Chapter 2
Strategies for Designing Equitable, Accessible, and Effective Blended and Fully Online Education

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ABSTRACT

The arrival of the pandemic in early 2020 necessitated a rapid transformation in higher education. In the early days of the pandemic, many instructors struggled to redesign their courses quickly, devise alternative assessments, and adapt to new technologies, while others welcomed the opportunity to learn new techniques and technologies. Because some institutions have decided to continue offering blended and fully online programmes in this post-pandemic period, many instructors are now looking for more guidance on which strategies they should continue to employ, and which other strategies to consider, when teaching online. Furthermore, as more students from diverse backgrounds, abilities, ages, races, and cultures avail of online programmes, there is an even greater need to consider diversity, equity, and inclusion when developing online courses. To help alleviate these challenges, this chapter presents a systematic approach to designing, delivering, and evaluating blended and fully online courses.

INTRODUCTION

In early 2020, the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic caused major upheaval, not only to higher education but also to society in general. Higher education instructors were suddenly faced with having to move their courses online within a very short timeframe while also dealing with personal challenges relating to healthcare, working from home, and possibly homeschooling. While some instructors embraced the sudden shift to online delivery, others were anxious as they did not have the necessary expertise or time (Johnson et al., 2012). In addition, some staff were not enthusiastic about teaching online, so they did not welcome the change (Cutri et al., 2020; Rasheed et al., 2020).

Despite the plethora of literature that existed before the pandemic on how to teach effectively online and the existence of web content accessibility and universal design for learning guidelines (World Wide Web Consortium, 2024; CAST, 2018), instructors were typically advised just to do their best with the resources available to them. While many institutions provided targeted online webinars and other resources, little attention was paid to the accessibility of online course materials or the learning experience for marginalized students, as most institutions prioritized getting staff and students online as quickly as possible. However, once the initial upheaval settled, higher education institutions focused on improving the quality of the online experience (Hodges et al., 2020). Institutions also began to realize that remote learning does not automatically equate to quality online learning and that while it was positive that more people were exposed to the benefits of technology-enhanced learning, it was likely that some poor decisions had also been made along the way (Hodges et al., 2020).

While marginalized students have always encountered challenges accessing quality (online) education, institutions are only now turning their attention to matters relating to equity, accessibility, and the overall student experience because the world has now changed for all students, and many institutions plan to retain some form of blended or online learning model. A larger proportion of students are now working from home while studying and dealing with caring responsibilities, others are looking for employment, having lost their jobs during the pandemic, and others are suffering from the longer-term impacts of COVID (including long-COVID and anxiety) (Stock et al., 2022). Institutions now have no choice but to pause and consider how best to design online course materials and support instructors and students going forward. It is no longer acceptable to hold a class online simply because it is convenient—instructors need to carefully consider the needs of all their students and make appropriate technology decisions that are guided by pedagogy first and technology second (Boettcher & Conrad, 2016, p. 63). Furthermore, students' expectations have changed in light of recent experiences, so they expect educational

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