



The 2017 Accessibility Conference:  
**Becoming a Catalyst  
for Inclusion**  
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## Accessibility Outside of the Classroom - Why Bother?

### Transcript from the 2017 Accessibility Conference

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#### SPEAKER:

Hello, everyone. Thank you all for coming and attending the session and accessibility outside of the classroom, why bother? It is my pleasure to introduce Michelle Woolfrey and Amanda Lin. Michelle is a third year parts and contemporary studies student with a passion for diversity and accessibility. She talks for businesses and schools, helping breakdown barriers and redefine societies perception of disability.

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On campus, she works in student affairs, making students make the most of the university career and supporting the transition for students with disabilities. She wants to earn her law degree in order to work in disability law, fighting for equal rights for the disabled.

Amanda Lin is a fourth-year student in the disabilities studies program. After becoming disabled later in life, she experienced the difficulties of inaccessible spaces, attitudes and programming. Noticing a need for increased accessibility, Amanda has developed a passion for accessibility through her studies and is a student leader.

She hopes to continue creating positive change through her work with students with disabilities whilst engaging others with this intensity of accessibility.

MICHELLE WOOLFREY:

We sound very smart and professional there. Who is she talking about?

Welcome to our presentation. I am going to move this way. I think that we are picking up the little bit of feedback.

Welcome to our presentation, the hits, the misses and the homeruns. Thanks so much joining us.

Here is a brief agenda of what we're going to go over today. We will do introductions, as well as the idea of nothing about us without us. Then we will tell you our stories, then discuss the hits, the misses and the homeruns we have encountered, as well as our hopes for the future. If time permits we would love to have a discussion and answer any questions you might have.

AMANDA LIN:

I am going into my fifth year of studies.

MICHELLE WOOLFREY:

I am Michelle Woolfrey. I study in disability and equity, and I am a project assistant in terms of accommodation support.

So, disabled versus a person with a disability. We will be using the term disabled. This is a political statement. The reason we believe this is an important political stance is that we both subscribe to the social model of disability. We do not mean to offend anyone, but we do not

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feel we can separate ourselves from our disabilities, and society continues to create barriers that work to oppress disabled people.

AMANDA LIN:

So, nothing about us without us. This means that no policy should be made without the participation of those affected by the policy. People who make decisions could consult people who go through the student process as a disabled individual to better the programming and accessibility services.

MICHELLE WOOLFREY:

So, what is the difference between accessibility and accommodation? Some people do not know that right away. Accessibility is a forethought, making it possible to gain access without the need for special arrangements. It's baseline of equal service can benefit all types of individuals, for example, when a ramp is placed besides a set of stairs, it allows for mobility devices, delivery people and people with strollers to be able to gain access.

Accommodation is seen as an afterthought. It is used when organisers cannot predict or standardised methods of adaptation, thus making accommodation a second step when accessibility alone isn't enough.

They are usually individually based or need to be requested. So, for example, a student who requires the textbook in Braille will have to request that from the University in order to get the document in Braille.

AMANDA LIN:

OK, a little bit more about myself. When I was 16, I quickly began to lose my vision. By the time I was 18 and getting ready to start to think about attending university, I was almost totally blind. As I went into university, I had my accommodation set up for me, but I realised there were no accommodations for extracurricular activities. It was up to the individual club or student group to make their space accessible for an individual with a disability who wanted to enter that space, and also, that put the onus on the disabled student to share their needs and disability requirements.

I tried over and over again to find a place on campus, but I found myself in spaces that were not fit for people with disabilities. All that happened was that I was left feeling excluded and unwanted. When they came to this University, I found people were willing to create an

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accessible space and I gained confidence, learned hard lessons and spread my wings.

I joined teams of student support and accommodation support, and along the way, I have tried to bring a lens of accessibility to what I do. The figures on screen represent my life on campus as a student leader. The picture on the left is of me and my friends. The picture on the right at the top is of me and my time with orientation team in 2015, and the picture on the bottom right is of me at my time at the leadership event.

AMANDA LIN:

During my first degree, I began to become disabled. I went on to start my first year at Ryerson University and turned about disability services through a friend. By January, I was working for the access ATP. Since then, I have worked as many roles in the mentoring program, and though I have enjoyed every minute of my journey, I noticed some areas that could be increased by more than awareness of accessibility.

On my right side, there is a picture of me tabling for the mentoring program and doing my signature pose. On top, you will see me and my girlfriends where I didn't get the memo that we were doing a silly photo, so I look great, girlfriends don't. Below, you will see a picture of me and my colleagues at the mentoring program, as well as Michelle's old service dog, and we are congratulating the graduates in the program.

