



# Layer by Layer:

## Crafting Faculty Professional Development in Accessibility, Inclusion, and Academic Accommodation

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# About This Guide

Higher education institutions recognize the need for faculty and contract lecturer development in academic accommodations, inclusive design, and equitable practices. However, training often narrowly focuses on policies and procedures.

This guide argues for a deeper approach to professional development to effectively address and reduce barriers for students with disabilities. It is structured around five layers of reflection and practice, encouraging readers to examine the root causes of exclusion and equipping them with practical strategies to foster empathy, understanding, and actionable change. By addressing the often unseen currents of ableism, engaging in meaningful consultations, and facilitating a shift in emotional responses, this guide outlines the path to creating inclusive learning environments.

# Statement on language of disability used in this guide

We use “students with disabilities” and “disabled students” interchangeably to honor diverse language preferences in the disability community. Our approach acknowledges that individuals may have different perspectives on how their identity is described—some prefer person-first language to emphasize their identity beyond their disability, while others prefer identity-first language, valuing their disability as an integral part of their identity.

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# Peeling Layers:

## An introduction

## Peeling Layers: An introduction

Welcome to “Layer by Layer: Crafting Faculty Professional Development in Accessibility, Inclusion, and Academic Accommodation,” which we hope serves as an invitation to educational developers, disability services staff, academic leaders, and others, to engage in a conversation about how existing barriers to participation that students with disabilities experience can be, at least partly, addressed through the careful design of faculty professional development activities.

This guide captures some of the knowledge gained at Toronto Metropolitan University (TMU) through our efforts to design and implement “Policy 159: A Shared Responsibility, Faculty and Contract Lecturer Training,” a four-module online professional development resource released in 2023. You will find an outline of the training near the end of the guidebook. Throughout this guide we share both our story of creating that training, and the reflections and development activities that scaffolded the project design. We hope some of the approaches contained in this guide can light the way for others who wish to create their own interactive training regarding inclusion, accessibility, and academic accommodations.

Many institutions of higher learning have already identified the need for faculty development in the area of disability, academic accommodations, ableism, and universal design for learning (UDL). Here in Ontario, one need only look to the Ontario Human Rights Commission’s (OHRC) “policy on ableism and discrimination based on disability” or the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act’s (AODA) “2022 postsecondary recommendations” to know that the barriers students with disabilities encounter in higher education are well documented and in need of attention.

## Peeling Layers: An introduction

While many faculty across the country are doing amazing work to create accessible and equitable classrooms, if you are tasked with supporting a wide understanding of academic accommodations, you may also know the challenges of this work. Some are systemic, such as limited time, limited resources, large classes, online course limitations, and so on. Some are part of larger debates about rights and responsibilities. Some are the result of a lack of training on disability, accommodation, and inclusive design that have allowed misinformation to take root.

However, a significant dimension of the challenge is attitudinal. You may even have encountered expressions of ableism; those Sisyphean rocks of “Do they really need accommodations or are they just using them as an excuse?”, “If they can’t succeed in the classroom without accommodations, they’ll never be able to make it in the “real world””, “I don’t mind if someone really needs accommodation but some of them are just gaming the system” or, “I treat all my students the same so that means no one gets an accommodation.”

Underneath these statements are attitudes, assumptions, and biases about both disability and education that have gone unchecked for as long as disability and education have intersected, which is longer than most of us have been in roles meant to address them.



Four friends enjoying a good time at a cafe, sharing stories over coffee.

## Peeling Layers: An introduction

While our team was tasked with helping faculty understand an internal policy related to the provision of academic accommodations for students with disabilities, we quickly recognized that providing professional development in this area is about more than just reminding people of policies or procedures; it's about fostering a community where empathy and mutual respect guide our actions, and where every member understands their role in dismantling barriers to education. While we couldn't change something like class sizes, we could begin to address how we think and talk about accommodations and access.

