



Accessibility and Empathy: What Does it Really Mean and Why Should I Care?

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Can you
empathize
with this
feeling?



Accessibility – Definition as a Starting Point



➤ **ac·ces·si·bil·i·ty**

- the quality of being able to be reached or entered
- easy to obtain or use
- the quality of being easily understood or appreciated

➤ **in·ac·ces·si·bil·i·ty**

- the quality of not being useful or convenient
- Difficult to reach, approach, or understand
- Not accessible

Access is personal



WHO – WHY - HOW of Accessibility

➤ Who does accessibility affect?

- Individuals not familiar with the language
- Individuals who are perceived as not belonging to the group
- Individuals with disabilities (Neurodivergent)
- Individuals who are different because of color, race, gender, sexual orientation
- Elderly

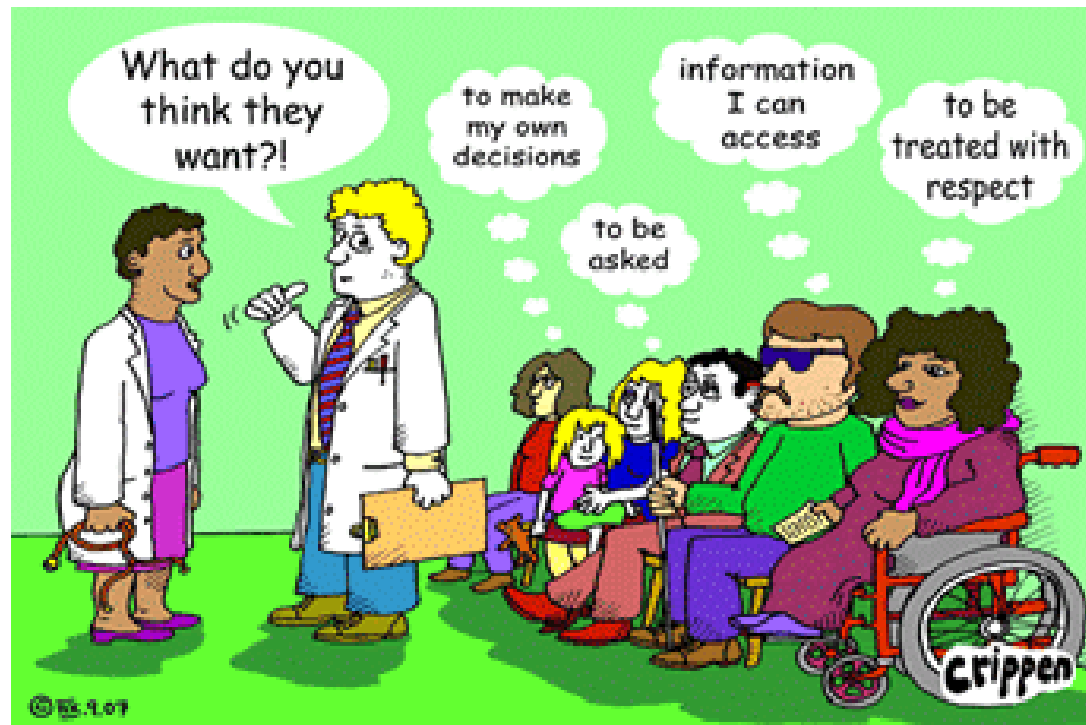
ALL OF US



WHY Embrace Accessibility?

➤ Inaccessibility results in:

- Loss of autonomy and independence; frustration; humiliation, but there is much more



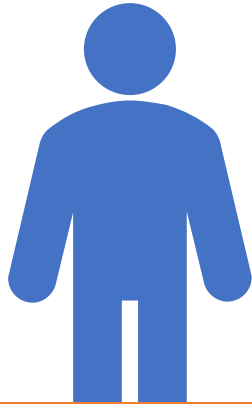
Neuroscience of Learning

Creating a Culture of Accessibility Starts with Empathy

“I’ve learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.” *Maya Angelou*

- **Our brains are wired for EMPATHY; which is linked to mirror neurons**
- “ perceive the emotions of others, resonate with them emotionally and cognitively, to take in the perspective of others, and to distinguish between our own and others’ emotions.” (Riess, 2017)





INNOVATIVE SOLUTIONS



1. Brains are uniquely organized with individual capabilities

1. *One size fits all does not work*

Consider Alex who has ADHD; focuses on too many stimuli, but is hyper-focused if something truly motivates him

Factory in India was situated just above the generator warehouse; extremely noisy; SAP solved the problem through diversity in hiring (VR Ferose)

Dandelion Principle



“Dandelion” is a powerful metaphor. Many people consider dandelions as weeds that spoil a green lawn, the plant has many positive characteristics: the roots can make a coffee substitute; the leaves are edible; and dandelions are an excellent source of many vitamins and minerals.

