13 pages instead of just 10 pages and marks taken off for going over 10 pages).[15] If concise writing is an essential requirement for a particular course, this should be made explicit.

e) Single assignments should not be worth over 40% unless this is an option a student chooses. Assignments worth a significant portion of our final mark cause many students unnecessary stress.

f) Instructors need to discuss and consider alternatives/modifications to process recordings, video interviews, in-class interviewing of a standardized client,[16]

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[15] See suggestion 4(n) for further discussion re: the need for social work specific writing tutors to help students learn skills such as concise writing.
[16] See Appendix A for further details.

attendance, and multiple choice tests for students with disabilities. These assignments in particular have been noted as difficult by social work students with disabilities.

g) Social work classes often include group work – even when group work does not appear to be an "essential requirement" of the course. There need to be alternatives to group work. There need to be ways to meet an essential requirement of group work in a group environment that does not include other social work students. We often assume that social work students are peers to each other and this is not always how these relationships feel to marginalized students.[17]

h) The School of Social Work should advocate so that our classes/tutorials do not take place in inaccessible classrooms (e.g. classrooms with stairs, classrooms too small for the number of students, classrooms far away from accessible washrooms).

i) Students have repeatedly commented on feeling overwhelmed as a result of the amount of reading per course and life situations that prevent us from reading all of the required material. This may especially impact students with disabilities who do not process information well through reading and who take longer to read/comprehend/retain written information. Instructors could note on a course syllabus which readings/information is "essential"/priority and which readings are "nice to know". Students can then prioritize our study time. It could help to have access to electronic copies of written material so that students can use software programs that read aloud. Instructors could also offer alternative forms of material such as audio interviews, videos, blogs, poetry, stories, etc. rather than such a heavy emphasis on reading academic articles.

j) Undergrad courses are frequently offered from 7-10pm. Some of us find it difficult to attend class this late (and for this long). We need more variety in course offerings – or at least in tutorial times.

k) 80% mandatory attendance policies are really hard on students with and without disabilities and don't necessarily benefit our learning.[18] We need to advocate for the incorporation of Universal Design into the regulation of social work education that mandates 80% attendance. Instructors could develop additional learning activities for students to engage in and complete outside of class when class attendance is not possible or beneficial for a student. This may involve links to interactive/online materials posted on Avenue to Learn. Class lectures could also be podcast so students can listen to them at a later time/space. Some Schools of Social Work across Canada offer online social work classes/programs where in-person attendance is not mandatory/doesn't even exist as an option. To what extent is 80% attendance actually

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[17] See Appendix A for further details.

[18] For example, we may not learn well in social environments and may learn better on our own. If we are stressed/triggered/marginalized in the classroom, we may not be able to actually engage in learning and may spend most of the class time protecting ourselves. In a more supportive environment of our choosing, we could have the emotional/physical space to learn better.

mandated by social work education regulatory bodies and what are possible ways around this?

l)   Case studies are frequently used in our classes. Many social work students from marginalized groups who are or have been service recipients find these upsetting/uncomfortable. They can be problematic when used without the consent of the service user they are about (or without explaining to the class where the case study came from), when there is pathologizing language used in class about the service user, and when students in class relate to the service user in ways not anticipated/allowed for and are forced into a "social work" role that feels inauthentic to us in relation to the situation. Further reflection on respectful/consensual/inclusive ways to use case studies in social work classrooms is needed. Instructors and TAs need to challenge pathologizing characterizations of service users, tie these incidents back to AOP perspectives, and offer good examples of how to think about and engage with case studies/imagined service users.

m)   We have really appreciated the Social Work classes that include rubrics for all assignments (such as those used in 1A06 and 2BB3) and would like to see rubrics used for all Social Work assignments. We also appreciate when Instructors give substantial information about how to complete an assignment – the particular pieces that are desired, how many sources should be use, multiple written descriptions explaining the assignment so that we can understand it more fully. This should happen for all assignments. Assuming that a description is "clear" or "straightforward" doesn't make it clear and straightforward to students. Sharing further information about what is expected and how assignments will be evaluated will benefit all students.

