

## **Reflections on inclusive and accessible learning**

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by Dr. Alma Maria O. Salvador

**One of the means of including persons who are differently abled (PDAs) in learning is through universal design and accessible technology. Accessibility and universality are principles that dictate inclusive education. However, their grounding in Philippine higher education is weak and is challenged by a general lack of awareness and by economics. While the concept of inclusion is articulated in the mission-vision of institutions of tertiary education, this is not easily translated to the PDA's right to equal educational access.**

In the Ateneo de Manila University (ADMU), offices such as the Academic Affairs, Student Affairs, and Guidance, among others, are responsible for awareness-raising and for socializing the university to the concerns of students with different learning styles and special needs. In addition, the Facilities and Management Office and Ateneo Institute of Sustainability play a role in creating an accessibility and sustainability-driven university campus. However, there is a lot more that can be done to embrace an accessible culture where faculty, administrators, and students transform traditional learning practices with technological assistance in order to provide “reasonable accommodations” for persons who are differently abled.

A screen reader is an example of technology that aids a person who is blind and enables him/her access to Web-based information such as admission information, readings, power point, etc., through a process that converts word and PDF versions to readable formats. Information technology (IT) and non IT administrators and faculty will play a key role in institutionalizing the use of accessible formats in communications, instruction, and information including usage during emergency situations. Part of the exercise entails the use of alternative texts (alt text) in formatting Word texts/ images/ audio files to screen readable format. Through an initial accessible cyberlearning training with the Institute on Disability and Public Policy for the ASEAN Region (IDPP) ([www.aseanidpp.org](http://www.aseanidpp.org)), our partner in inclusive education advocacy, my colleagues and I in the Department of Political Science were introduced to a new formatting “technique” based on adding “style” to headings, subheadings, and images. Styled or structured formats are accessible to all persons including those with visual impairments. They allow the visually impaired to

navigate a document through context clues of formatted titles, subheadings, tables, and images. The same training exposed us to the appropriate use of jargons, hues, and font sizes that are required of accessible documentation.

Platform is another crucial matter. With reasonable accommodation, persons with impairments are mainstreamed to participate in live and in campus settings. However, the virtual platform that complements the face-to-face setting is a pragmatic approach to the reality of inadequately accessible environments. In ADMU, for instance, an infrastructural toll will be evident in the building of or transforming of offices with accessible elevators, dorms, toilets, libraries, etc.

Blackboard Collaborate, IDPP's preferred online platform, is customized to enable the inclusion of audiences with different physical functioning. <http://www.blackboard.com/Platforms/Collaborate/Products/Blackboard-Collaborate/Web-Conferencing/Accessibility.aspx> is an informative link that highlights the assistive and enabling technological features of the platform. In addition to the screen reader, Blackboard Collaborate provides for closed captioning, a text-based technology that enables a person with hearing impairment to participate in a conversation; for the mobility-impaired, the virtual platform incorporates the familiar chat room and "hot keys" that facilitate accessible manipulation of the keyboard.

ADMU has taken up the challenge of accessible learning with its partnership with the IDPP. In furthering accessible learning culture throughout the university, it should take the lead in incorporating accessibility features in its building designs in the future. There is also a huge horizon to expand beyond the present state of online offerings in which the distance learning masters program of the Konrad Adenauer Center for Journalism is pioneering. Support should be extended for the development of more out of campus (or "offshore"), hybrid, and blended programs designed to cater to a multifarious clientele. Finally, there are collaborations to be forged and learnings to be learnt from other institutes of higher learning.

Except for Brunei, the entire ASEAN region including the Philippines has ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Affirming our participation in a regime that advocates for disability-inclusive education is a national and regional obligation. It is also a movement that will align Philippine higher education to the evolving global norm of accessible and inclusive learning.

*Alma Maria O. Salvador, PhD, former chair of the Ateneo de Manila University Department of Political Science, is an assistant professor of Political Science and convener of the Working Group for Security Sector Reform.*