

Chapter 1

Re-Examining Online Learning Practices Now and Beyond

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ABSTRACT

Educators need to support all students' learning needs to provide equitable access to online learning. During the COVID-19 crisis, the abrupt and unplanned shift to online learning did not support the learning of all students. This was a challenge, but it was also a valuable learning experience for a better future. With proper planning, educators can provide all students with high-quality online learning experiences when the delivery of knowledge is challenged. This chapter discusses how the community of inquiry enhances the quality of online learning while also promotes inclusivity. There are multiple approaches to examining strategies that support diversity, equity, and inclusivity in online environments. Universal design for learning principles are considered in relation to the literature on inclusive and accessible teaching and learning for a broader range of students with and without disabilities. The chapter concludes by envisioning what online learning might look like in the future.

INTRODUCTION

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals recognize digital inclusion and equitable access to technology as critical factors in promoting quality education. With online learning transforming higher education (Pelletier et al., 2022), providing equitable online learning experiences for all students is challenging. When the

DOI: 10.4018/979-8-3693-0268-2.ch001

COVID-19 pandemic disrupted face-to-face education, the abrupt and unplanned shift to online learning did not support the learning of all students. Emphasizing the significance of preparedness, Rapanta et al. (2020) stated that “the worst thing that could happen is not learning from the crisis we experienced” (p. 941). Various lessons have been drawn from the abrupt closure of institutions across the globe (e.g., Auf, 2023; Ferdig & Pytash, 2021; Holzweiss et al., 2020; Homer, 2022; Khlaif et al., 2021), including policy lessons (e.g., Fernández-Batanero et al., 2022; Zancanella & Rice, 2021). Furthermore, for decades, researchers have been exploring best practices in online teaching (e.g., Baran & Correia, 2014; Goode et al., 2022; McBrien et al., 2009; Picciano, 2017; York & Richardson, 2012).

However, will educators deal with another form of *emergency remote teaching* (Chaka, 2020; Hodges et al., 2020) if another global pandemic or disaster strikes? Will the sudden closure of institutions disrupt students’ education or violate their fundamental right to receive a quality education? These questions and many more are meant to spark global discussions and promote preparedness to develop quality online learning courses and programs for the present and uncertain future (Salmon, 2019). Framed within the Community of Inquiry (CoI) (Garrison et al., 2000), this chapter sheds some light on online learning practices for educators. What we can learn from the COVID-19 crisis is that when face-to-face education is disrupted, an alternative delivery mode, such as a well-designed online education, should support the learning of all students and their needs. Dhawan (2020) suggested that understanding online practices is not an option but rather an obligation for educators to better prepare for an uncertain future.

Given the global reality of significant growth and popularity of online learning due to the pandemic, technological advancements like Artificial Intelligence (AI) for learning tools, Virtual Reality (VR), and Augmented Reality (AR) (Pelletier et al., 2022; Salmon, 2019). Moreover, with the increased demand for flexible, accessible, and personalized learning (Goode et al., 2022; Saadatmand et al., 2017; Witthaus, 2023), promoting meaningful engagement in online environments for all students is challenging for educators and institutions. The challenges center on aiming for as much equity as possible for an increasing diversity of students across cultural and international boundaries (Araujo Dawson et al., 2022) or when students are not in inequitable environments (Bates, 2019). However, to ensure that all students, regardless of their abilities, backgrounds, or circumstances, have equal educational opportunities and better online learning experiences, educators must support various students’ diverse needs.

This chapter provides nuanced insights into some design principles and practices that promote diversity, equity, inclusivity, and accessibility in online environments. It examines various online learning experiences, practices, and issues in higher education. The chapter begins with an introduction. The second section explores

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