Chapter 7

Arguing for Proactivity: Talking Points for Owning Accessibility in Online Writing Instruction

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ABSTRACT

The field of composition studies has come to value online writing instruction’s potential because it has matured theoretically. Despite its status as a viable means of instruction, research shows that those who teach it fail to comply with the obligation of accessibility and inclusivity in their online courses. When meeting ideals for accessible and inclusive online writing instruction remains unimportant and difficult to put into practice, instructors fail students with disabilities. The author argues that instructors need to advocate for a proactive approach at their institutions to address the issue of not providing accessible and inclusive online writing courses. A proactive approach supports instructors in attending to the online learning environment before launching a course so that it meets the needs of students with disabilities. This essay offers ideas for framing a conversation to address the issue described above and to encourage establishing a culture of proactivity, and it provides a vision for the features of a proactive culture.

INTRODUCTION

Students with disabilities have a right to equal access to all courses, programs, services, and activities offered through a university, guaranteed by two federal laws: the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Section 504) and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. Both laws mandate that universities provide students with disabilities the necessary accommodations to ensure equal access to all academic and co-curricular programs and services. Furthermore, changing demographics point to the potential for an increase in the number of students with disabilities enrolling in our online writing courses. Oswal and Meloncon (2014), drawing from D. M. Hinn (1999), claim that this is a result of a growth in the number of online writing courses: “[It] has opened up learning opportunities for students with disabilities because ‘Web-based instruction may be the only way that some students can independently access courses and course materials—something that is a powerful reminder of the need for accessible distance education’” (p. 106).
Griffin and Minter (2013) point to a changing demographic in light of a broad range of institutional contexts for online courses: “[D]emographic analysis of postsecondary degree-seeking students suggests that, increasingly, writing classrooms will see greater numbers of underrepresented populations, English language learners, and students with disabilities” (p. 146). Referencing a report published by the US Government Accounting Office, the University of Alaska notes that “more students with disabilities are pursuing higher education” and that “[i]n particular, veterans with newly acquired disabilities are enrolling at high rates” (Disability Support Services, n.d.).

Unfortunately, there is a disconnect between the ideals for effective online writing instruction (OWI) with regard to inclusivity and accessibility and the reality of meeting those laudable goals.

Most institutions that offer online courses and the field of composition studies promote standards for effective online instruction that include a concern for accessibility and inclusivity. Many institutions promote definitions of quality developed by Quality Matters (QM) or the Online Learning Consortium (OLC) by subscribing to the services these organizations provide. These services allow instructors to assess their courses to see if they meet standards for well-designed courses that support successful online learning. QM (2014) offers a “faculty-centered, peer review process that is designed to certify the quality of online and blended courses.” The OLC (2015), “devoted to advancing quality online learning,” provides “professional development, instruction, best practices publications, and guidance to educators.” Many institutions provide online resources that can educate instructors about designing courses that are accessible and inclusive. At the University of Alaska Anchorage, for instance, instructors are directed to videos about Universal Design for Learning (UDL). UDL, the result of an interest on the part of educational researchers to “explore ways of using new technology to provide better educational experiences to students with disabilities” (CAST, CAST Timeline, 2015) provides educators with a “framework to improve and optimize teaching and learning for all people based on scientific insights into how humans learn” (CAST, About Universal Design for Learning, 2015). Instructors can also find a link to WebAIM, a non-profit associated with the Utah State University, whose mission is “to expand the potential of the web for people with disabilities by providing the knowledge, technical skills, tools, organizational leadership strategies and vision that empower organizations to make their web content accessible to people with disabilities” (WebAIM, 2016). WebAIM offer information, training, and resources that provide “comprehensive web accessibility solutions.” Institutions also promote standards developed by the World Wide Web Consortium (WC3), most notably those associated with the organization’s Web Accessibility Initiative. The current standards, known as “Web Content Accessibility Guidelines 2.0” (WCAG 2.0), are elaborate technical guidelines developed with the input from individuals and organizations around the world. WCAG 2.0 consists of 12 guidelines organized under four principles (perceivable, operable, understandable, and robust) and testable criteria for success in meeting these guidelines. Finally, those who teach OWI can also refer to “A Position Statement of Principles and Effective Practices for OWI” provided through an affiliation with the National Council of Teachers of English (Committee for Effective Practices, 2013b).

All of these resources advocate for the importance of accessibility and inclusivity:

- QM requires course design to meet standards for accessibility and usability.
- OLC, which considers each criterion for quality to be related and interdependent, links access with having opportunity and achieving success.
- The organization that sponsors UDL strives to “Bust the barriers to learning that millions of people experience everyday” (CAST, Our Work, 2015).