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## Accessibility in the Basic Course: A Case for Retaining Pandemic Technology

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## Basic Course Forum

# Accessibility in the Basic Course: A Case for Retaining Pandemic Technology

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### Abstract

*This piece focuses on the potential of technologies adopted during the COVID-19 crisis to enhance accessibility for students with disabilities in the basic course. The pandemic disrupted traditional modes of teaching and learning and required basic course instructors to seek out technologies that could help meet the goals of a traditional classroom experience. This piece suggests that this spirit of flexibility with technology should be retained in traditional classrooms going forward, as it can benefit students with disabilities. First, Universal Design for Learning is discussed, including its emphasis on providing multiple options for learning and the guidelines it presents for creating more accessible classrooms. Then, discussion turns to two examples of technologies utilized during the pandemic that could be retained and deployed to offer a variety of learning options for students. Such options increase accessibility and benefit all students.*

*Keywords: COVID-19, pandemic, educational technology, accessibility, disabilities, Zoom.*

As higher education institutions abruptly shut their doors in 2020, faculty scrambled to find tools for teaching and learning during a pandemic. The shift to emergency remote learning demanded flexibility that higher education had never experienced, and technology was critical in keeping classes going. Faculty were pushed outside their comfort zones, relying on technology they'd never taught with (e.g., Zoom) or

had not fully utilized (e.g., Blackboard, Canvas). Now, two years later, technology remains a crucial component of university plans to keep the doors open during these difficult times. One of the questions posed for this forum asked which pandemic changes might be retained to benefit the basic course, and I believe we could use pandemic-era technology to offer better access for students with disabilities. Specifically, by adding technology-based options to our permanent repertoire, we increase access for students.

### **Universal Design for Learning and Pandemic Technology**

Educational access has long been a concern of students with disabilities and those who support them. In recent years, Universal Design for Learning (UDL), a set of guidelines for developing accessible courses, has been at the forefront of conversations about access. UDL's goal is to create courses where all students "can access and participate in meaningful, challenging learning opportunities" (CAST, 2018, para. 1).

UDL's principles center around providing multiple learning options for students, specifically, multiple 1) *means of engagement* (participating in learning), 2) *means of representation* (ways for students to acquire knowledge), and 3) *means of action and expression* (ways for student to show what they know). Emphasis is placed on offering options so that the diverse needs of learners are met, in turn empowering them to take charge of learning (CAST, 2018). Such options benefit all learners, not just students with disabilities. In fact, options are critical to access—true access is not achieved without them.

In considering pandemic practices to retain, it's worth considering how greater (and better) utilization of technology might offer students options. It's a particularly relevant conversation for the basic course because the pandemic disrupted our preferred ways of teaching—small, face-to-face sections featuring class discussion, group activities, and public speaking (Morreale et al., 2016). The pandemic also disrupted our traditional ways of establishing relationships with students, which are particularly critical to students with disabilities (Joyce, 2018). However, in facing the pandemic's access challenges, we may have found ways to offer better access to students with disabilities. Furthermore, it's appropriate for the basic course because we see students early in their college careers and positive experiences with us can encourage students with disabilities going forward (Joyce, 2018).

To illustrate how pandemic-inspired alternatives benefit students with disabilities, I offer two exemplars: 1) a videoconferencing option for office hours, and 2) an online option for class discussion.

### **Videoconferencing Meetings**

Videoconferencing was not widely adopted pre-pandemic due to reticence about technology and preferences for in-person interaction (McKenzie, 2021). However, we have all become more at home with technologies such as Zoom or Microsoft Teams, and such familiarity may benefit students with disabilities.

While office hours are important supplements to in-class instruction and can facilitate positive student-faculty relationships, in-person office hours can prove a barrier for some students with disabilities. Physical impairments can make it prohibitively difficult for students to traverse campus. The extra effort required for an in-person meeting may discourage disabled students from meeting with professors at all. Offering multiple means of engaging with a faculty member could remove that barrier for some students with disabilities.

Additionally, videoconferencing may create options for disabled students to interact more easily with peers. Class and meeting spaces are often not designed for group work or for students with disabilities (Gin et al., 2020), but videoconferencing could facilitate group projects and co-curricular activities such as debate and forensics. In turn, greater disabled student presence in these spaces can encourage mutual understanding.

It's important to note that requiring new technologies can place additional burdens on students with disabilities as they attempt to navigate inaccessible technology (Strawser et al., 2017). Zoom, for instance, offers chat and whiteboards that can't be read by a screen reader, and it also handles captioning (live and computer-based) poorly. Faculty will need to recognize that such limitations exist.

### **Online Class Discussions**

Pre-pandemic, most faculty underutilized their learning management system (LMS) such as Canvas or Blackboard, mostly posting documents and announcements (Brooks & Grajek, 2020). As we shifted into remote learning, attention focused on the LMS as a site for learning and discussion and faculty have become more accustomed to using features of the LMS. This could offer students a new option for class discussion.

Graded in-class participation in communication courses can be a barrier to students with disabilities (Meyer & Hunt, 2011)—for instance, students with anxiety may find it exacerbated by feeling “on the spot.” Students with physical disabilities may have difficulty hearing or speaking (Dolmage, 2017). In fact, a wide variety of students can be disadvantaged by our typical mode of discussion. However, offering options to discuss class material online could minimize some of these concerns and allow for more robust and thoughtful participation. Simultaneous conversations with multiple options can be accomplished through using now-common technologies such as chat (e.g., Zoom, Teams, Google Classroom) and whiteboard software (e.g., Jamboard, Padlet, Wakelet). Students can post responses prior to class in the LMS to be referenced during class. Allowing multiple options for discussions offers students the opportunity to choose what works best for them, bringing more students into the conversation. This better serves the needs of all the diverse learners in our classes.

Offering online participation options through the LMS can also allow students to time shift their work. Students time shift when they work at times that are best for them, physically, mentally, or personally. Students with disabilities may find such flexibility key to putting forth the best work possible, as they can work when they are most energetic, better able to concentrate, or can take their time to write a comment. Disabled and non-disabled students alike can benefit from this opportunity.

### **Conclusion**

In considering how technology offers options to students, it’s important to bear in mind that technology serves pedagogy, not the other way around. As Strawser et al. (2017) point out, “Technology, however, is not a panacea. . . . Course design for students with disabilities is not defined or confined by technology; instead, technology must be combined with effective pedagogy” (p. 93). Future work in this area could present full-course basic course designs that begin with pedagogy, utilize UDL, and demonstrate additional ways technology can be used to improve the experience of students with disabilities. It could also address a much broader range of disabilities.

Here, I’ve presented two brief examples of small ways the basic course can use pandemic technology to better serve students with disabilities. By increasing access in this way, we not only benefit students with disabilities—we benefit all students. This essay is not meant to be the last word on meeting these needs, but rather a call to extend the spirit of flexibility into our future classrooms as a place to start.

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