n)   The feedback we receive on our graded assignments is sometimes not clear/doesn't help us in understanding where we went wrong or how to improve. Students are not finding phrases such as "go deeper" or "more analysis needed" particularly helpful. TAs/Instructors may need support in learning how to give more comprehensive/productive feedback.[19] We need support understanding the feedback that is being given. It could be helpful to offer Social Work essay writing workshops where someone could spend time explaining to us what these phrases mean and how social work assignments are being graded. Some students would also appreciate individual tutoring organized by the Social Work department (rather than students having to find these relationships for ourselves – which many are doing or trying to do).[20] There are many particularities about Social Work assignments that the writing

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[19] In the Cultural Studies department at McMaster, new TAs receive 3 days of training. In Social Work, TAs receive no training.
[20] There was a pilot writing skills tutoring program organized through Social Sciences by David Young and offered in Social Work during the winter of 2013 (with two grad social work students as volunteer tutors). No students ever attended this program as it was conceived – poorly advertised, limited scope, infrequent – but perhaps this is an idea worth exploring again… MUSSWSA is currently devising a mentorship program and has offered to help with mentorship as it relates to writing skills/assignments.

support staff at Student Accessibility Services or the Student Success Centre may not be very helpful with (e.g. social justice perspectives, self-reflection).

o) For some students, it may feel more accessible/welcoming to take a social work class through another school on a Letter of Permission (LOP) and have this count for credit at McMaster. For instance, Dalhousie offers many online courses and Ryerson University offers a course that includes a lot of Mad Studies content. It would be helpful if the School compiled a list of course offerings available locally and online that students could take (and how to do so) and smoothed the process of the LOP. Students with disabilities may also need School support in having SAS accommodation letters recognized by other Schools of Social Work.

Feedback Related to Lived Experience

a) It would help to know who our assignments will be graded by and how they will be kept confidential as this may impact what we choose to disclose. In classes that have multiple people marking assignments, it would be beneficial if we could designate someone to mark our assignments (someone we feel more comfortable with) or to know our assignments are marked by 1 consistent person whose name we know before we submit our assignments.

b) Sometimes we may not feel comfortable sharing certain aspects of our lived experience but may feel pressure to disclose in order to succeed academically. What are we supposed to do when we are asked to be self-reflective, but we have nothing or very little we feel comfortable sharing in a self-reflective assignment? We need Universal Design alternatives to traditionally constructive self-reflective assignments. Faculty may want to consider how students can meet essential requirements of social work that include some level of reflection/awareness – without feeling pressure to disclose personal information we don't feel comfortable sharing. What are other options – other than assignments – where students can engage in safer/more supported self-reflection not associated with a grade?

c) Sometimes we draw on our lived experience and then feel that this is discredited in the grading of our assignments (e.g. we use our lived experience as a service user of a particular therapy technique and then do poorly on this assignment – which makes us feel really awful). It would be helpful to have a workshop/discussion about how to integrate lived experience into our social work assignments in ways that feel ok to us (protect our experience) and fit assignment descriptions and course objectives.

d) Lived experience is not consistently valued/respected across TAs/Instructors. We worry that disability/mental health/trauma/service use are not respected lived experiences in social work. There needs to be further integration of critical disability studies and service user ideas into social work curriculum and philosophy so that we can demonstrate our respect of service user/disabled lived experiences.

e) We need private places for social work students with disabilities/marginalized social work students to share our lived experiences in a safer way so that we can learn from

them and how to integrate them into our social work practice. These sorts of learning opportunities are generally not available within the School curriculum. The School could find ways of better recognizing and valuing the learning we need to do on our own/in marginalized groups (e.g. Social Work Students with Disabilities, United in Colour, Hamilton Mad Students Collective) because it is not available to us through the School. These student-run groups are fairly precarious – depending on individual students to put in extensive work/time/personal resources to maintain them. Further institutional support/resources could be allocated to these groups. Students could be given course credit for participating.

f) Opportunities to connect with Faculty/Instructors/TAs in human ways outside of the classroom (as well as increasing Faculty/TA vulnerability and sharing in the classroom) could help increase comfort and understanding of each other and support student learning generally as well as safer vulnerability in assignments (e.g. Faculty attendance at the United in Colour coffee house).

