

Unimpeded Learning for Students Who Stutter

“A participation focused approach for Students Who Stutter”

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Hogeschool Utrecht, University of Applied Sciences, uses the Unimpeded Learning Approach to improve participation of Students Who Stutter. During this workshop I would like to exchange ideas about how this approach could work in your country.

What is Unimpeded Learning?

Because of the “Law on equal treatment on the grounds of disability or chronic illness” in the Netherlands, educational institutions need to make adjustments to improve participation of students with a disability or chronic illness.

At Hogeschool Utrecht this law is carried out by “Unimpeded Learning.”

Students with a diagnosed disability or chronic illness who want to study at our University can set up an arrangement with a student adviser. This arrangement, a so called “Educational Regulation” is a contract / working plan which describes what the university will do to minimize participation problems and what is expected from the student.

Examples of practical application of contracts such as these are: “making classrooms wheelchair accessible or giving more time during exams to dyslectic students.

What about stuttering?

We may assume that the stuttering of students who stutter can be seen as a chronic disease.

Students who stutter experience limitations in their ability to participate in different learning situations during their vocational or scientific study.

A quick internet survey carried out in 2009 in which 19 graduated persons who stutter and 10 students who stutter participated showed that:

59% of the participants experienced Stuttering as an impediment in the communication with teachers and/or lecturers.

45% of them experienced Stuttering as an impediment in the communication with their peers.

As a result of their stuttering, 16 % of the persons who stutter graduated later than expected, or had felt obliged to end their study before graduation.

The majority of the students who stutter have the opinion that counselling provided by the educational institution is of great importance. This will help the stuttering student to cope with the disorder during his or her study.

Only 10% of the students did receive counselling by the educational institution during their study.

HU decided to give special attention to Students who Stutter.

So in 2009 HU started to develop and implement Unimpeded Learning for Students Who Stutter.

Because stuttering isn't always recognized as a chronic impediment.

All students, lecturers, student advisers and student counsellors have to be informed about the fact that stuttering can be a chronic impediment that limits the ability of participating during different learning situations. They also need to be informed about the possibility for students who stutter to make use of the Unimpeded Learning Regulation

Since last year Students are informed by HU websites, information given to first class students by student advisers.

Lecturers, student counsellors and student advisers are informed about stuttering and how to act when a student is stuttering by the Unimpeded Learning page at the HU website, a workshop and a brochure developed in cooperation with the Dutch Stuttering Federation.

The Educational Regulation:

If somebody is sitting in a wheelchair it is quit clear that the building should become wheelchair accessible to improve participation problems but: "What do students who stutter need to benefit as much as possible from the education they are provided?"

We all know that stuttering is a complex communication disorder and that students who stutter have developed different strategies to cope with their stuttering.

Some students will communicate openly about their communication disorder and choose to speak in a way that is appropriate to the situation. Such a student might benefit when time pressure is reduced by giving him more time during presentations or oral exams.

But what are the needs of a student who is avoiding moments of stuttering and utilises strategies to make sure that he doesn't have to speak?

Case John

John is a first year student optometry. He is 19 years of age. He is a person who stutters and never had any fluency therapy or any other kind of therapy. He is very ashamed about his stuttering and avoids asking questions during lectures. He speaks as little as possible, is very often late or doesn't come to practical lectures especially, avoids role playing and doesn't use the telephone. He is depressed about his stuttering and very often cries about it when he is at home. John did not earn the required number of credits to continue his study.

During conversation with the student counsellor he speaks about his stuttering and the impact it has on his life. The student counsellor advises him to discuss his problem with the student adviser to find out the possibilities of the unimpeded learning program.

John's Process:

The student adviser advised John to contact a Fluency Specialist.

Assessment by the fluency specialist showed that John's stuttering at all aspects was very severe. The SSI scores as well as the scores on the OASES and scores on the Behaviour Assessment Battery were all 2 or more Standard Deviations above the average compared to male who stutter. The fluency specialist and John agreed that working with a psychotherapist was the first step to take because of the impact of the emotional component.

John started psychotherapy.

The results of the fluency assessment were discussed with the student adviser by the fluency specialist. At that moment the fluency specialist and the student adviser decided not to set up the educational regulation. John first had to make so much progress in therapy, in order to be sufficiently equipped to improve participation during classes. This decision was made to prevent the extra pressure. If John was told he had to improve participation when he wasn't ready for it, it might worsen the problem.

In the meantime the student counsellor informed John's lecturers and teachers Optometry about the fact that John was stuttering and advised them to read the brochure about Students Who Stutter.

After one month of psychotherapy John was ready to work on his avoidance behaviour and he made an appointment with the student adviser to set up his educational regulation.

John's Educational Regulation:

John got extra time to collect the credits he needs to pass his first year because of his specific stuttering problem if he showed that he was working on improving participation in oral learning situations.

The working plan, which consists of a list of situations in which John planned to participate step by step, set up by John and his psychologist, was a part of the educational regulation.

His student counsellor was paid to invest extra time to help John achieving his working plan goals.

Because of his chronic stuttering but also because of John's commitment towards therapy showed that he was working on improving participation during different oral learning situations his educational regulation was approved by the board of examiners of his department and he was allowed extra time to finish his first year.

John's educational regulation will be evaluated on regular intervals.

Educational regulations are flexible and can be adapted from time to time.