

Challenges and Best Practices of Disabled Instructors at UBC

Summaries of One-on-One Consultations

Prepared by

- Corin de Freitas, PhD Candidate, Department of Geography
- Shota Iwasaki, PhD Candidate, Department of Asian Studies
- Sharalyn Orbaugh, Professor, Department of Asian Studies
- Ayaka Yoshimizu, Assistant Professor of Teaching, Department of Asian Studies

We consulted with six disabled instructors about their experiences of teaching and performing other types of work at UBC, the challenges of seeking supports, and tactics and techniques they have developed to enable their work. Consistent with our findings from the university-wide survey that we conducted in March 2021 (see attached ppt file “Survey Results”), our consultants expressed concerns over disclosure, which places instructors in a vulnerable position, due to the stigma surrounding disabilities, and does not consistently result in necessary supports. They also highlighted other challenges in seeking or receiving instructional supports. Some of them identified flexible teaching scheduling or course delivery methods (e.g. online) as ways to remove some instructional barriers. Normalizing disabilities in our everyday working environment, planning for accessibility, actively examining and removing barriers that disabled instructors face, and providing support through community-building were suggested as effective steps toward a more inclusive university.

Chris Reimer

Rank: Teaching Assistant/PhD Candidate

Type of Disability: Rare autoimmune disease (Autoimmune Lymphoproliferative Syndrome) and Asplenia (no spleen)

Quote: *Having a disability in academia seems to require a more intentional (and initially stressful) process of establishing and vetting an intimate network of faculty, peers, and admins who you can count on. Unlike for other students, this isn't just an added benefit for developing friendships or mentorship, but an extra necessary step so that you can simply do your job.*

The heightened risk of infection due to the COVID pandemic impacted Chris Reimer's ability to teach in person. When the pandemic started, he was teaching three discussion groups in person. UBC did not take action quickly, and the three-week period before the university finally made the transition to online teaching made him stress about choosing between risking infection and

doing his job well. As there was no formal channel to pursue accommodation for his type of disability (that he knew of), he disclosed his condition to the instructor and told them that he did not feel comfortable coming to in-person classes for the rest of the term. Thankfully, the instructor was supportive. His condition is quite unpredictable and variable, making accommodations challenging. He has TA'ed for the same two professors since arriving at UBC and both courses involved other TAs that he knew. This allowed the professor and his peers to be supportive and co-TAs were willing to trade particular tasks with him when it became necessary. His tactic moving forward is to stay close to a small, reliable network and community of faculty and peers to ensure he continues to get these necessary informal and ad-hoc supports. He is not confident it would be provided outside his small web that he trusts. While it is the most comfortable solution and offers him the support he needs, this tactic limits which courses he can apply for as a TA and prevents him from meeting new people. He suggests that it is important to create a department-wide policy on how to support disabled TAs. Formal and one-time documentation of his condition and request for accommodation would enable him to receive ongoing supports from the department without repeated disclosures and negotiation with instructors. To change the systemic and negative culture about disability, he suggests that it is important to create more time to discuss disability, just like race and indigeneity, in classroom and to raise awareness of what disability is and can be among faculty and students. Training sessions for all instructors would also be helpful.

Grace Robinson (pseudonym)

Rank: Assistant Professor

Type of Disability: Digestive, severe pain, fatigue, psychological, elimination

Quote: *Because of my disability, I bring the ability to empathize with and provide support to students who are struggling with their own physical and mental health issues. However, this is not work that "counts" in terms of my tenure application.*

Dr. Grace Robinson's disability involves severe pain, exhaustion, and digestive problems that have regularly resulted in the need for surgical intervention. Meetings and teaching back-to-back without sufficient breaks can make her sick for several days. While the offer letter she received when she accepted the position as assistant professor referred to having 40% of her time allocated to research, she has not found this to be the case. In general, there is lack of support for disabled instructors compared to the support the university offers to students. As a result, disabled faculty must do many hours of work and spend their own income on finding adequate supports. She has tried to reach out for supports through the university, and was offered a potential leave of absence or a reduced workload, but she was concerned that this would appear to be "special treatment" and impact her tenure application. She was also asked to submit a very detailed doctor's note, which created an extra burden as she had trouble finding a family doctor in Vancouver and has had some negative experiences with her current "healthy male" doctor, who rushes her through appointments and does not always trust what she describes about her

condition. She finds it very difficult to talk about aspects of her disability that involve her internal organs, uterus, and genitalia. The coping tactics she has developed include spending two hours in the morning to get to the point where she can start working; preparing special food, medication, and other things she needs to function for the rest of the week; and spending several additional hours throughout the day managing her illness so she can function. While her workload increased during COVID, online teaching has been helpful, because she has everything she needs at home (food, medication, easier access to a bathroom, wellness aides, private space to rest and stretch). In the past, when she shared her disability with colleagues, it made them uncomfortable, and they changed the subject, as they are confused about what private information they are allowed to know about each other. To make the university more inclusive, disability should not be tabooed and should be openly talked about it. Other ways to normalize disability include creating a space in meeting rooms to stretch and lie down, prioritizing breaks, eating and hydration in meetings, and enabling people to take rests between meetings.

