Casting the Widest Net: Accommodation, Accessibility, and Universal Design for Learning
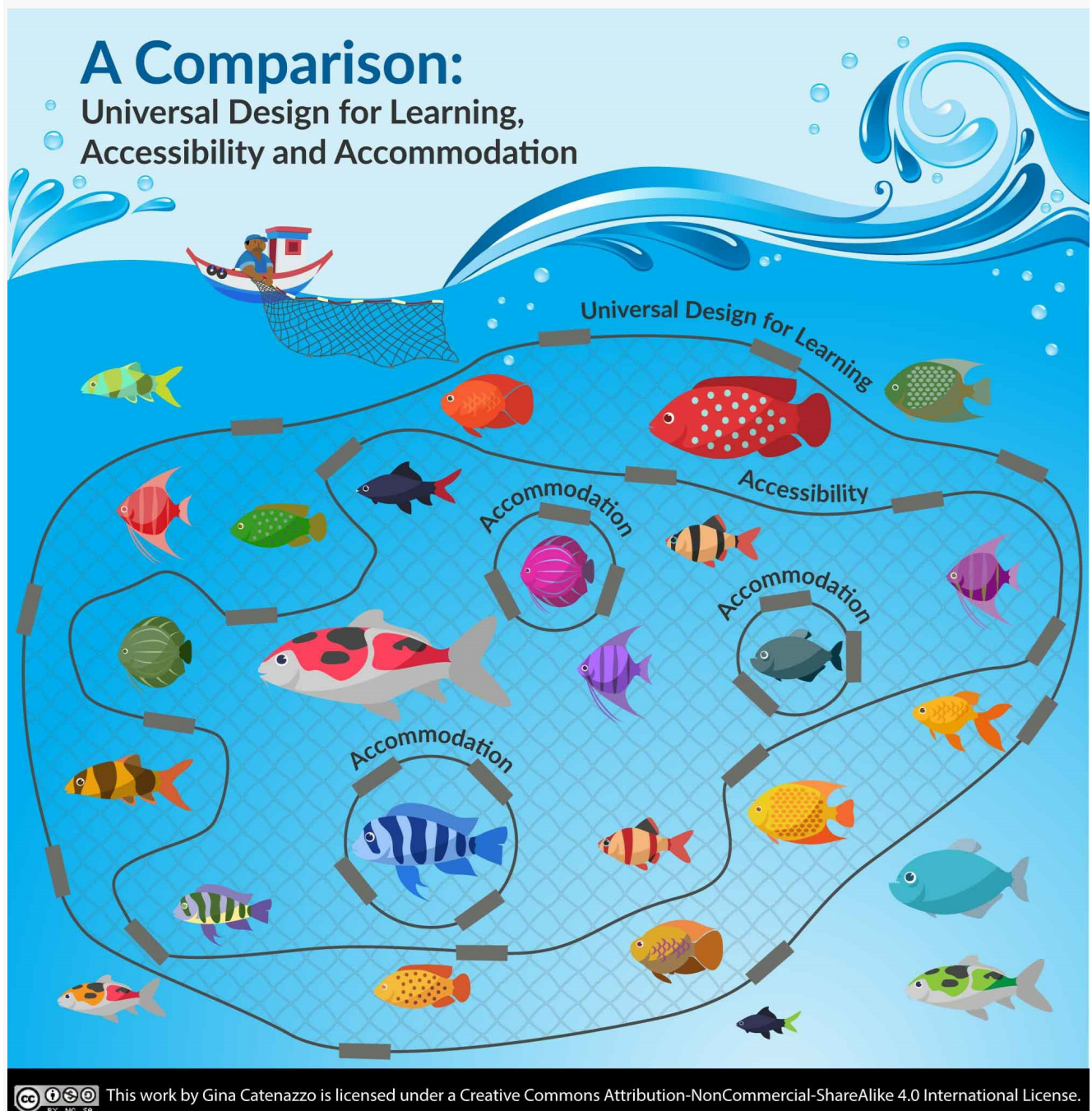
Published 3/25/2022 by Ashley Ribbel

by Gina Catenazzo, Instructional Designer in the Teaching & Learning Centre

Over the years of training faculty and staff on creating accessible digital materials and documents, I have learned that there is often confusion about the difference between the terms accommodation and accessibility. A few years ago, I was mulling over how to clearly convey the difference, as well as the relationship they have to each other, and an analogy about catching fish popped into my head. I (eventually) created the infographic below to explain the concepts.

Infographic Description: The infographic is making an analogy comparing accommodation, accessibility, and Universal Design for Learning (UDL) to catching fish. The nets labelled accommodation are small nets that only catch one fish each. The net labelled accessibility is a bigger net that

catches more fish. The net labelled Universal Design for Learning is the biggest net, catching the most fish.

In this analogy, I am thinking of our students as the fish. Surrounding the fish, three different types of nets have been cast out: the accommodation nets, the accessibility net, and the Universal Design for Learning net.

Between April 2020 and March 2021, 3377 students[1] at Seneca College registered with and sought supports from Personal Counselling and Accessible Learning Services (Accessible Learning Services, 2022). These supports are called **accommodations** and can include more time on a test, alternative formats of materials, etc. When we provide an accommodation for students, we are attending to the needs of each student individually, and therefore, if we use my analogy, when we cast out the accommodation net, we are catching one fish at a time.

When we implement **accessibility** into the creation of our digital content, learning materials, and documents, we are considering multiple disabilities in our design. "Educational materials and technologies are 'accessible' to people with disabilities if they are able to 'acquire the same information, engage in the same interactions, and enjoy the same services' as people who do not have disabilities" (National Center on Accessible Educational Materials, n.d.). So, if we revisit my analogy, we are casting our net out further and catching more fish.

When we implement **Universal Design for Learning (UDL)** we are casting out our net even further and catching even more fish. "Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a framework to improve and optimize teaching and learning for all people based on scientific insights into how humans learn" (CAST, 2022). For example, one of the principles of UDL is providing multiple means of representation, which includes offering content in different formats.

One thing to note, however, is that there will **always be fish outside the net**. Our objective is to always try to cast out our net as far as possible[2] and catch as many fish as possible. We can do this by creating our content accessibly and implementing Universal Design for Learning Guidelines.

If you are interested in knowing more about creating accessible content, have a look at this video on Foundations of Accessibility for Digital Materials (59:49 minutes) from Teaching & Learning Day Fall 2021. As well, if you have any questions about creating accessible content and digital materials, do not hesitate to reach out at gina.catenazzo@senecacollege.ca and/or The Teaching & Learning Centre.

[1] This statistic of 3377 students at Seneca College needing support is likely an underrepresentation because this only refers to students who **identify** as having some sort of disability/diagnosis.

[2] Video of person demonstrating how to cast out a fishing net.

References

Alessandro Boschi. (2017, February 3). *Boschi Alessandro Rezzaglio* [Video of person demonstrating how to cast out a fishing net].
    https://youtu.be/9vM9FGGoI7o

CAST. (2022). *About Universal Design for Learning.* https://www.cast.org/impact/universal-design-for-learning-udl

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National Center on Accessible Educational Materials. (n.d.). *What is Accessibility?* https://aem.cast.org/get-started/defining-accessibility

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