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Considerations of Access and Design in the Online Writing Classroom

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Abstract

This article argues that writing programs have an opportunity to create a new playing field in their online composition courses. A playing field that conceives of students and content differently than does a typical iteration of an online course (a course that traditionally migrates materials and practices from a f2f context and reimagines them for an online setting). The focus of this article emphasizes how readers can use user-centered design in their online courses to accommodate all students with varying learning styles. Readers will gain a better understanding of how significant user-centered design can be for maintaining student enrollments, promoting learning and avoiding attrition. Further readers will understand that specific moves made by the instructor will have very real repercussions on whether or not a course, or even elements of a course, are accessible by all.

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1. Introduction

Many writing programs face the challenge of creating courses for a varied student demographic, including underprepared students and students with learning disabilities (McLeod, 2007, p. 84–85). Not only is this a very real challenge when teaching face-to-face (f2f), but when teaching and learning are transferred to the online domain, new challenges arise. Kelli Cargile Cook (2005) explains, programs are “Faced with institutional pressures and technological mandates, [resulting in] concerned instructors [. . .] struggling with a variety of questions, anxieties, and fears about how they will teach with online technologies” (p. 51). As writing programs impact nearly all students on campus, it is imperative that instructors within these programs be prepared to teach online, specifically prepared to teach the diverse students who will take an online course. Online student populations, according to Marjorie T. Davis (2005), “will almost certainly be much larger and more diverse than students sitting in a physical classroom” (p. 17). Diversity recognizes that students come from all walks of life and come to the class with different skill-sets and abilities. Diversity recognizes that not all of the population is able bodied and that some require accommodations. Diversity also acknowledges that students learn differently, and have different learning styles/preferences (aural, auditory, visual, spatial, hands on, etc.).

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The diverse combination of students in an online course requires that instructors design materials that simultaneously cater to multiple learning styles. While this is no different than many f2f classes, online, the instructor cannot identify specific qualities about students that a f2f instructor could by observing the class. Considering the wide range of needs and preferences of the student demographic who will take these courses, it becomes important to consider a definition of access that extends beyond accessible course materials. Instructors should anticipate that students will use mobile devices to access the materials, that students will also be working at all hours of the day and that some students may have disabilities that require accommodations. This diversity of students translates to a need for varied approaches to instruction that move beyond methods designed for f2f instruction and consider the unique opportunities inherent in teaching within the online domain. A very real challenge in approaching online course design, and for us, in writing about it, is to determine the balance between attempting to improve course design for every student in our courses, but not overly generalize about all students in a way that diminishes the needs of students with specific disabilities. While it is firmly established through the classic example of the curb cut, that “inclusive design is better design for all” (Womack, 2017, p. 497), the danger, as Anne-Marie Womack (2017) states is that in focusing too much on accommodations for all students, as opposed to individual students, “disabled students who have more limited options again fall to the wayside” (2017, p. 499). While our intentions are to improve instruction for each student, it is possible that by doing so we adversely impact the very students we are working to assist. In attempting to help all students, it’s imperative that instructors pay particular attention to their teaching practices, to more critically examine their own biases, attempts at inclusivity, and how to provide students with what works best for each of them.

The first of the principles in *A Position Statement of Principles and Example Effective Practices for Online Writing Instruction (OWI)* states that “Online writing instruction should be universally inclusive and accessible.” But what does this mean? How is inclusivity/accessibility defined? The Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI) explains “accessibility means that people with disabilities can perceive, understand, navigate, and interact with websites and tools, and that they can contribute equally without barriers” (Henry, Abou-Zahra, & White, 2016). WAI furthers that inclusion establishes that materials should “be usable by everyone to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation” and that “Inclusion addresses a broad range of issues including access to and quality of hardware, software, and Internet connectivity; computer literacy and skills; economic situation; education; geographic location; and language — as well as age and disability” (Henry et al., 2016). In *Making Online Teaching Accessible*, Norman Coombs (2010) blends inclusivity/accessibility as he argues for creating a level learning space (in online courses) for students with disabilities. Due to technological innovations, Coombs (2010) states “. . . schools and universities now have the opportunity to create a learning space that puts students with disabilities on a more level playing field than ever before” (p. 28). Inspired by Coombs’ notion, we will argue that writing programs have an opportunity to create a new playing field with their online writing courses, one that conceives of students and content differently than a typical iteration of an online course where pedagogy, materials and practices are migrated from a f2f context and applied to the online setting.

In this article, we will provide discussion of the importance of making an online course more open and accessible to students and offer suggestions on how to do so. With the focus of this article emphasizing the individualized nature of student learners and added challenges that students with learning differences face, readers will gain a better understanding of how significant user-centered design (UCD) can be for promoting learning and decreasing student attrition. We feel it is important for readers to understand that specific moves made by the teacher will have very real repercussions on whether or not a course, or even elements of a course, are accessible by the students in the course. We will argue that in addition to developing and compiling the content for online writing courses, instructors should pay close attention to the design of their online writing courses to accommodate varied learning styles and make the course itself “universally inclusive and accessible” (CCCC Executive Committee).

Throughout this article, we aim to raise questions about online course design because an instructor’s design decisions play an integral role in the potential for student success in an online course. We hope that by raising questions on design, we will encourage readers to question how they assemble their online courses and consider how they can make those courses more inclusive and accessible for students with myriad learning styles, preferences and abilities. We will discuss how online course design can be negatively affected when instructors try to take their course materials from a traditional f2f space and insert them into a digital environment or pay minimal attention to how different the online domain is compared to the f2f domain. We begin our piece with an understanding of user-centered design. We aim to define it and ask readers to consider how it could be used in online courses. Next, we discuss the challenge of OWI

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