This guidebook uses the metaphor of "peeling back layers" because, similar to peeling back the layers of an onion, each layer reveals another, and another, until you arrive at the core or center of the issue at hand. We centre the critical reflection and approach we undertook at every stage of the project that supported us in addressing some of the root causes of exclusion and inaccessibility. You might see these layers as invitations to go deeper into the underlying issues that cause barriers in the first place. The five layers we've chosen to peel back in this guide are by no means comprehensive; however, they are a good start to building out a meaningful professional development activity.

As you engage with this guide, each layer gets peeled back to uncover the often overlooked or misunderstood aspects of academic accommodations—from recognizing the prevailing currents of ableism ("Layer 1: Recognizing the Water We're Swimming In"), through engaging in meaningful consultations to map the terrain ("Layer 2: Engage in Consultations and Discovery"), to shifting the emotional currents that drive faculty attitudes and actions ("Layer 3: Shifting the Emotional Valence"), and beyond, into developing empathy and actionable strategies ("Layer 4: Create Empathy and Action Tools"). We end on a call to lead by example ("Layer 5: Show and Tell Accessibility").

This guide is our way of reaching out, of sharing some insight into the questions and critical reflections we engaged in as we designed and implemented our training program. We are still peeling back layers, still learning from those who know best where barriers are, and we also hope to learn from each of you as you build resources that support an inclusive educational environment.



The background features a light beige color with abstract, flowing shapes in shades of grey and white. A pattern of small grey dots is visible in the lower right quadrant, transitioning into a solid grey area at the bottom right.

# Layer 1:

Recognizing the Water  
We're Swimming In

## Layer 1: Recognizing the Water We're Swimming In

When someone says “the water we’re swimming in,” they’re using a metaphor to describe the environment or context in which we live, work, or operate that may be so familiar or pervasive that we are not consciously aware of it. Just like fish might not be aware of the water they swim in because it’s their natural habitat and they’re constantly immersed in it, the phrase suggests that there are aspects of our social, cultural, or professional environments that we accept and navigate within without actively noticing them.

This expression can be used to highlight how certain norms, beliefs, or conditions can influence our thoughts, behaviors, and interactions without us being fully aware of their impact. It’s a way of drawing attention to the need for critical reflection on the environments we take for granted, to better understand how they shape our experiences and perspectives.

Before building training in accessibility, inclusion, and academic accommodations, we need to understand the water we’re swimming in with regard to attitudes, behaviors, assumptions, and biases surrounding disability at both a local level (your college or university) and the wider contexts that influence your local experience. We encourage you to use this opportunity to take in and explore what disability activists and scholars have written as well as drawing from expertise across your institution.



A group huddled around a laptop, brainstorming ideas and working together.

## Layer 1: Recognizing the Water We're Swimming In

Here's a look at a sample chart that highlights some of what we discussed in detail at the start, and throughout, the project. As you can see, each point has much to unpack.

Local Context	Wider Context
Significant confusion and misunderstanding regarding Academic Accommodations.	<b>The Medical Model</b> of disability is the primary model. Most aren't aware that other models exist, let alone are possible
Signs of "negative emotional valence" associated with academic accommodations.	The <b>historical exclusion</b> of people with disabilities from education at all levels.
Accommodations policy revised 2022 includes mention of ableism for the first time and shifts from procedural document to "inclusive educational environment".	Postsecondary education champions an "ideal student" and upholds and celebrates a work ethic that is <b>ableist</b> .
Faculty have little training on disability, accessibility, and human rights in relation to academic accommodations.	<b>2022 AODA Postsecondary Recommendations</b> <b>Barrier Area 1:</b> Attitudes, Behaviours, Perceptions, Assumptions <b>Barrier Area 2:</b> Training and Awareness
Institutional EDI Values: Front and centre, but frequently disability fails to be centered.	<b>Covid-19 Pandemic:</b> Led to the adoption of UDL practices, whether faculty were aware or not. Increased openness to flexibility and compassionate consideration. Need to support faculty in making the connection between pandemic progress and accessibility for students with disabilities.
Few existing resources provide practical guidance on strategies to create a more accessible learning environment.	<b>Perceived and actual increase of students requiring accommodation across Canada</b> illuminates the need for professional development in inclusive design, accessibility and ableism.
Bias/stigma needs direct and intentional intervention. Are there ways of talking about disability across the institution that do not align with the university's stated values of equity, diversity, and inclusion? How are these addressed in the moment? Are they tolerated and normalized, or are they recognized as misaligned with values of equity and inclusion?	<b>The immense cognitive load</b> of understanding and navigating academic accommodations that systemically is considered "acceptable": <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• For disabled students</li> <li>• For faculty and contract lecturers</li> <li>• For disability and accessibility offices</li> </ul>
The critical need for "shared responsibility" is not well understood across all stakeholders	

