

Chapter 11

Removing the Disability from Distance Education

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ABSTRACT

Students with disabilities are increasingly opting to take distance education courses. As a result, many courses are not prepared to adequately meet the needs of their students. This chapter provides an overview of the main accessibility issues, including the delay in technology use and adaptation and assistive technology integration for people with disabilities in distance education courses. To mitigate these issues, a framework for instructional design, Universal Design for Learning (UDL), is presented. UDL is a set of three principles that, when applied from the beginning of the course design, can reduce the need for later modifications or accommodations. Instructors may use UDL to ensure that the course is accessible, not just for students with disabilities, but for all students in the course.

INTRODUCTION

One Faculty Member's Experience: Part I

At the world's only university established for the education of deaf and hard of hearing people, there is much talk of how technology works (or does not) for deaf individuals. The emphasis is on ensuring that technology promotes bilingualism, because the university is a bilingual university which uses American Sign Language (ASL) and English. This is particularly true for our online courses and programs, as the students do not have the benefit of attending classes on campus which is the center of American Deaf Culture. On-site courses are taught using ASL, thus ensuring direct access to deaf students in every subject area. This does not easily translate to online courses.

As a faculty member at this university, I have had the experience of teaching on-site, asynchronous online, and synchronous online courses. I also coordinate the university's only fully online program. As you will see throughout this chapter, through the research and my own experiences, there are still many challenges in supporting the needs of individuals with disabilities, even at a university whose mission is to promote the education of people who are deaf or hard of hearing.

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Chapter Outline

Distance education presents new ways for people to interact with others with whom they may never otherwise be able to connect. It unites people from different walks of life all around the globe through a central learning portal almost instantaneously. People can access Web-based distance courses at their convenience: from home, work, school, and even on-the-go with mobile devices. With this ease of access, it is easy to become complacent with the advances in distance learning providing greater access for students from a variety of backgrounds. However, there is at least one group for whom access to distance learning continues to be problematic: individuals with disabilities.

Where distance education has the capability of bridging spaces throughout the world by bringing people from different locations together, it also continues to marginalize many. Advances in technology occur quickly, but ensuring accessibility for people with disabilities continues to lag behind those advances. This chapter explores ways in which distance education currently moves people with disabilities into the margins or the mainstreams, reviews studies on current practices in distance education, discusses one way to promote access for all in distance courses, and provides suggestions for future needs in distance education research.

After reading this chapter, individuals will:

- Gain an understanding of the significant issues faced by people with disabilities as they try to engage in distance education.
- Identify current practices and issues in supporting students with disabilities in distance education courses.
- Understand how Universal Design and Universal Design for Learning can promote participation of people with disabilities in distance education.

BACKGROUND

Institutions of higher education are increasingly utilizing distance education models to deliver instruction (Allen & Seaman, 2013; Radford, 2011). Distance education takes a number of forms including fully asynchronous online instruction to synchronous multiple-site classes (Lou, Bernard, & Abrami, 2006; Parsad & Lewis, 2008). Historically, distance education has been low-tech, utilizing the correspondence course model, but today, distance education typically makes use of Web-based instruction that includes use of multimedia.

At first glance, it might seem that distance learning is all-inclusive in that anyone can participate at anytime from anywhere. After all, students with mobility issues enroll in distance education courses and programs at significantly higher rates than their peers without mobility issues (Pontes, Hasit, Pontes, Lewis, & Siefring, 2010; Radford, 2011). However, it is not always the case, particularly for people with disabilities, who are frequently marginalized by instructional methods that are not accessible to them. In fact, since the turn of the century, researchers have been examining the ways in which disability intersects with distance education, with the shared conclusion that there is some way to go before distance education will be fully accessible for people with disabilities (Asuncion, Fichten, Ferraro, Chwojka, Barile, Nguyen, & Wolfarth, 2010; Barnard-Brak, Lechtenberger, & Lan, 2010; Moisey, 2004; Pearson & Koppi, 2002).

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