It is only considered a weed in the *context* of a carefully maintained lawn. **“However in contexts that don’t call for uniformity, we can appreciate the dandelion’s distinctive attributes.”**

Austin & Sonne (2014)



2. We learn through trial and error

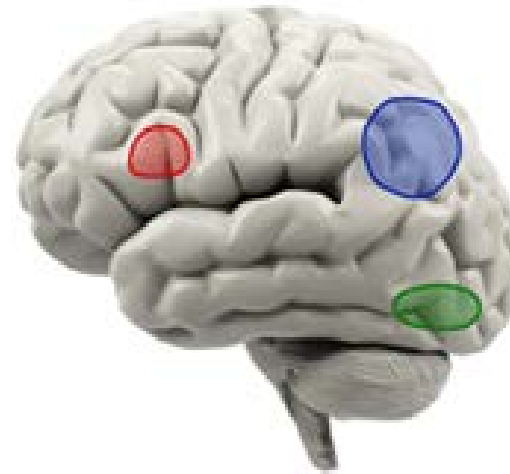
Reduces Emotional Toll

A system designed to reward perfection is not natural

Anne was diagnosed with dyslexia in 9th grade; she thought she was stupid. She carries that scar today at age 45

Typical Brain / Dyslexic Brain comparison

Typical



Dyslexic



● Broca's area, Inferior frontal gyrus (articulation/word analysis)

● Parieto-temporal (word analysis)

● Occipito-temporal (word form)

● Broca's area, Inferior frontal gyrus (articulation/word analysis)

Shaywitz & Shaywitz, 2012



**“I want to go out
and be a face in
the crowd that
no one looks at”**

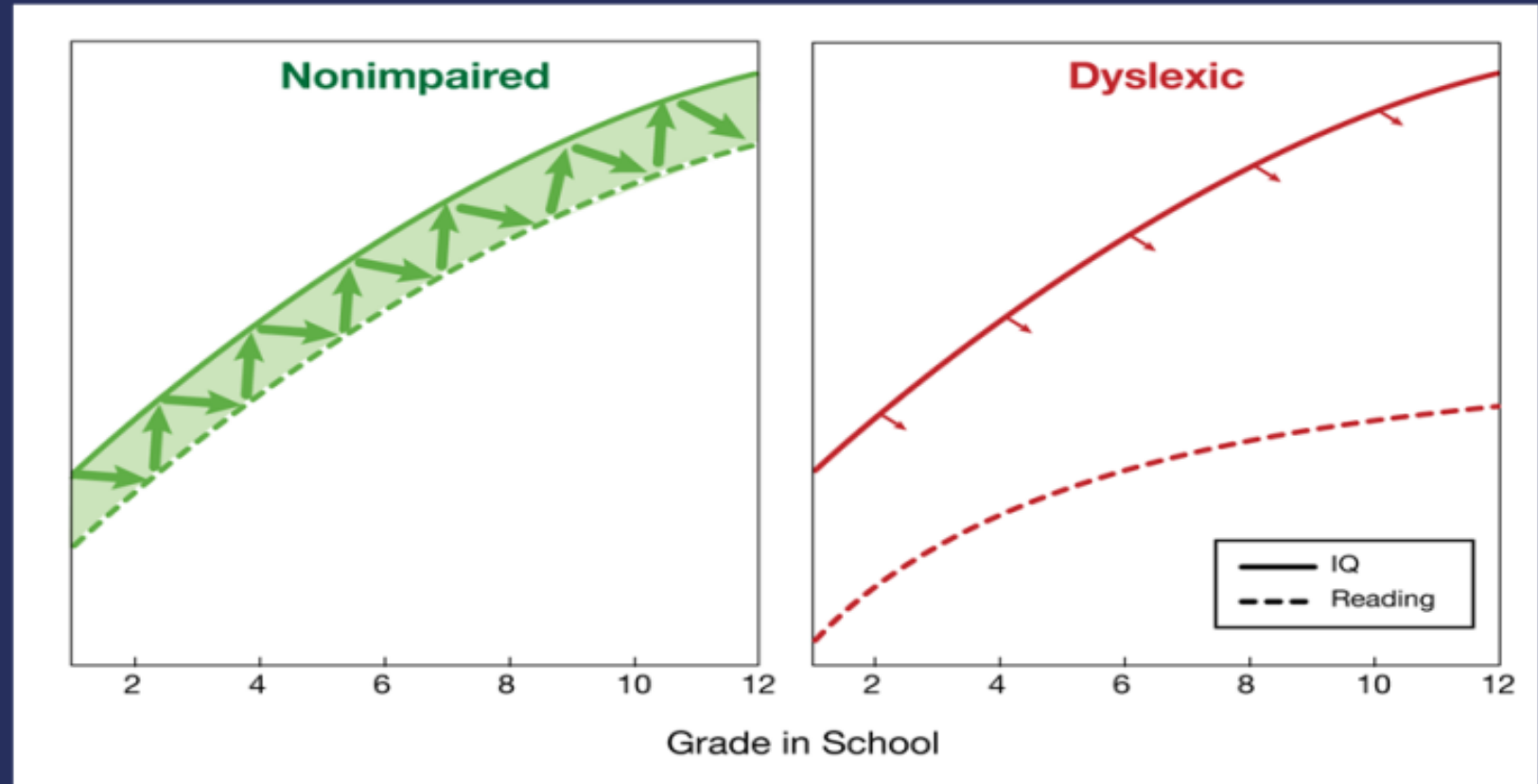
At age 14, Katie Stubblefield shot herself in the face because she thought she wasn't perfect

