Accessibility and Usability

Instructors should meet the documented needs of our students with disabilities in every course we teach, whether on campus or online. For example, students often have legal accommodations for extra time on tests and assignments. Some of these accommodations are very similar regardless of the format of the course; however, online learning poses particular challenges for students who have difficulties hearing, seeing, or typing. For example, a student who is hearing impaired will struggle with lectures that are primarily delivered through audio narration of bare-bones PowerPoints. Creating a transcript of the lecture and making this available to the student can make the lesson more accessible.

The concept of Universal Design[*] takes this a step further, based on the principle that an accommodation for one person may be beneficial to all. Posting a transcript of your lecture for the hearing-impaired student might help all students because it frees them from taking notes while they watch and listen to your lectures, letting them really focus on your words. It's a win-win for everyone.

Similarly, a visually impaired student might need verbal narration of visual content, but since we know that the human brain learns best when information is presented in more than one receptive modality, everyone could benefit from both seeing and hearing the content of your lessons. A student who has difficulty typing might need to submit comments to discussions as an audio file attachment rather than text entry. If all students were allowed to use this response method, it might stimulate better discussion posts, since it's generally easier to talk than to type. You can benefit from this idea, too. Many online classrooms include the option to post comments in discussions or give feedback on assignments by recording an audio file. Students generally appreciate hearing your voice instead of just reading a typed comment. It makes the course feel much more personal and human and allows you to use the tone of your voice to communicate a level of warmth and positivity that might not come through as clearly in writing.

As you plan to put your course online, consider how you could incorporate the elements of Universal Design into your lectures, activities, and discussions. The time we spend preparing these additional resources may help <u>all</u> students to be more successful, not only those with disabilities.

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[*] CAST (2017). *Until Learning Has No Limits.* http://www.cast.org/our-work/about-udl.html#.WJ0jS_JRI8I