MICHELLE WOOLFREY:

Each topic now has two slides to it. What barrier we discovered what went wrong, and the second is when we talk about what we did to attempt to remove the barrier or to educate colleagues and friends.

Language. I was given a lesson in language. One reason was because I was not aware of the language I was using and how it was impacting those around me. I learned I was still running into people who, like me, were not aware of the language, and were not making the best choices with their language. I was sitting would hear people saying things like, "that is so crazy." "That is retarded."

When this happened, I would feel sick and unwanted. It creates an unwelcoming space for some students.

Through our time, a major barrier for a lot of students is inaccessible communication. For

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example, I often get emails from different groups on campus that gives the title and description of a fascinating events, but the information is on an inaccessible poster. There were also signup processes with multiple steps. For example, some of the appointment booking tools required students to sign up three times, and that is very overwhelming.

How did we solve the language program? First, we tried to teach people the language of words or phrases. When people understood the violence that was attached to words like crazy or retarded, people stopped using them. We didn't want to get people in trouble, but we wanted people to recognise when they were making these choices.

We also had empathy for each other and tried our best to understand that this is a learning process, and it can be hard for people to learn, and it can take time. For the inaccessible communication, we did a couple of things. We told people they needed to explain things in more than one way. Repeating the same sentence over and over again for someone who is disabled isn't necessarily the answer to clear communication. Come up with another way to say it.

We also have a conversation about using simpler language, making things easy to follow. We also came across situations where things were not able to be changed, (inaudible). A student with a disability doesn't have to out themselves in order to go about participating in the activity or event.

AMANDA LIN:

When it comes to the physical layout of the space, it can deter people from entering and enjoying the space itself. Spaces can become uncomfortable if people have to ask for access. Ryerson University has a learning centre, but there are places (inaudible), putting the onus on the person with a disability.

On the side, we have two layouts of the same space. One is inaccessible because of its lack of clear pathways and space. The second layout has been rearranged to take these into account. This is considered more accessible.

Some environmental factors are smells because there are people with smell sensitivities. Lighting can cause headaches in a setting, or if there is constant flashing. This can cause a problem for people who are prone to seizures.

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So, how did we fix this? We created room layouts like you saw before on the previous slide. We also use these for other spaces around campus. Each layout was catered to the events requirements and have various options for flexibility. I would purposefully lead empty spaces for accessibility and mobility devices, service dogs, anything like that.

These layouts could also be posted online so it was available for everyone to reference. It was important we had everyone understand that making accessible floor plans is not only for those with mobility devices. It benefits everyone who uses the space.

Creating this understanding can be the beginning of an attitudinal change in the space.

For environmental factors, it is important to remind people about light sensitivity. Some people are not faced with these issues, so having spaces that use accommodation of natural, fluorescent or no lighting would be ideal to people can choose where they want to be.

We identified spaces that had less noise, were scent free and welcoming to a variety of individuals.

**MICHELLE WOOLFREY:**

Attitudes. We found that people who are running events or helping us to run events would make a lot of assumptions about mine or other students disabilities. This was problematic, obviously, because instead of asking the person or having an open mind about a disabled student, a person is shut down for conversation. This is like being told that I don't look blind, because people are making assumptions about what a blind person should or shouldn't look like.

They are right; I don't fit the problematic representation of a blind person, but that doesn't mean I am any less blind. I have also been on the opposite end of the spectrum, where everyone on the team has been given a list of to-dos, but I have been given nothing because the leader has assumed I cannot contribute to the organisation of the event due to my disability.

I have also found myself being the butt of jokes or rude comments from other students. I can have a laugh with my closest friends over the challenges that being blind creates, but that is very different (inaudible). That just hurts my feelings and makes me feel like I have to do some kind of performance for others instead of just being myself.

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Casual conversations. Amanda and I have a lot of experiences with this, as I have a visible disability and she has an invisible disability. She finds herself being asked about my disability. She will chat more about this in the next section, but I want to highlight that. We struggle with friends, colleagues, organisers, all asking about someone else's disability. This is like walking into a room and overhearing someone talk about you.

Like I said, people have misconceptions about disability. We tackle this in different ways. We created a space for open conversations for everyone. This included people being able to share what they were b or weak in and what they wanted to do to work on that. This was an opportunity for everyone, whether they had disability or not to share their strengths and weaknesses. Clearly, that gives me an opportunity as the disabled individual to say that cutting in a straight line is not a strength, but getting up and talking to the class definitely is.