## Layer 1: Recognizing the Water We're Swimming In

The truth is that most of us can't see the water we're swimming in the same way that those who are most harmed by it can. Consider immersing yourself in articles by disability scholars and activists, attending conferences, conducting a deep literature review on the intersection of disability and higher education, consulting students with disabilities, inquiring with Human Rights Services about common situations that involve academic accommodations and disability that arise at your institution, and the Disability Studies program at your university if you have one.

When we reflect on some of the harm done by a system that many of us succeed within and benefit from, it's not uncommon to feel defensive, uncomfortable, or generally resistant. Naming and addressing these feelings, unpacking their origins, and countering them with up-to-date, evidence-based disability justice scholarship is urgent, critical work that must be initiated at every level of postsecondary education.

### Highlighting Key Scholars in Disability Studies and Inclusion in Higher Education

Lennard J. Davis | Jay Dolmage

Nirmala Erevelles | Susan Gabel

Elizabeth Grace | Mia Mingus

Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha

David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder

Margaret Price | Tanya Titchkosky

Melanie Yergeau



# Layer 2:

## Engage in Consultations and Discovery

## Layer 2: Engage in Consultations and Discovery

In designing faculty training at TMU, we began by immersing ourselves in the university's academic accommodations ecosystem—observing faculty discussions on accommodations, consulting with a wide range of educators across disciplines, and engaging with disability services staff to grasp their insights. Crucially, we listened to students with disabilities. What we heard across the board was a deep well of confusion, frustration, and a resounding sense of isolation. Through our literature review and our exploration of resources built at other institutions, we understood that the problem was not unique to TMU. All of this insight allowed us to tailor the training to the local level and also align ourselves with wider efforts being made across Canada and within disability justice discourse.

We are suggesting here that you engage in a thorough and reflective consultation process, not just because it's due diligence, or because you will learn a great deal by listening to those who will be most impacted by what you eventually create, but in our journey towards a more inclusive and accessible educational environment we're also traversing the vast landscapes of understanding, empathy, and community. To build a learning environment where every student can flourish, we must listen, learn, and connect. Consider the consultation phase an opportunity to begin building trust and as a way to invite the community into the fold.

Here are some stakeholder groups we suggest you speak with.

- **Students with disabilities:** Students registered for academic accommodations are the most important voices in this process. They know best where the barriers are, and are overflowing with wisdom and ideas on how to best address them.
- **Faculty and contract lectures:** Aim for representation across disciplines, union groups, and lengths of time teaching.
- **Academic accommodations services staff:** Even if you work in this area, it's important to capture the experience of staff who work with students with disabilities as well as support educators with understanding academic accommodations.
- **Leaders across the university:** Deans, directors, and chairs often have a great deal of insight into various conversations and issues that are going on behind the scenes that could be integral to your work

## Layer 2: Engage in Consultations and Discovery

### Engaging with the Community

To truly understand the needs and experiences of all stakeholders, we need to create spaces where their voices are not just heard but valued. Here are some ways to connect:

- **Open forums and listening sessions:** Host regular, accessible meetings where students, faculty, and disability services staff can share their experiences and ideas.
- **Focus groups:** This was our primary method, done with stakeholder groups separately. You might ask where the pain points are, what each party wishes the other party knew about their experience, and ask them to explain their understanding of how academic accommodations do or should work.
- **Interviews:** These allow you to go deeper into individual experiences. This method is particularly effective for Deans/Directors/Chairs and others in leadership roles.
- **Advisory panels:** Establish a diverse group of stakeholders that meets regularly to advise on policies and practices. You may also tap into groups that already exist such as a student advisory committee in your accessibility services area, or a Faculty ECI working group, a UDL committee, etc.
- **Feedback surveys:** Utilize anonymous surveys to gather honest feedback and suggestions from the wider community.
- **Roundtable discussions:** Facilitate discussions between different groups to uncover misunderstandings and assumptions.

Incorporating these methodologies into your approach not only enriches understanding but also strengthens your community. By engaging with each other in meaningful ways, conducting informed research, and bravely addressing the gaps in your collective knowledge and empathy, you will pave the way for a more inclusive educational experience.



# Layer 3:

## Shifting the Emotional Valence



## Layer 3: Shifting the Emotional Valence

When you think of sitting down to do taxes, or you imagine meeting a good friend for coffee, chances are a set of feelings comes with the thought. Maybe excitement or nervousness, maybe a sense of burden or a sense of possibility. The question we asked ourselves was, when a professor with 100 students opens her email and sees 10 academic accommodation plans, what feeling rushes in? Is it a sense of worry about how she will manage the workload of the semester, or does she already feel confident that everything is in place to ensure the students will be accommodated? If the professor feels burdened, what would she need to have a different emotional response in that moment? And how much of that can a training provide?

While policies are essential for upholding rights and ensuring fairness, research shows that simply explaining the nuts and bolts of these policies to faculty doesn't significantly remove known barriers or improve the experiences of students with disabilities<sup>1</sup>. The real change comes from addressing the emotional aspect—how faculty emotionally respond to the idea of accommodations.

Faculty may experience a range of feelings about accommodations, from **positive** (seeing it as an opportunity to support and empower students) to **negative** (viewing it as a burden on their own workloads, or as an unfair advantage offered to entitled students) and of course many feelings and thoughts in between. This emotional response, known as emotional valence, plays a crucial role in the students' ability to access their education. Positive **emotional valence** leads to feelings of satisfaction and fulfillment for faculty, and feelings of respect and dignity for students. On the other hand, negative emotional valence can result in frustration and resentment from faculty and feelings of marginalization and defeat for students.

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<sup>1</sup>Murray, C., Lombardi, A., Wren, C. T., & Keys, C. (2009). Associations between prior disability-focused training and disability-related attitudes and perceptions among university faculty. *Learning Disability Quarterly*, 32(2), 87-100. <https://doi.org/10.2307/27740359>

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### Layer 3: Shifting the Emotional Valence

Faculty who have a positive emotional relationship to academic accommodations are more likely to seek solutions and collaborate with others when they do experience uncertainty. They are also more likely to anticipate that students with disabilities will be members of the classroom whether they are registered for accommodations or not, and therefore proactively reduce barriers in their courses, integrating accessible and inclusive design practices. This shift not only benefits students with disabilities by creating a sense of inclusion and possibility and reducing the need for accommodations, but also enriches the educational experience for everyone involved.

The key to reducing barriers to education isn't just about policy comprehension or knowing what to do in every situation where an accommodation is in place, but fostering a shift, even a small one, towards positive emotional valence. By promoting awareness and empathy through professional development, we can help faculty see accommodations as vital to an inclusive educational environment.



A moment of quiet discovery: a young person engrossed in a book among library shelves.



# Layer 4:

Create empathy  
and action tools

## Layer 4: Create empathy and action tools

Though on the surface, the training will provide a deeper understanding of internal policies and procedures regarding accessibility, inclusion and academic accommodations, every aspect of the training needs to be built with the purpose of increasing empathy, and reducing the overall amount of negative emotional valence.

