Creating Inclusive, Accessible Online Learning

The following are best practices to consider as you are preparing to teach in a fully online format. Please remember that most suggestions for making your courses accessible to students with disabilities and other specific learning needs will also enhance the learning of all students. The focus on equity and inclusion for all of our students aligns with the mission and strategic goals of the university. Much of what we refer to here is based on Universal Design recommendations. Keep in mind that the population of students with disabilities includes those with physical disabilities, learning disabilities, and mental health disorders.

ENGAGEMENT

1. Student engagement can be difficult to maintain and assess in online formats. During class, encourage peer-to-peer and student-to-instructor discussions to help maintain student involvement. This can be accomplished through a variety of teaching methods (debates, interactive lectures, student presentations, team/small group activities, dyads, Kahoot contests, etc.) Be creative and change methods from week to week!

2. Limit the amount of synchronous lecturing during class. Studies indicate that students’ online attention span is between 6-10 minutes! Consider providing a partial asynchronous component that students can watch/listen to at their leisure prior to that class session. This will also allow students to slow down, speed up, or listen to more than once. “Chunk” these asynchronous lectures or PowerPoint presentations in 10 minute sections.

3. Assign 2-3 students (depending on class size) per class to take notes and share on Google Docs.

4. Use Google Docs or similar platforms to encourage resource sharing among students.

TECHNOLOGY

1. Assure the accessibility of texts (such as articles, PDFs, Word documents, etc.) and other resources by checking their compatibility with screen readers. If your text is not compatible, you might consider a new text or seek assistance from our Digital Learning professionals on campus. Digital Learning staff can assist you in checking for and setting up needed features. Instructions can also be found on the DSS website under the “For Faculty” tab.
2. There are a number of equity issues related to the use of web cams. Be aware that some students may need to avoid looking directly at their screen or need to turn their camera on and off multiple times throughout the class. Students should not lose participation points should they need to do so. Distractibility can also be due to mental health issues.
3. Students might need to keep their mics muted due to background noise that might disturb the class. Allow students to “mic” in and out as needed.
4. Ensure that video/audio clips include an option for closed captioning for legal compliance. If this is not an option and the media chosen is absolutely essential, seek assistance from the Digital Learning staff.
5. If using PowerPoint or other visual aids, avoid busy graphics, colors and animations that may be distracting or inaccessible to learners with visual impairments or visual discrimination disorders.
6. Use narrated videos.

ATTENDANCE
1. Let the class know to contact you if they have a medical situation that prevents their attendance or causes them to be tardy. Students should not be penalized in those situations.
2. Some students use their cell phones to help them manage supports related to their disabilities, or maintain their availability for family issues/emergencies. Consider creating a policy for such usage (i.e. phones should be silenced, ask students to send you a private message should these needs occur, etc.).

LEARNING SUPPORT
1. Follow-up with students who seem to be out of synch in online discussion boards, chats, etc. Sometimes, the nature of a student’s disability might require an additional accommodation, or might easily be improved with instructor guidance.
2. Avoid pointing out students who appear distracted or display unexpected nonverbal behaviors as these might relate to ADD/ADHD or Autism Spectrum issues.
3. Assist students who are approved for notetaking services by helping to recruit a classmate to take notes. DSS can work with you to create an alternative if needed.
4. Some students need to hold printed materials in their hands to stay focused or hand-write their responses to scan and upload. Many will not have access to printers. Be flexible!
5. Allow students to submit first drafts to allow for feedback and guidance.
6. Where pedagogically appropriate, chunk and scaffold assignments into sections throughout the semester to avoid assignment overload at the end of the semester.
7. Provide summaries of critical content covered each week, or allow students to access your instructor notes. If used, provide PowerPoint handouts prior to the start of each class to encourage notetaking. These handouts will also be useful for students who are unable to connect to Zoom on any given class session.
8. Where FERPA compliant, record class sessions for later review by students.
9. Where appropriate to meeting course objectives, offer multiple ways to assess student knowledge on any one assignment (i.e. write a paper, create a presentation or video, etc.).
10. Provide options to work in small or large groups, or independently.

EXAMS

1. Format exams to ensure better accessibility. Use at least 12 point font and limit the number of questions appearing on each page/screen. Allow students to return to previous questions to edit their responses as this is an effective exam-taking strategy.
2. Consider using alternative methods to assess student knowledge by offering multiple options for exam/assignment completion (i.e. papers, presentations, teaching class content).
3. Administer exams asynchronously. This addresses a variety of equity issues such as family responsibilities, access to technology, and physical space conflicts, and allows students taking medication to select times more compatible with any attention or energy constraints.

COMMUNICATION

1. Update changes to your syllabus on Blackboard in a timely manner. Consider using the announcement feature on the course Bb page and also make announcements about any changes in class. Reminders always help!
2. Provide clear expectations on course assignments. Post rubrics for how each assignment will be assessed. Provide detailed, specific feedback on assignments. If feasible, provide samples of exemplary work.
3. In addition to communicating with the entire class, schedule individual meetings with students at the beginning and toward the ending of the semester (depending on class size).

Initiated by the CARES Act Equity Task Force in August 2020. Created by Dr. Gail Uellendahl, Professor- School of Education and Wendy Jimenez, Director of Disability Support Services.