People can ask for help, which is a polite way of saying, "I will ask if I need help. You don't need to assume that I need help because I have disabled."

We spoke to supervisors in order to create safer options. We did this in order to create a dialogue around what is appropriate and what is just insensitive. In this situation, we felt it wasn't necessarily our job to confront the person directly, but by going to our supervisor, boss, whoever, we were able to get that job done in a way that wasn't so much on us.

Finally, when asking about someone else's disability, we ask the question which redirected to the disabled individual. For example, Amanda gets asked why have a dog. Her response to that is, "Michelle loves to talk about her dog. Why don't you ask her?" There is nothing rude about this, but it redirects the question back to me.

AMANDA LIN:

We will talk about awareness. There was a lot of fear when it comes to a lack of awareness. I have heard from my colleagues and friends that they are afraid of making inappropriate comments, gestures or offerings to disabled people. They really don't know that I am disabled.

Sometimes people come up to me and address questions about my visibly disabled friend.

Outing happens quite frequently. People who have nonvisible disabilities like myself can often pass as able-bodied, depending upon the circumstances. Being publicly outed by working

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professionals can be an awful experience.

So, what we did to work on this, instead of dismissing my colleagues comments, we used it as a learning opportunity and created the space for open dialogues and questions. I pointed out the importance of directing the question to the disabled person themselves. I do not want to speak for others, particularly when they would prefer to speak for themselves.

When this happens, we talk amongst ourselves about what we would prefer. Michelle wanted people to talk to her, so I went with that. There are other times when people come back to me and said, "I am scared she will not want to talk to me about that." You never know until you ask.

When it comes to outing, we must make it clear to others what should be considered confidential. Being explicit can divert from awkward situation and allow the person who is doing the outing to rethink their actions. Sometimes people honestly don't know that what they are doing is offensive.

For those doing the outing, it is important to remember that you need to mind your own business. There is always a polite way of saying this, but sometimes getting directly to the point can be the best choice of action if someone who doesn't understand what you mean. The more you have that conversation, the better it is. For you and for others.

MICHELLE WOOLFREY:

For us, we will have an event and walking together, and all of a sudden, the organiser will shout, "here comes the blind girl." It is about thinking about these things when you are doing. Yeah.

So, this is the other category that we couldn't really think of what the title is. Like we mentioned, inaccessible communication is a barrier, but it is also a lack of materials. For example, Amanda and I attended a workshop for work-related training, and neither of the presenters have the presentations available to us. We had no idea what was going on, and Amanda ended up being put in a position where she had to spend the day being my eyes, instead of enjoying the workshop herself.

Another issue is the use of inaccessible platforms. Often, when presenters offer materials, students are told to access information on Google Drive. Google Drive is completely

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inaccessible to adapted software.

Sometimes, information lacks description, like with pictures or charts. Even with information ahead of time, students are not always able to contribute because they don't have access to the information.

AMANDA LIN:

I have USBs with our presentation on. We need to have them returned, but you are welcome to get a copy of our presentation. We can also email us or talk to us at the end.

Accessible presentations/materials. One way is to have it in multiple formats, on a USB for guests to download. One thing is to ask your organiser to set a soft deadline so you can give them the materials ahead of time and they can post it on the website. That way, it is readily accessible for people to print out or do whatever they want.

We encourage creating friendly resource sheets on best practices. Although we should be aware of checklists, some people need them as a starting point. Especially when not faced with these troubles, you don't know that you need to be working on this. If you do a checklist, it starts the thinking and awareness process coming.

Don't be afraid to create conversation around not knowing. Having these conversations allows people to be in the know.

MICHELLE WOOLFREY:

We think it is good to celebrate the wins.

Student engagement working group. At Ryerson University, we have an umbrella organisation called (unknown term), and this helps us implement policies and practices. The group is made up of a number of working groups that each take a policy like IT or communication.

Two years ago, we helped create a new working group called the student engagement working group, helping remove barriers that students face across campus. It is interesting sometimes to sit in those meetings because students are very unique in institutions. For us, it was about identifying the unique individuals who need that little bit of extra support.

Access tours. This is a project of the working group that happened throughout the year, mainly

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during orientation. It has come as disabled students that have mobility related issues with incoming students who also have mobility disabilities, showing them the most accessible ways to navigate around campus.

When we say this, we don't necessarily mean people in wheelchairs. We mean people who have back injuries or are blind, or who have issues opening heavy doors, anything like that. It can be anyone who feels they need more accessible a route.

One thing we like to highlight is the indoor route versus the outdoor route for the days when it is really yucky out; where the bathrooms are, as well as where bars and cafes are on campus.