Here are some tools you can use to build empathy, and increase the likelihood that faculty will take action to increase the accessibility of their courses:



**Success stories:** Share real-world examples where faculty successfully provided accommodations, adopted universal design methods, found ways to reduce the need for disclosure of disability, or other innovative teaching examples that focus on the positive outcomes for both students and faculty. These stories should highlight the satisfaction and fulfillment that comes with supporting students' needs.



**Interactive scenarios:** Use interactive scenarios that allow faculty to navigate through accommodation requests, providing guidance on how to approach situations with an open, willing and curious mindset. Embed the most common examples of negative attitudes and behaviors that appear within your institution inside the scenarios themselves. This will encourage faculty to reflect on whether their own thoughts, behaviors and teaching practices have unintentionally created barriers for students with disabilities.



**Reflection activities:** Incorporate reflection prompts and quotes from activists and scholars throughout the training that encourage faculty to reflect on their biases and attitudes towards accommodations.

## Layer 4: Create empathy and action tools

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**Testimonials, panels, and experiences:** Feature video testimonials from students registered with disability services, educators experienced in inclusive teaching, and staff in your accessibility offices. Hearing the individual, human stories behind the accommodation requests goes a long way in widening faculty’s perspectives and understanding of students with disabilities, as well as unveiling unconscious biases and stereotypes they may be carrying.

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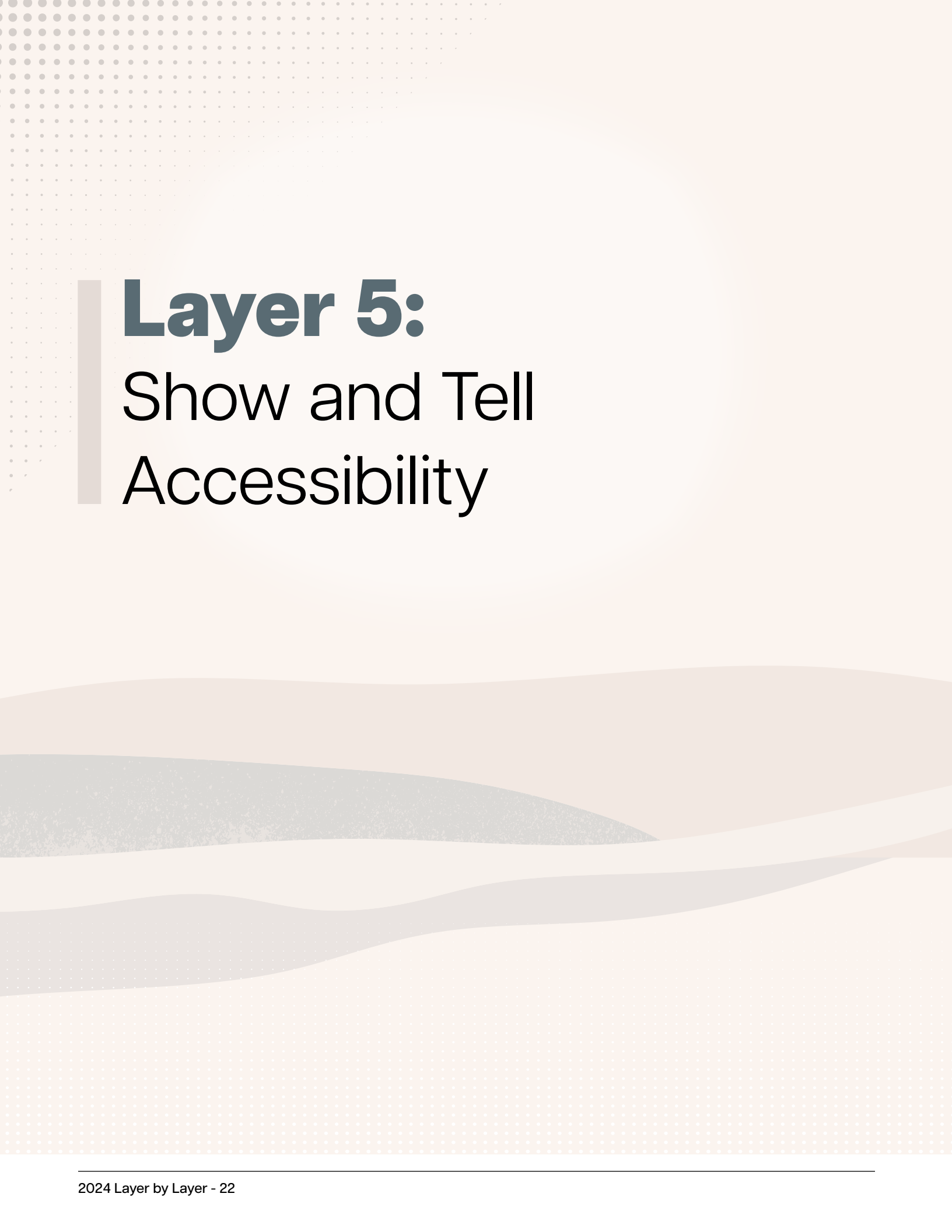
**FAQs that address the hard questions:** FAQs are notorious for addressing the simple, surface-level questions. Instead, go for the really challenging ones such as, “why do we so often hear that academic accommodations sit in opposition to academic excellence?” Locate these within learning activities that support a more nuanced understanding of the answer.