3. Paradox of Dyslexia – Slow Reading, Fast Thinking (Shaywitz & Shaywitz, 2012*)

Enhances
Opportunity
For All; ROI

Non-impaired:
IQ-Reading Linked

Dyslexia:
IQ-Reading Diverge



What does Empathy have to do with Accommodations?



Does taking an empathetic view of a student's situation help or hurt accommodation



Should we start from a position of empathy, and if so, why or why not?

Accommodation Decisions and Empathy

- **Empathy allows one to go beyond the ADA default mode and see the request for in CONTEXT and as an INDIVIDUAL request**
- **Helps us better engage in accommodation determination as an “interactive process”**

Jonah’s documentation (2018) notes that he has ADHD. His cognitive profile on the WAIS is solidly average to above average. VCI – 124. He has never been in special education. Relative weakness in PSI – 92. Achievement measures are all average. No history of accommodations. He is asking for 50% more time because he runs out of time and is failing his biology course where he has to answer 50 multiple-choice questions in 60 minutes.

Case where Empathy can hurt the Interactive Process

Ann approaches the DS office stating she has been diagnosed with brain cancer, and she needs to take several weeks off from school. DS arranged a medical leave. DS is quite concerned. Student comes back and says she is on a special diet and is very low on money that week to buy the grocery she needs.

By now, DS person has an empathetic relationship with her and offers her \$20. Next, the student asks cab fare to get to the hospital. Another \$20s. By now the DS person is suspicious.

It turns out student was spinning a story and out of empathy, the DS person fell for it.

The Default Mode for Accommodation Determination can be Limiting

- ADA is about establishing eligibility and approving “reasonable accommodations”
- We know there are many problems with establishing eligibility as an individual with a disability:
 - Incomplete documentation
 - operationalizing “substantially limits one of more major life activity”
 - diagnosis is not always stated or may appear to be inaccurate



Eligibility through the Lens of Empathy

- Promotes flexible mindset for DS to discuss options and alternatives beyond guidelines
- Allows one to “consider” the emotional aspect of the accommodation request
- It creates a welcoming climate without suggesting an “all or nothing” reputation for the office

NOTE: Empathy is not the same as Compassion



Operationalizing Empathy

- Tone on the website
- Implementation of case-by-case; how do you respond to: “That will be setting a bad precedence”?
- Understanding functional limitations in context and as individual circumstance

Understanding Circumstantial Challenges with Empathy

▪ **Course specific accommodations**

Deaf student in ornithology course requests accommodation for course project asking students to identify bird songs/calls and tweet about the location

Solution:

▪ **Exam specific accommodations**

Student with LD is simply unable to pass a required writing course despite many traditional accommodations

Solution:

Understanding Circumstantial Challenges with Empathy

- **Rescheduled Comprehensive exam**

Doctoral student with ADHD and panic attacks feels he is not prepared for the upcoming comprehensive exam, which has been set up 2 months prior. Now he is asking for 1 week additional time

Solution:

- **Confidentiality and graduate students**

Graduate student in a highly competitive program asks for accommodation letter but does not want to use it for fear of being thought of as incompetent. Asks DS to have a “conversation” with faculty

Solution:

Empathy Training for DS personnel

- DS as advocates for disabilities, but not a personal spokesperson for a student
- Giving difficult feedback to students
- Negotiating with faculty/senior administrators on behalf of the student
- Understand and respond to the emotional experience of being turned down for accommodations
- Responding to student anger and personal safety issues

End of Presentation