Basic Communication Course Annual

Volume 29 Article 10

2017

Universal Adaptation: The Need to Enhance Accessibility in the Basic Course

Michael G. Strawser
Bellarmine University

Brandi N. Frisby
University of Kentucky

Renee Kaufmann
University of Kentucky

Basic Course Forum: Adaptation

Universal Adaptation: The Need to Enhance Accessibility in the Basic Course

Michael G. Strawser, Bellarmine University
Brandi N. Frisby, University of Kentucky
Renee Kaufmann, University of Kentucky

It is well-documented that the basic course is the front porch of the communication discipline (Beebe, 2013). Regularly part of general education, the basic course introduces students who may never experience another communication course to communication-based content. Because of the prominence of the basic course in general education, the scope of participating students is vast in terms of motivation and ability. This varied population may present several challenges for basic course instructors. One oft-forgotten issue, or an afterthought in course design, is the development and implementation of accessible basic course delivery and materials for students with disabilities. We believe it is necessary that basic course administrators and instructors recognize challenges faced by students with disabilities. Using both universal design principles and computer mediated access strategies, instructors can develop and implement a classroom climate that engages students across the spectrum of academic abilities. This is especially important in light of the increasing enrollment of students with disabilities.

The impetus for adaptation

The need for supporting and training inclusive educators is apparent (Marquis et al., 2016). Student enrollees with diagnosed learning disabilities have increased in higher education (McIntire, 2015). The National Center for Learning Disabilities (2014) claims that 67% of students with learning disabilities enrolled in a postsecondary institution. In this student population, disabilities may include visual impairment, attention deficit disorders, brain injuries, speech and language disabilities, auditory impairment, and physical disabilities, to name a few (John Hopkins University Office of Student Disabilities, n.d.).

Given this increasing and diverse student population, Federal laws mandate equal access to education for all students. This mandate has been especially controversial in an educational landscape where technology is prevalent. Namely in online courses, one dimension of online student success, according to Schrum and Hong (2002), is the use and access to technology. They continue that the choices of technology used within an online course should be explained and readily available for all types of learners. While face-to-face courses do not rely on a mediated modality for delivery, many instructors choose to rely on technology. Notably, regardless of course delivery (i.e., face-to-face, hybrid, or online) technology must offer adaptations that will allow all students to use it without limitations. Further, the U.S. Departments of Justice and Education, in a 2010 letter to college and university presidents, wrote:

> Requiring use of an emerging technology in a classroom environment when the technology is inaccessible to an entire population of individuals with disabilities — individuals with visual disabilities — is discrimination prohibited by the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Section 504) unless those individuals are provided accommodations or modifications that permit them to receive all the educational benefits provided by the technology in an equally effective and equally integrated manner. (Paragraph 1)

Further, federal mandates such as Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), enacted in 1990, required, in essence, accessible courses and accessible course delivery. Specifically, Section 504 required postsecondary institutions, public and private, to implement

accommodations and auxiliary aids for students with disabilities (Madaus, 2011). Updated amendments to the ADA in 2009 further emphasized the rights of individuals with disabilities and loosened disability documentation requirements. As a result, many institutions have seen an increase in declared disabilities (Shachmut, 2014).

One issue for instructors is the wide variety of reported disabilities (Madaus, 2011). For instance, students with learning disabilities differ from those with speech and language impairments, physical disabilities, autism, intellectual disabilities, emotional disturbances, or visual or hearing impairments (Vaughn, Danielson, Zumeta, Holdheide, 2015). It is not enough for instructors to focus on one or two diagnosed disabilities; rather, a holistic perspective and a uniform course design mandate must be adopted that reinforce principles of universal accessibility. Despite the seemingly limitless array of diagnosed disabilities, the Americans with Disabilities Report (2010) highlighted three areas of impairment in the communication domain as primary: 1) blind or difficulty seeing; 2) deaf or difficulty hearing; 3) difficulty having speech understood. Students with sight, hearing or speech impairments may experience challenges or difficulties in the communication classroom over and above other subject-matter.

