Accessible Design: Every student has special needs!

Actions for 'Accessible Design: Every student has special needs!'

Created by Ruth Barton on Feb 4, 2015 5:59 PM

Accessible Design is a term I discovered on WebAIM.org (http://webaim.org/resources/designers/); it seems a beautifully elegant term, does it not? Combining *universal design* with *accessibility (*which I believe mean the same thing, please correct me if I'm wrong), *accessible design* just rolls off the tongue. It also sounds very like the subject we seem to be studying and, so, linguistically harmonious. Basically, we're talking about designing online programs that are accessible to everyone, especially people dealing with disabilities.

This module has definitely changed my understanding of the challenges students with disabilities face online (a really cool infographic on this same web page puts a lot of this information all in one place). I was able to access language and information that assisted me in Empathy. Empathy comes in here for several reasons, but the one I most want to address is concern for one another's welfare, which is a human expression of care, of love. And love, if we're being completely honest, is something all humans need. As we develop our understanding of who we and our students and fellow instructors - and everyone else on the planet - really are, we receive insight into humanity. And often we discover the universality of human need in the midst of these understandings.

These articles and videos definitely helped me deepen my understanding of my fellow human beings (HBs) who are dealing with some pretty hefty challenges. And that understanding leads me quite naturally to more care and concern for those fellow HBs. That care, that empathy, instills in me the desire to translate that care into programs I'm creating that I definitely wish to be available to all people, regardless of their perceived status or ability or level of challenge. I believe that the more we create our programs with accessible design in mind, the more universal our teachings will be, and consequently, the more intrinsically valuable.

The trick with empathy, I think, is non-judgment. As teachers, the wish to communicate well is a generally acknowledgeable value, wouldn't you say? And not judging our fellow HBs, especially our students, for not knowing things to begin with, or for thinking differently than we do, or for expressing themselves in ways we don't immediately understand, is bedrock successful pedagogy, wouldn't you think? I believe that another term for *non-judgment* is *empathy*. When we relate to each other, we tend to embrace, not reject or judge. I think empathy is a pretty universal quality in teachers who love teaching, because the desire to effectively communicate knowledge or methodology is so essential to teaching. And the more we embrace empathy, I think it's pretty safe to say, the better teachers we are.

Which brings me to my main point: Every student has special needs. Especially when they're children. Every child has needs that are special, simply because they are children. But another way of saying the same thing - about all of us - is that *everyone is disabled*. I say this not to minimize the disabilities that hundreds of millions, maybe billions, of people experience every day, but to lift up *all* human beings, with our universal need for respect, for love, for empathy. We're all disabled because none of us are perfect and without love, or empathy, or care or concern, we are nothing. The reason I'm talking about empathy here is that we're all dealing with needs and vulnerabilities - and everyone has them. We're also dealing with faults and blind spots and being *differently*-abled. If we acknowledge these simple tenets, then extending empathy to everyone is part of the natural flow of teaching and of being a human being on this planet. And the more we understand each other's *dis*-abilities (the things we're lacking that if included would make us "*perfect*" HBs) the more empathy we have for each other and the better HBs - and teachers - we become.

I write about these things because I have been dealing with emotional trauma from when I was a child, and sometimes these emotions have *disabled* me, in the world's terms. But really, it was the lack of empathy in the world that caused it to view me as disabled! Many times I have needed empathy that the world could

simply not provide and I had to find it within. So in my terms, *THE WORLD HAS BEEN DISABLED!!!*

Everyone has special needs, and those who have to ask for accommodations perhaps have more obvious - or *unignorable* - needs than those of us who don't constantly *appear to need* better accommodations.

Resource: http://webaim.org/resources/designers/