Feeling Welcome as a Student with a Disability

Many students with disabilities have felt oppressed in the School of Social Work and use this language of oppression to name our experiences (such as experiences of accessing accommodations, or feeling like our lives are not well-represented in course curriculum). When we feel like the School is oppressive, it makes it very difficult to take seriously anything we are supposed to learn about AOP. We imagine that other students feel this way about AOP curriculum too when we start noticing how oppression operates in a School that claims to promote anti-oppressive perspectives.

When we are not well supported by the School/Instructors, this puts a lot of pressure on our relationships with our peers/classmates who we rely on to help us with access issues. Sometimes our peers get "burdened" by this which then impacts how they feel towards us as fellow classmates.

When it feels like the School does not take accessibility/disability seriously, we feel ashamed. We feel like we shouldn't ask for what we need and that we are seen as a problem and "too demanding". We debate whether we should lay low and not say anything or whether we should speak up and say what's wrong or what we need. We take on extensive additional emotional and physical work to get our needs met when this shouldn't be our job.

Students have talked about how our mental health has decreased since becoming a student in the School of Social Work. Some of this is related to attending school in general and some of it is specific to Social Work. Students are finding it very unsettling to be a service user in a social work space – the treatment of service users in the classroom can be triggering/distressing. Difficulty accessing accommodations or having our learning needs met is distressing. It is especially distressing when we have been led to believe that Social Work is more progressive/invested in social justice. As a result, many of us have to increase our medications, talk to counsellors, etc. to help us manage. We don't always have good access to these resources. We sometimes need to become clients at Student Wellness or other mental health services where

our fellow social work classmates may be spending time as placement students and have access to our health records. We worry about our privacy.

a) We need further discussion in the classroom of the wellness/mental health/self-care of social work students. We need to feel less isolated in our distress and have distress brought up in the School in a way that does not make us feel like we're "unsuitable" for social work. At the beginning of each course, it would be helpful if all professors went over access/accommodations in the course and sought feedback from students on how to make their course more accessible. Instructors could say how some of the material may be upsetting/triggering for students and that students are encouraged to take care of ourselves during class (e.g. leaving when needed). Setting up class norms that encourage self-care strategies (an expansive list vs. seeing only some self-care strategies as appropriate) while in class would be helpful. We appreciate that some social work Instructors have done this in our classes and want this to continue and expand to all classes.

b) Sometimes we are seen as being in distress or not behaving "appropriately" based on racist/sexist/heterosexist/ableist stereotypes (e.g. we are seen as overreacting to racist/sexist/homophobic/ableist comments in class, are seen as too emotional/passionate/vocal/sensitive/angry). Instead of narrowly identifying distress in individuals, we need to see how course content/structures are distressing and position marginalized students in ways where our affect/emotions are dismissed as irrational. Instructors need to continue paying attention to racism, sexism, heterosexism, ableism, and sanism playing out in classroom environments/curriculum and respond to this to create a more supportive learning environment for marginalized students.

c) Course material is often geared towards students who are not aware of a particular issue/concern/experience rather than students who have lived this reality and are very well aware of it. We need to better understand who course material is targeted at and how to support the learning needs of students who already know/have lived this material. It can be distressing to participate in the education of other students when one has extensive personal/community knowledge of something and has to "wait" for classmates to catch up (where catching up is often impossible). Alternative curriculum may need to be developed for students with lived experiences in various areas.