Despite the clear need and mandates to provide equal access, some colleges resist when it comes to making the campus, and classroom, an accessible environment (Davis, 2015). Students with disabilities face significant challenges when earning a college degree and institutions are finding it difficult to ensure equal access for all students (Shachmut, 2014). To combat these issues, scholars advocate for universal design principles, which will be discussed further in this forum piece, to be used in creating instructional materials that are accessible and that instructional and technological materials should be equivalent for all students (Zydney, & Hasselbring, 2014).

Universal design in instructional design

One theoretical framework to assist basic course instructors in addressing the spectrum of diagnosed disabilities is through universal design. Universal design (UD) focuses on new initiatives and strategies for instructional challenges, like accessibility. UD principles can provide flexible use of instructional products based on human diversity, social inclusion, and equality (Bjork, 2009).

The general framework for a course that is universally designed is relatively simple. Bjork (2009) highlights seven principles: (a) it incorporates equitable use, (b) has an innate user flexibility, (c) is simple and intuitive, (d) incorporates perceptible information, (e) has a tolerance for user error, (f) creates an opportunity for low physical effort, and (g) presents and appropriate size and space for approachability. For instructional design that emphasizes a universal approach, usefulness is the primary end goal. Scott, Shaw, and McGuire (2001) explain instructors should provide multiple opportunities for students to show learning. This ranges from offering assignment variety (e.g., essay exam, speech, project) for assessment. They add that while there are several approaches to UD, not all need to be used at once and encourage instructors to consider their students when selecting approaches. Thus, UD becomes increasingly feasible for instructors as technology is integrated into course delivery and material design.

Virtual accessibility in the basic course

Virtual accessibility is also an area of primary concern, especially in light of the technology-emphasis in many basic course offerings. In the basic course, an increased use of technology and web-based resources may provide one outlet for increased and enhanced accessibility. Technology, however, is not a panacea. In fact, it is important for instructors to remember that technology cannot be separate from effective pedagogy (Lane & Shelton, 2001). Course design for students with disabilities is not defined or confined by technology; instead, technology must be combined with effective pedagogy (King-Sears, 2009). Further, Shachmut (2015) says that while the opportunity for students with disabilities may grow because of technology, the potential can only be realized if "technology is designed and coded with equal access in mind" (para. 5). As such, equal access, and UD, must consistently be on the mind of administrators, faculty, and instructional technology developers. Technology and pedagogy are not mutually exclusive, but without effective pedagogy, accessible technology in the classroom is futile, especially as it relates to students with disabilities.

Benefits of accessible basic communication course offerings

Despite the inability, anxiety, or lack of understanding, of some instructors to create accessible basic communication courses (Fabris, 2015), the positive ramifications for doing so are worth the time and effort to focus on UD. Students

with disabilities experience positive outcomes when their instructors use assistive technologies (e.g., Screen-reading technologies, voice recognition software, and mobile access technologies) to reinforce instructional principles. For instance, student with disabilities may experience increased independent thinking skills, a maintenance of self-reliance, increased autonomy, developmental problem-solving skills, the facilitation of a sense of continuity and an active involvement in educational activities at home, school and the community (Akpan & Beard, 2013). It is imperative, then, that instructors design basic communication courses universally with an emphasis on assistive technology implementation.

The discipline of communication, and communication instruction, are both critical components of student development (Morreale & Pearson, 2008) and the academic development of students with disabilities (Calculator & Black, 2009). Students are not one-dimensional communicators, and while the traditional population of the basic communication course communication course continues to vary, the necessity for instructors to use the virtual format as a platform for positive impact on students with disabilities necessitates a thorough and accurate collaboration of technology and pedagogy within the discipline.

Student-teacher characteristics, class structure, as well as interaction with peers are influential contextual elements of the classroom used by students with disabilities (De Bortoli, Arthur-Kelly, Mathisen, & Balandin, 2014). Therefore, it is important that communication courses emphasize the student-teacher relationship, reinforce an organized class structure, and create an interactive environment that is free of judgment for all students, including those with disabilities. By focusing on these general pillars, and designing with UD in mind, instructors may create a more inviting educational setting for all students, especially those with disabilities.

