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Increasing Accessibility in Online Courses

by Amanda Brunson

During the current pandemic, more students are taking online courses than ever before as many universities and intensive English programs are choosing to continue with remote learning for the time being. But what is online learning like for ESL students with disabilities? This article explores some of the problems that students with disabilities may encounter in their online courses and offers suggestions for instructors on how to make their courses more accessible.

A disability is defined as “any condition of the body or mind (impairment) that makes it more difficult for the person with the condition to do certain activities (activity limitation) and interact with the world around them (participation restrictions)” (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, n.d., *What is Disability?*). Disability can include mobility impairments, learning disabilities, Autism Spectrum Disorder, emotional disturbance, intellectual disabilities, and speech impairments, among others. In order for any service or good, including education, to be accessible, a person with a disability must be “afforded the opportunity to acquire the same information, engage in the same interactions, and enjoy the same services as a person without a disability in an equally effective and equally integrated manner” (Burgstahler, 2017, *The Meaning of “Accessible”*).

It is estimated that 19.4% of undergraduate students in the U.S. have a disability (U.S. Department of Education, 2019); however, the actual number is probably higher because some students choose not to disclose, and others may not have documentation or access to testing to “officially” be considered disabled by their institution. In higher education, as opposed to K-12, it is the student’s responsibility to disclose their disability and request accommodations. Nevertheless, there are a number of

things faculty can do to make their online courses more accessible to students, whether or not the students have a documented disability and whether or not they have accommodations.

Online courses, particularly asynchronous ones, require students to self-regulate, to manage their time, and to prioritize tasks if they want to be successful. Unfortunately, students with disabilities, particularly ADHD, learning disabilities, and autism, often have trouble with executive function skills such as these (Dahlstrom-Hakki, Alstad, & Banerjee, 2020). Instructors can help with this by breaking down large projects into smaller assignments, giving clear step-by-step instructions, and by establishing a regular routine for the class.

Synchronous courses, such as those that meet frequently via video conferencing, sometimes include lectures and class discussion. Students with learning disabilities and processing disorders may have difficulty keeping up with the pace of the conversation (Dahlstrom-Hakki, et al., 2020), and students with autism, who already struggle with social skills such as understanding nonverbal communication (Cullen, 2015), may have even more difficulty in an online, synchronous discussion because of the “greater demand on social dynamics” (Dahlstrom-Hakki, et al., 2020, p. 9). Faculty can help in this area by not considering the amount that students talk as good participation, and by facilitating discussions in a way that gives students time to reflect and respond one-by-one.

As far as lecturing goes, instructors should record each lecture, make the video available to students, and be sure to include closed captioning or a transcript (Major, 2015). This will allow students with hearing impairments, sensory processing disorders, and a number of learning disabilities to re-watch the lecture or parts of the lecture as many times as they need to and read the content rather than listen to it.

Students who are blind or visually impaired and students with certain learning disabilities, such as dyslexia, may be using assistive technology such as screen readers.

Instructors should keep this in mind when designing their courses and posting text-based material and images. Some basic guidelines for creating accessible content include the use of headings and meaningful hyperlinks (i.e. a brief description rather than the words “click here”), as well as adding alternate text descriptions to images (Burgstahler, 2017; Major, 2015).

Other general advice for making classes more accessible includes providing multiple means of engagement, representation, and action and expression (CAST, 2018). For engagement, instructors should try to make the content relevant to the students, while keeping in mind that students may have different amounts of background knowledge or various motivations for taking the course. For representation, instructors should provide content in multiple modes, such as readings, videos, audio, and visual aids. And, for action and expression, whenever possible instructors can allow students to choose how they will demonstrate they have learned something. For example, students might be given the option to write a paper or give a speech.

It is always important to make online education accessible, but perhaps it is even more pertinent now that many students are forced to be in online classes due to the pandemic. Even as more campuses open up, and students return to face-to-face learning, online education will likely continue to grow. It is essential that it be accessible so that everyone has the opportunity to learn.

Following the recommendations presented in this article will not only assist students with disabilities but will also likely benefit students without disabilities. For example, if a lecture introduces students to technical terms and new vocabulary, all students would benefit from closed captioning or a transcript. Moreover, providing content in multiple modes caters to students' various learning preferences as well as improves learning as they receive information in multiple forms.

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