d) It may help to talk more openly as a School (situated in a broader academy and profession) about how we are implicated in oppressive systems and play a role in perpetuating oppression. We need to find ways to take AOP seriously (if this is the goal?), without becoming cynical or apathetic when we experience oppression from a social justice-oriented department and colleagues.

e) As a result of the competitive application process to social work (and sitting in large, nervous, first year classes of 475 students), social work students feel as if we should be grateful for getting into the program since it is hard to get into. This story of gratitude/luck/I shouldn't complain is often privileged over our experiences of isolation, inaccessibility, distress, difficulty, oppression… We need some other stories that

legitimize our negative/difficult experiences in the School of Social Work and allow us to name them without feeling guilty or ashamed.

f) Add disability, madness, service use or some words other than "ability" and "health" to the McMaster School of Social Work philosophy statement. Not all disabilities are easily categorized into "ability" or "health". Mental health/madness is also less visible/accounted for by these terms.

g) Send out more disability-related news items via the School of Social Work student listservs.

h) Remove some of the furniture from the Social Work Lounge so that it is more accessible.

i) Audit social work course outlines and add readings/guest lectures/course content related to (critical) disability perspectives/Mad Studies to every social work course. We would happily help with this.

j) Students have spoken highly of the SW 3S03 disabilities class and have expressed appreciation that this class exists. It is unfortunately only offered every other year. SW 4Y03: Critical Issues in Mental Health and Addiction has not been offered since the fall of 2012 and at that time included little material written by people with lived experience of mental health concerns. Increasing the offering of SW 3S03 to every year and/or revamping and offering SW 4Y03 would add further opportunities for students to explore critical disability/Mad Studies perspectives.

Appendix A: Universal Design and Social Work Assessments

Group Work

Barriers

Group work can be extremely difficult for students with disabilities for a number of reasons:
- Difficulty in social situations.
- Difficulty with attendance (unable to leave home or participate in-person).
- Students with disabilities may not relate as a "peer" to fellow classmates (or vice versa) and feel excluded/uncomfortable/different from others in the group.
- Lots of pressure on the student with the disability to negotiate. accommodations/relationships with the group that other students don't need to do.
- In the case of groups being freely chosen by students, this may be difficult for students who do not have prior relationships/do not know others in the class.
- Groups get decided in various ways (prof assigns groups, students select a topic they are interested in and get assigned to a group that way, students choose their group partners, numbering off/other random sorting). These have different pros/cons. For isolated students, it can be hard to form a group and students may get or feel left out.
- Timing/location of group work:
  - Students with disabilities often have different sleep needs, schedules, ability to work in long stretches.
  - Inaccessible group meeting locations/travel barriers.
- Students with disabilities may need longer to prepare/may take longer to complete projects/may need extensions leading to a mismatch between the way a student with a disability needs to work vs. the way the group wants to work.
- When a student with a disability gets an accommodation around group work so that we don't need to complete group work, we are often still supposed to be in class when groups are working together. This "outs" us to the class/can feel really uncomfortable.

Suggestions

- Do not assign groups on the first day of class. Give students notice of when/how this will happen and provide alternatives for folks who may want to give feedback on the process (e.g. have had a negative experience with particular students in class and cannot work with them, need to work on a particular topic… etc.).
- Offer flexible ways to do group work that modify expectations around working with others, attendance, participation, time-based deadlines.
- Offer alternatives to group work (e.g. individual assignments).
- Group work is often more successful when members get to know each other/feel more comfortable with each other. How can instructors support members in getting to know each other?
- The professor/TA could talk to the whole class about practicing accessibility in group work so maybe doing "accessible" group work becomes part of the learning/doing of group work and makes everyone's needs more explicit in the doing of group work. It is possible to work in a group where not all group members need to participate in an oral

presentation. Group members could take on different roles and some of these roles could involve more "behind the scene" aspects. The group assignment is clear about the particular components and some components could be time-delayed or completed independently without in-person attendance and these could be taken on by disabled students. Students can be encouraged to use various media to stay in contact with each other – e.g. Google docs, Facebook groups, etc.

