Chapter VI

American Sign Language Learning Objects for Instruction: A Higher Education Perspective

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Abstract

Little consideration has been given to involving the deaf community in higher education teaching and learning as it relates to the use of instructional technology. The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee was mindful of this need and collaborated with Instructional Communications Systems, University of Wisconsin-Extension to work with instructors in the use of technology and develop American Sign Language (ASL) learning objects as components of ASL courses. The purpose of this chapter is to present a background on learning objects; the use of ASL learning objects in three higher education settings; recommendations for the use of learning objects for multiple higher education disciplines; and insights into future and emerging trends related to the use of learning objects in higher education.

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Introduction

Today, 54 million Americans—20% of the population—have some form of disability that affects their capabilities of hearing, seeing, or walking (Freedom Initiative, 2001). Nearly 20 million people nationally, and 500 million people worldwide are deaf and hard of hearing (National Deaf Education Network & Clearinghouse, 1989). Historically, society has tended to isolate and segregate people with disabilities. Despite some improvements, such forms of discrimination against these individuals continue to be a serious and pervasive problem that persists in many areas.

In July of 1990, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was signed into law by President George H. Bush. This act describes a clear and comprehensive national mandate to provide consistent and enforceable standards to address any type of discrimination against individuals with disabilities. The Telecommunications Act, Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act Amendments of 1998, and the Workforce Reinvestment Act are more recent mandates that address technology accessibility and instructional design, requiring systems to be designed with accessibility built-in, where possible, for instructors and learners (Freedom Initiative, 2001). These mandates have served to bring technology accessibility and program design to the attention of higher education.

Little consideration, however, has been given to involving the deaf community in higher education teaching and learning as it relates to the use of instructional technology. In order to meet the changing needs of learners and instructors, the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (UWM) has been mindful of this need. This university collaborated with Instructional Communications Systems, University of Wisconsin-Extension to train instructors in the use of technology, assisted in the development of 351 basic-level video-based American Sign Language (ASL) learning objects, and applied and promoted their use in undergraduate education. The first use of the ASL learning objects was in a distance education course offered in the summer of 2001. Subsequently, these learning objects have also been used as instructional aids in traditional face-to-face classes and in independent learning.

The purpose of this chapter is to present: (1) a background on learning objects (definitions and characteristics of learning objects, and ways in which they have been used in general); (2) the use of ASL learning objects in three higher education settings; (3) recommendations for the use of learning objects for multiple higher education disciplines; and (4) insights into future and emerging trends related to the use of learning objects in higher education.
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