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**Add job aids:** Throughout the training, offer downloadable resources designed to be put into use immediately and simply, such as accessibility statements that can be added to syllabi, a first class accessibility checklist, or a template for an accessible syllabus. The purpose here is to take away the “too much work” feeling that many hold about inclusive teaching practices.

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# Layer 5:

## Show and Tell Accessibility

## Layer 5: Show and Tell Accessibility

Creating an inclusive learning environment in higher education is not just about understanding and implementing policies; it's about embodying the principles of accessibility and inclusion in every facet of teaching and learning. As educational developers tasked with designing training to support faculty in their efforts to increase the accessibility of their courses, we must not only talk the talk but also walk the walk. This means our training materials themselves must exemplify the very practices we advocate. This section, "Show and Tell Accessibility," provides a number of ways to model accessibility throughout your training materials, providing faculty with a clear, practical example of what accessible education looks like in action.



**Be transparent:** Up front, provide participants with a contact if they encounter any barriers to their participation in the training, or any inaccessible elements. Include an accessibility statement that outlines the accessibility features and limitations of the training.



**Closed captioning on all videos:** Every video included in your training should have closed captioning. This not only supports individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing but also benefits learners for whom English is a second language and those who prefer reading to listening.



**Varied presentation formats:** Present material in multiple formats (e.g., text, video, audio) to cater to diverse learning preferences and needs. This approach underscores the principle of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), which advocates for multiple means of representation, expression, and engagement.

## Layer 5: Show and Tell Accessibility



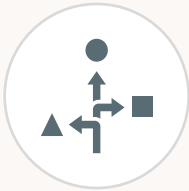
**Audio files for text:** For longer text documents or lessons, provide audio files. This supports learners who process auditory information more effectively than visual information and those with certain reading difficulties.



**Estimated reading and watch times:** Include estimated reading times for documents and watch times for videos. This transparency helps learners manage their time and sets clear expectations, reducing anxiety around time commitment.



**Summaries and downloadable PDFs:** Offer summaries for longer sections and a downloadable PDF of the entire training. Summaries give learners an overview and help them decide which sections to focus on, while PDFs offer flexibility in how and when the content is accessed.



**Flexible entry and exit points:** Design your training to allow learners to exit and enter as needed without losing their progress. This flexibility respects the varied schedules and commitments of faculty members, promoting a learner-centered approach.



