

Chapter 14

Online Learning for All: Addressing Best Practices and Systemic Inequities

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ABSTRACT

The current pandemic has brought to light two areas of the online American educational system that need to be improved. One is the need to promote a greater sense of online teaching efficacy, leading to the ability to navigate the online teaching environment to promote student learning. The other is addressing the disparities that the pandemic uncovered associated with involving all learners in the online environment. Online learning for all learners and structures/systems that support equity is needed to have a seat at the table, whether that table is face-to-face or online. This chapter will address best practices of engaging learners in an online environment that can positively impact teacher online self-efficacy. The institutional culture and climate which led to the disparities that left many institutions rushing to make sure that all their learners would be served will be examined.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter will examine the questions “How did we get here?” and “Where do we go from here?” concerning the disparities and inequities in the American educational systems that have been revealed during the global COVID-19 pandemic. These disparities cover the lack of technology access by learners and the lack of preparedness of educators to teach in a virtual environment. Learners from marginalized groups were left without access to technology and Internet connections. Educators who were not prepared to teach online were suddenly expected to engage their learners in this new virtual environment. Looking at the sources of these issues can lead to understanding the steps that are needed to make sure that all learners and all educators are prepared to continue the learning during a global crisis.

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Online Learning for All

The issues and problems surrounding the inequities in online learning that have been revealed during the pandemic are multidimensional. This chapter will take a multidimensional approach to the inequities and to the possible solutions. Systemic elements will be discussed to build context and to show the interwoven nature of the many dimensions of the problem. After building that context, a range of solutions will be offered.

This chapter will examine and discuss the importance of institutional culture and climate, the role of implicit bias, the inequities for learners that were revealed through the pandemic, and the need for professional development for educators to effectively teach and learn in an online environment. Institutional and professional practices to create and sustain a more inclusive and equitable educational environment will be discussed.

BACKGROUND

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted every aspect of life. The pandemic has revealed several disturbing issues, including a lack of readiness to address major health problems, a fragile supply system, and even greater disparities in healthcare and education than were previously acknowledged. Disparities in education focus on aspects of inclusion and belonging. As educational institutions explore options with regard to reopening and moving forward, leaders are challenged with creating workplace environments, whether virtual or face-to-face, which are based authentically upon principles of belonging and inclusion.

The need to move to virtual learning revealed the depth of the digital divide that currently exists when it was revealed that many learners did not have the equipment and wireless access that was needed to engage in virtual learning. On top of that, some teachers stated they were unaware that some children in their class did not have Internet services in their homes. Educational institutions were left scrambling to find ways to reach all of their learners. It is important moving forward to examine how and why these disparities exist. There is a need to examine beliefs and biases in institutional culture and climate. There is a need for culturally responsive pedagogy in online learning. There is a need for professional learning in online teaching/learning for teachers.

The COVID-19 pandemic revealed that United States educators were not prepared to transfer their face-to-face teaching/learning to the virtual environment. This gap in preparedness extended to all levels of learning environments, both basic and higher education environments. Educators need to have specific and intentional professional development in virtual teaching/learning in order to be effective (Davis & Rose, 2007). Online learning self-efficacy is needed for educators to successfully address the learning needs of all of their students.

Each of these elements will be addressed in this chapter. An understanding is needed of institutional culture and climate and the role that implicit bias has in shaping the culture and climate of educational institutions. The professional development needs of educators for online learning will be discussed to examine how the disparity in preparedness for virtual learning has contributed to inequities in teaching/learning. Solutions to address these needs will be discussed.

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