- If a student with a disability in a group needs an extension, perhaps the whole group gets an extension.
- Some tasks are not conducive to group work – e.g. group essays. Instructors need to consider tasks that align better with a group work approach.
- If an essential requirement of the course involves group work (can't be avoided), then how might a student with a disability demonstrate this without working in a group with classmates? Some possibilities to explore:
  - Perhaps they work in a self-chosen group of their peers outside of the class/"group" is not composed of classmates but could be composed of friends or members of the Disability Action Group, for example.
  - Students with disabilities in the class are grouped together (with their consent) and given extensions/other accommodation around working as a group.

Process Recordings/Video Assignments

Barriers
- Students may not feel comfortable being recorded (photo, video, audio) – due to various life situations/disabilities/experience of medical or police surveillance.
- Students who are highly sensitive/highly-attuned to judgements of our appearance, abilities, etc. can feel particularly distressed having to watch/hear ourselves, transcribe and critique.
- Folks very detail-oriented may super-focus on the details of transcription and the minutia of such a detail-oriented assignment (slow process, aggravating).
- May provoke trauma history/past experiences as a service user – due to the repeating over and over again during transcription (listening, reading) or detailed nature of writing the report.
- Can take up to 6x longer to transcribe and complete the paper than other students (not fair, no additional learning happens during this time).
- Some students with disabilities have to pay for transcription and cannot transcribe by ourselves, which is a financial burden other students do not experience.
- Not all students in the classroom will have access to a safe/comfortable/private place in which to conduct the interview. Not all students will have a partner/peer with whom we feel comfortable conducting the interview.

Suggestions
- Student could work with a video/audio recording and transcript prepared by some other person (giving feedback on a stranger and client).

- Student could do reflection on an interview we have completed but have not recorded. (Folks with a transcript will be able to pay attention to more details and so a different marking scheme/approach needs to be used for students without access to a transcript.)
- The interview can be recorded with audio only (no video) and reflected upon with audio only (no transcript).
- Students could be encouraged to work with someone we feel comfortable with who may not be a classmate. Supportive groups on campus could be identified (e.g. peer groups for students with disabilities). Students with disabilities could be paired up.
- Students with disabilities could reflect on our experiences being on the receiving end of an interview (as service user) and what worked/didn't work about this experience for us. (This could be recorded with the permission of the service provider?)
- The purpose of using the Process Recording as a form of assessment could be identified by Faculty and other alternatives could be developed that allow students to learn the same things and be assessed for similar things in alternative/more accessible ways.

Role Plays/Mock Interviews

Barriers

These usually occur in a group format where the student has to interview a "client" in front of our peers. "Client" is sometimes a stranger or fellow classmate from another class. The student has little control over the environment in which the interview occurs or the timing/scheduling of the interview. These can be particularly stressful for social work students who have often been on the other end of the interview as the service user. The experience of interviewing someone in front of our classmates may unexpectedly bring up a host of memories/reactions that other students may not experience or be able to support well.

Suggestions

- It would be helpful if students with disabilities had more control over the scheduling of the interview (at a time of day, location that works better).
- Interviews could be conducted in a location other than the classroom (e.g. library room, other private bookable space, TA office).
- Student can interview the TA or a chosen person (friend from outside the program) in a closed setting with just the TA present and with support people present if desired. This could also be done via phone/Skype instead of in-person or the interview could be recorded and a copy given to the TA rather than being done live in front of the TA.
- The student could interview someone with a different staff person present to confirm that the interview occurred (e.g. a different TA that student feels more comfortable with, a community partner).
- Conduct an interview in private and report back on the experience rather than having the interview itself examined/public.
- The topic of the interview should be chosen by the student to ensure less triggering material, and so we can prepare ourselves in advance.
- Some students prefer to talk about what we might do in a situation instead of actually enacting the situation.