

Chapter 7

Equitable Means Accessible: Using Universal Design for Learning and Student Development Theory to Inform Online Pedagogy

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ABSTRACT

The continued growth of online learning provides more educational opportunities to a diversity of people than ever before. In fact, Smith and Basham report that K-12 students with disabilities are opting for online learning environments at remarkably high rates, a trend unlikely to diminish as those students matriculate into postsecondary education. However, growth of educational practice is not always part and parcel of the growth of educational opportunity; too often, the latent shortcomings of traditional classrooms and teaching practices are heightened in non-traditional, virtual spaces. This chapter examines current models informing accessibility in education and explores the creative application of emerging pedagogical research and practices that support inclusive and accessible instruction across an increasingly diverse learner base.

INTRODUCTION

It has long been established by educational philosophers like John Dewey and Paulo Freire that a democratic and just society has the responsibility to provide public education that is accessible and equitable. Dewey (1916) affirmed that “only through education can equality of opportunity be anything more than a phrase” (p.223). While it is widely accepted that education has become a gatekeeper to social and financial status, but more importantly, it has the power and responsibility for (re)shaping society. Acknowledging this importance, higher education needs to “rethink its public role, to respond to the challenges of our time, and to reclaim its potential to transform society with people and planet in mind” (Tassone,

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O'Mahony, McKenna, Eppink, & Wals, 2018, p.349). As the complexities of institutions continue to grow and the student body diversifies, this calling becomes more complicated and ambiguous. Educators are challenged to create educational practices that are sensitive to the necessity of access, promote equality and equity for higher learning, and simultaneously balance fiscal responsibility.

Adding to this academic complexity is the emergence of online education and its role in access to higher education. Over one quarter of students in the U.S. take at least one online course (Allen & Seaman, 2015). As online learning opportunities continue to expand, it is imperative for researchers and practitioners to embrace the paradigm shift necessary for implementing pedagogical practices that are truly inclusive. In this chapter, we discuss the increasingly critical need for inclusive and culturally responsive pedagogy. Too often, discussions of inclusivity neglect the needs of individuals with differing abilities, particularly those who may present as able-bodied and/or neurotypical. Students learning in an online setting may experience the disregard of their disabilities more acutely, as already non-obvious differences are rendered even more so behind the computer screen.

Faculty have the responsibility to meet the needs of *all* students, not just the majority. While some pedagogical practices are selected out of convenience knowingly excluding some students, many times it is simply the result of an unawareness of how one's practices affect students. It is our hope this chapter serves as a primer to challenge educators to think about their practices through the lens of inclusivity. A mechanism to address and strive towards inclusive teaching practices, Universal Design for Learning (UDL), will be discussed in-depth. It has the potential to help faculty foster flexible learning environments to better meet the needs of all students. While faculty will never perfect their pedagogical practices, as the needs of students are dynamic and constantly changing, adhering to the best practices of UDL will begin the conversation and help to build momentum in this direction.

Thus, this chapter will explore the benefits and limitations of such frameworks from a systems perspective, with a particular focus on UDL, student development theory, and andragogy. We will discuss the need for greater attention to diversity in further developing these frameworks; the growing view that it is our curricula rather than our students who are disabled; student development and adult learning theories, and their applications to online pedagogy; and the use and misuse of rubrics in the assessment of our accessibility practices and of our students. We will also make recommendations for improving best practices in inclusive pedagogy and conclude with a consideration of future scholarship opportunities.

BACKGROUND

In 2018, it can be hard to imagine a time when terms like *accommodations*, *accessibility*, *ADA compliance* and so on weren't part of the professional lexicon for educational practitioners at all levels; however, our relatively quick adjustment to such terms and the underlying policies as routine belies how truly recently American education (and society writ large) began to address and subsequently shift its view and treatment of individuals with disabilities and disabilities in teaching and learning spaces. Indeed, even modern social justice movements focusing on important diversity, equity, and inclusion work often neglect individuals with disabilities (particularly those with invisible disabilities) as valuable members of inclusive communities.

The National Center for Education Statistics (2016) reports 11% of undergraduates identify as having at least one disability of some kind. The total number of undergraduates with an ADA-recognized disability is likely much higher; disabilities are not always readily apparent, and many students choose

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