

Chapter 1

Exploring Accessibility in Online and Blended Learning: Universal Design for Learning as a Lens on Equity in a Post-COVID K–12 Landscape

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ABSTRACT

The covid crisis has created an emergency public health situation in the K-12 sector globally that has imposed an overnight pivot to online and blended teaching and significantly accelerated a shift that had been a decade coming. There have definitely been positive outcomes to this health crisis, and change has been accelerated in schools: technology has had to be rapidly integrated, online teaching developed at lightning speed, blended instruction embraced without hesitation. These changes had faced considerable resistance in the K-12 sector before then. Unfortunately, the positive outcomes have also been accompanied by worrying challenges. Accessibility, in particular, has been set aside during the pivot, and many forms of online and blended teaching developed during the pandemic have been far from inclusive. The needs of students with disabilities have been neglected. The chapter argues that universal design for learning is a convenient, hands-on, and user-friendly framework to guide teachers as they reflect on inclusion within these innovative online learning spaces.

INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

The COVID crisis has brought rapid changes to the K-12 landscape by forcing an overnight pivot to distance and blended learning (Peterson et al., 2020). As schools readjust to a ‘new normal’, it is becoming increasingly apparent that these two modes of delivery are now inherently and intimately tied to the way we perceive and construct 21st century public education (Dhawan, 2020). Practitioners may have been reluctant adopters, among the chaos that ensued during the public health crisis, but even the most

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fervent opponent now has to accept that online and blended teaching have a place in schools' proactive preparedness for any major future social disruption (Di Pietro et al., 2020; Guzer & Caner, 2014).

This pivot, however, has not been seamless for most. Critics have been quick to point out that it has widened the socio-economic gaps among learners (Fox, 2020); it has also disproportionately affected international students and second language learners (Williams & Carhill-Poza, 2020). It is students with disabilities, however, that have been the most affected (AIR, 2020). Despite legislative protection guaranteeing adherence to inclusive policies, schools and school boards have been able to argue 'undue hardship' in a situation of force majeure, to dismiss the needs of students with disabilities in favour of other steps – purportedly more urgent and seemingly benefiting the greater majority (Waberi, 2020).

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) has been increasingly popular, within the last decade, as a framework to implement inclusive provisions in schools (Basham, Gardner & Smith, 2020). It is popular because it allows practitioners to free themselves from the constraints of medical model processes to instead think proactively about access from a design perspective (Buyrn & Murray Stowe, n.d.). UDL has never been as useful as it is today, in a COVID landscape, to guide teachers towards approaches to the development of online and blended learning that guarantee that students with disabilities do not become the forgotten casualties of this rapid transformation. It is a quickly evolving landscape, where practitioners seek immediately relevant resources, and UDL is uniquely pertinent because it allows teachers to consider accessibility beyond the conventional and rather onerous structure of the Individualized Educational Plans (IEP), accommodations and publicly funded retrofitting (Alberta Inclusion, n.d.). This chapter will examine the many ways UDL supports teachers in the COVID landscape, as they seek to maintain accessibility and inclusive provisions within an online and blended teaching space. It situates this reflection and analysis within a Canadian context, but considers how these outcomes may have global relevance beyond.

EXPLORING THE LITERATURE

The first section of the chapter examines the emerging literature on the effect of the COVID health crisis, within the public education sector, on online and blended learning in K-12; it also explores the literature on UDL in the K-12 sector.

Online Learning

Interestingly, the body of literature around online learning has its roots in the scholarship on distance education, rather than in the literature on technology itself (Kentnor, 2015; Bozkurt, 2019). Indeed, until very recently, online and distance education have been conceived, rather simplistically in the K-12 sector, as the simple transfer of face to face instruction to a new media (Gilbert, 2015; Johnston, 2020). As a result, there has been a paucity of in-depth reflection and analysis as to the redesign required to achieve effective online or blended learning (Fidalgo et al., 2020). The lack of organic reflection around the growth of online learning has become painfully apparent during the COVID pandemic; teachers have voiced the extent to which they were unplanned and untrained to take on the rapid –sometimes overnight – online pivot (Miller, 2020; Mirchandani, 2020).

Even if the field was not prepared for a shift to online learning, there has certainly been within research itself some crucial conceptualization around the essential conditions required for successful online or

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