(inaudible), pairing them with other students to provide a mentoring experience. As I am sure some of you are aware, as an incoming disabled student, my learning curve is that much different from someone else's. We have to talk about what happens when you are refused accommodation, how did accessible formats on books, things that are traditional orientation doesn't necessarily cover for students.

After doing that for a couple of years, the programmers actually developed into more of a philosophy than a separate program. We see that the TMP program is accessible for everyone that signs up, so it is not just disabled people and able bodied people. It is all accessible, whether you identify as disabled or not. You are still included.

We want to highlight the wins (inaudible), pointing out that they created a great accessible building but they didn't consult someone with a disability, and therefore, there are few things missing. It is just highlighting what we can do next time, so when the next building gets built, students like Amanda and I get to be consulted.

Through learning support, we have created conversations around departments about how to make programs more accessible for students. We want to make sure that students and faculty can access them like everyone else. We have also worked with the English language departments, so when they are going into classrooms and giving presentations, all students are accommodated and included in that.

Pushback, things we learned.

When we did this presentation at a different conference, we were asked if we had any

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pushback. The short answer is yes. The long answer is yes but we learned a lot in the process.

An important place to start working with people and apartments is to work within the systems that are built. If you start small within the framework that is already there, you get people on board and systemic change is possible.

Not all people have lived experience of being disabled, so it is important to create open dialogue so that clear conversation can happen. It is important to understand what assumptions and misinformation people have around disability. Sometimes, this is where the most learning and change comes from, helping people dispel the myths they have about the disabled.

Again, because not everyone has experience, with a live tour in relation to someone else, it can be an easy thing for people to be hesitant or fearful of what you do or say. We learned that people can be scared of what they don't understand, but that is very different from someone who isn't willing to learn at all.

Finally, the biggest lesson is recognising the small changes. It is really easy to get frustrated with systems that are not seeing the change. It is so disheartening. It is easy to get disheartened and discouraged when it seems that things are not changing, but sometimes, the most important changes are very, very small. It is very much about the ripple effect.

AMANDA LIN:

In this presentation, we have raised some areas of concern, but also, how we have attended to remove those barriers. Going forward, we have three hopes for the future that hopefully all of you can help us realise.

More people and campus groups need to recognise the importance of creating spaces that are accessible to all students.

We hope our community will be consulted about all aspects of post secondary education, and not just the classroom needs. Although classroom accommodations are very important, it is more important that disabled people are involved.

The traditional post secondary experience is something that all students participate in. When all you want to do is get involved and interact with other like-minded people and you are unable to do so because an event is taking place in an empty pond which is not wheelchair accessible,

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it can be extremely discouraging. This makes the experience of post secondary something to get through, purses something to enjoy.

Thank you so much for being with us through this time. Feel free to contact us at the following addresses.

Thank you so much.

(Applause)

SPEAKER:

Thank you for a great session. I can certainly see how some of your key messages can be applied back at my workplace as well, not just in the academic world, so I appreciate you being here today.

Does anyone have any questions?

SPEAKER:

I run a peer support group, and I have people who do interviews, and this is the first time I have a mature student who also became plans later in life, and he is joining our team and will be working with our accessibility coordinator and myself to basically bring another side to the peer help.

Had we market to students with disabilities, and what I mean by that, I don't want them to come and me make the accommodation then. They shouldn't have to show up without those accommodations. How do I present that our program is accommodating and outreach properly so they don't feel they have to advocate for themselves.

AMANDA LIN:

We use the term is accessible and inclusive. Right off the bat, you have thought about the possible issues that make up for people. Accommodations will always be necessary, but that is how we phrase it. Inclusivity, accommodations.

Still put special needs accommodation statements there.

MICHELLE WOOLFREY:

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With posters or advertising on campus, they will often put posters around advertising that they offer mock interviews or whatever. We use the internationally recognised symbols for disability and put them right on the poster, so someone who is blind and is getting an electronic copy of that poster can recognise there is a Braille symbol.

The other thing we do is that on every one of our signup forms, we have two questions. Is there any dietary or food restrictions that we need to be made aware of, whether we are serving food or not. If someone will have an anaphylactic shock after eating peanuts, we make sure everyone knows not to bring peanuts into the room.

The second is in accessibility statement. "If you require any accessible needs to participate, please contact us." If you are doing a form, it can be a box that is not required. People can then fill it out themselves if they want to.

We do accessible practices, making sure our environment is as accessible as possible, and we allow students to identify any more specific accommodations that they might have. Does that make sense?

SPEAKER:

That concludes our session for today. Thank you very much.

(Applause)

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