Chapter IV

Universal Design for Online Education: Access for All

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Abstract

This chapter will discuss accessibility issues related to online education. It will provide rationale for designing online courses that cater to different levels of functional ability. It will also present an overview of the challenges faced by students with disabilities in accessing and interacting with online course materials and activities. In order to address the potential barriers to full participation, national and international guidelines will be examined, with particular emphasis on their implications for specific course components. In addition, mechanisms for validation of web accessibility will be suggested and resources will be listed for those interested in obtaining further information on the topic.
Introduction

Universal design calls for the development of information systems flexible enough to accommodate the needs of the broadest range of users of computers and telecommunications equipment, regardless of age or disability (Campbell & Waddell, 1997, p. 4).

In terms of learning, universal design means the design of instructional materials and activities that makes the learning goals achievable by individuals with wide differences in their abilities to hear, see, speak, move, read, write, understand English, attend, organize, engage, and remember. Universal design for learning is achieved by means of flexible curricular materials and activities that provide alternatives for students with differing abilities. These alternatives are built into instructional design and operating systems — they are not added on after-the-fact (Danielson, 1999, pp. 2-3).

At a recent faculty workshop on inclusive education, an experienced professor raised his hand and commented “Good teaching is good teaching.” After a pause and a few puzzled looks from the other participants, he explained his statement in greater detail. He claimed that if teachers use effective pedagogical strategies in their teaching, they automatically reach out to diverse populations, including persons with disabilities.

In fact, a review of the Theory of Multiple Intelligences developed by Gardner (2000) points to a similar conclusion. This theory postulates eight different pathways to learning (linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial, musical, bodily-kinesthetic, naturalistic, intrapersonal, interpersonal). Learners use different channels to acquire information; therefore, an effective teacher should ensure that his or her teaching is not based on only one mode of instruction. By utilizing a variety of ways to present course materials, the teacher will increase the likelihood that a broader range of students will access and process the information. Consequently, students with disabilities will benefit from teaching approaches that integrate various sensory, physical, cognitive, and social experiences.
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