Jessica L. Main

Rank: Associate Professor

Type of Disability: Neuro-diverse, ADHD, spectrum disorder

Quote: *You have to take a second 'job' to go find the supports you need, and they will forgive you for doing that. But they won't help you with it.*

Dr. Jessica Main went undiagnosed for a long time, partly due to gender bias around her condition, but also because she was already a successful academic. How could she have a disorder if she was able to get through higher education and work at a university? She did not talk openly about her struggles with depression and other symptoms until she had tenure, but now discloses her disability to colleagues, staff, and especially her students, to prepare them for possible interruptions in teaching. She has mostly solved challenges herself, because getting organized enough to ask for help takes all the energy she has to do the thing. She thinks there should be individualized help for disabled instructors on campus. This could be someone who would know her situation and whom she could call on for concrete assistance when a challenge arises, like a combination of case worker and tech person. Similarly, she believes that UBC should make accessibility products (e.g. Braille reader, TTS, and voice dictation software) available and ready to be used by instructors, just as they do with tech products (e.g. Adobe Acrobat). She thrived while teaching remotely, and would like to continue with a hybrid model that makes remote and in-person participation possible. She would also like this for meetings too, and hopes the university will put money into making sure meeting spaces have large video screens, all-direction microphones, stable internet connections, etc. At a philosophical level, UBC needs to assume the existence of disability—whether long-term or temporary—in its employees, and accept and plan for limits, accept and plan for loss. People can't excel all the time, so what can they cut (i.e. not do) when necessary? Like pruning a garden

leads to further growth, a person's being able to cut activities judiciously when necessary leads to further excellence on that person's part.

Brian Webb (pseudonym)

Rank: Associate Professor of Teaching

Type of Disability: Bipolar Disorder Type 1

Quote: *UBC's response to the pandemic showed us that there can be effective remote teaching that can benefit both teachers and learners with disabilities. This is not the time for UBC to forget that win in the interest of having people 'back on campus.'*

Dr. Brian Webb's has Bipolar Disorder, and his disability can causes severe anxiety and/or depression from time to time. When this happens he is not able to teach and has to cancel his class. To make it up, he records the missed lecture after the fact and makes the recording available for students. He discloses his disability to students at the start of the term and gives them a warning about potential cancellations ahead of time. Usually, he has to cancel class 1-2 times per term, and he has taken a few medical leaves in the past. His disability impacts his teaching more than his research, and as an Educational Leadership faculty whose work focuses more on teaching, he must disclose his disability to his department head so that his leaves and class cancellations don't affect his tenure and promotion negatively. Given the nature of his disability, Brian is not sure where to go to get support or what supports might be actually helpful. One potential support might be to implement some mechanism to cover those sessions when he is not able to teach, like a 'pinch hitter' faculty member with an honorarium. Teaching online, either via distance education courses or during the pandemic in general, has given him more flexibility with his teaching and a class cancellation causes less student complaints since the class is delivered remotely and no commuting is involved. To improve the negative perception of disabilities in general, Brian thinks that working to deal with self-stigma is important. Engaging in self-disclosure in a safe environment and active engagement with other disabled people has helped him battle his self-stigma. To keep that environment safe, Brian wishes for a faculty-only support group for people with disabilities, as current support-group offerings at UBC are more general.

Sandra Tomc

Rank: Professor

Type of Disability: Pain and physical impairment

Quote: *UBC is a radically ableist campus, designed only for people who can walk or ride a bike.*

Dr. Sandra Tomc has a mobility-related disability and states that challenges include the physical demands of teaching and the travel required for conferences and research. She has found that the anti-car culture at UBC has exacerbated the issue and has made parts of campus completely inaccessible to her. The lack of accessible and affordable parking is a further problem. She wants the university to understand that cars are mobility aids. She has tried to get the university to address this but was told that the campus meets provincial standards and there is nothing more they can do. With respect to getting supports, she said that she started at the Office of Accessibility “and their response was ‘you’re on your own.’” She noted that the pandemic has been a welcome change because she does not have to battle a hostile built environment to teach. Previously, she just paid for the things she needed herself (such as the extra costs of bringing her husband to conferences because she cannot go alone) and if it wasn’t for her husband stepping in, she would be “completely isolated and unable to do these things”. Last year, she finally approached the English Department for assistance covering costs. The skill that she has developed is making demands until you’re heard—although a lot of times she has given up because it’s exhausting. She believes that it is important to have supports and understanding, but community building is tough because it involves more work for an already overburdened and under-resourced group of instructors. She also noted a potential generational divide in how disabled members of the UBC community relate to their disabilities and to disability culture.