## Layer 5: Show and Tell Accessibility



**Interactive elements:** Incorporate interactive elements such as quizzes, reflection prompts, and scenario-based exercises. These elements encourage active engagement and allow faculty to apply concepts in practice, deepening their understanding and empathy for students with disabilities.



**Inclusive design in practice:** Your training should not only be accessible but also aesthetically pleasing and easy to navigate. Use clear, legible fonts; ensure high contrast between text and background; and organize content logically with intuitive navigation. This demonstrates that accessibility and good design go hand in hand.



**Reflect on accessibility features:** Include sections that reflect on the accessibility features you've incorporated. Explain why each feature is important and how it contributes to an inclusive learning environment. This meta-commentary can help faculty understand the rationale behind accessible design choices and inspire them to implement similar practices in their own teaching materials.

By integrating these accessibility features into your faculty development training, you do more than impart knowledge; you showcase what accessible education looks like in practice. This dual approach of “show and tell” not only educates but also inspires faculty to embrace accessibility in their own teaching, leading to a more inclusive and supportive learning environment for students with disabilities.



# **An Example of Faculty Training**

## An Example of Faculty Training

By sharing an example of our faculty training outline in this guide, we're pulling back the curtain to reveal what putting all of our shared insights into practice could look like. While this example lights one path, your own layers of thinking and learning might take you down other roads—perhaps a live workshop, a micro-credential, or something uniquely your own. It's about sparking imagination and courage to explore inclusivity in ways that resonate with your context and community.

This is the final outline of the online training developed at Toronto Metropolitan University in 2023, titled "Policy 159: A Shared Responsibility". The training is currently live and accessible via our internal learning platform, Desire2Learn (D2L). All who teach at TMU have indefinite access to the training. It was built in Articulate Rise 360 and is fully interactive.

### **Policy 159: A Shared Responsibility**

#### **Introduction to the Training**

Participants gain a clear overview of the training and its outcomes, as well as accessibility features and language used. They engage in a short interactive module about a student named Kentay and his experiences navigating university courses both before and after academic accommodations are in place.

#### **Module 1: Policy 159 In Action**

- Scenario-based learning immerses educators in the experiences of a student with academic accommodations and a professor teaching an online course as they manage a last-minute accommodation request.
- Opportunity to review and learn about accommodation plans in context of the scenario-based challenge.
- Uncover the systemic, behavioral, and attitudinal barriers that disabled students can face.

## An Example of Faculty Training

### Policy 159: A Shared Responsibility

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#### Module 2: How we share responsibility

- Show the connection between Human Rights and institutional policy they manage a last-minute accommodation request.
- Reveal the “hidden labor” associated with accommodations for all stakeholders and acknowledge the effort that goes in, emphasizing that this is harder to do in isolation.
- Demonstrate how and when collaboration can and should occur among stakeholders.

#### Module 3: Inclusive Educational Environments

- Understand how the social environment, curriculum, assessments, and educational rhetoric (like syllabi) can foster or hinder inclusion.
- Equip participants with tools for crafting accessibility statements, creating accessible documents, and applying universal design in teaching.
- Explore how “typical” university courses can exclude disabled students.

#### Module 4: Understanding Disability

- Elevate the perspectives of students with disabilities, activists, and scholars.
- Challenge prevailing beliefs about disability.
- Critical exploration of different models of disability, intersectionality, unconscious biases, ableism, etc.

#### Conclusion

The training concludes with a resource library that encourages participants to continue doing the work.

# Conclusion:

## The End Is the Beginning

As we conclude our guide, remember that our exploration into creating more inclusive educational spaces is just the beginning. This guide is a stepping stone, meant to inspire and guide your efforts. The journey towards inclusivity is ongoing, rich with opportunities for growth and learning. Take these insights, adapt them to your context, and continue to champion accessibility, inclusion and empathy in education



Celebrating achievement: Graduates toss their caps against a sunset sky, marking the end of a journey and the beginning of new horizons.