Designing a basic communication course with UD in mind means as the instructor, you've considered the principles and have thought about the multiple ways to instruct and assess all students and not just the traditional student. Providing students with multiple instructional opportunities, depending on the institution, budget, and resources is important. For example, a visual interpreters, screen readers, speech generating devices, real-time video captioning and printed transcripts could all be utilized to reach a wide range of students with disabilities.

Students with visual, speech or hearing impairments can be valuable assets in communication courses and the tools at the disposal of the 21st-century communication educator are historically unmatched. However, the creation of course content and the use and implementation of instructional technology does not

negate the importance of UD that emphasizes accessible course content. While technology has the potential to serve as the great equalizer, innovative tools and modalities must be utilized to ensure equal access. As such, it is important that communication educators lead by example and demonstrate to their peers the benefits of creating an accessible virtual course.

Conclusion

In light of the challenges mentioned above, we must continue to explore and identify barriers to accessible learning for our students in the basic communication course. Creating scales that measure accessibility awareness and implementation should be established and used in the basic course and with the instructor evaluation process. Lastly, training and support instructional design for basic course instructors and program is warranted. Continuing to examine and enhance the delivery of our basic course and design of instructional materials to accommodate students becomes a necessity for the basic course to adapt to the changing needs of the current college student population. Only through this adaptation using universal design principles can we ensure an inviting and inclusive front porch for all students who encounter our discipline.

Author information

Michael G. Strawser (Ph.D., University of Kentucky) is an Assistant Professor in the School of Communication at Bellarmine University in Louisville, Kentucky.

Brandi N. Frisby (Ph.D., 2010, West Virginia University) is an Associate Professor in the School of Information Science at the University of Kentucky.

Renee Kaufmann (Ph.D., University of Kentucky) is an Assistant Professor in the College of Communication and Information at the University of Kentucky.

References

Akpan, J. P., & Beard, L. A. (2013). Overview of assistive technology possibilities for teachers to enhance academic outcomes of all students. *Universal Journal of Educational Research*, *1*(2), 113-118.

Alias, N. A., & Zainuddin, A. M. (2005). Innovation for better teaching and learning: Adopting the learning management system. *Malaysian Online Journal of Instructional Technology, 2(*2), 27-40.

Beebe, S. (2013). Message from the president: "Our front porch." *Spectra*, *49*, 2-3.

Björk, E. (2009). Many become losers when the Universal Design perspective is neglected: Exploring the true cost of ignoring Universal Design principles. *Technology & Disability, 21*(4), 117-125. doi:10.3233/TAD-2009-0286

Brault, M. (2010). Americans with disabilities: 2010 current population reports. *U.S. Census Bureau*. Retrieved from http://www.census.gov/prod/2012pubs/p70-131.pdf

Calculator, S. N., & Black, T. (2009). Validation of an inventory of best practices in the provision of augmentative and alternative communication services to students with severe disabilities in general education classrooms. *American Journal Of Speech-Language Pathology*, *18*(4), 329-342. doi:10.1044/1058-0360(2009/08-0065)

Davis, L. J. (2015, July 23). Where's the outrage when colleges discriminate against students with disabilities? *Chronicle of Higher Education.* Retrieved from http://chronicle.com/article/Where-s-the-Outrage-When/231799/

De Bortoli, T., Arthur-Kelly, M., Mathisen, B., & Balandin, S. (2014). Speech-Language Pathologists' Perceptions of Implementing Communication Intervention with Students with Multiple and Severe Disabilities. *AAC: Augmentative & Alternative Communication*, *30*(1), 55-70. doi:10.3109/07434618.2014.881916

Fabris, C. (2015, February 25). As high-tech teaching catches on, students with disabilities can be left behind. *Chronicle of Higher Education.* Retrieved from http://chronicle.com/article/As-High-Tech-Teaching-Catches/190341/

John Hopkins University Office of Student Disabilities. (n.d.). Types of disabilities. Retrieved from http://web.jhu.edu/disabilities/faculty/types_of_disabilities/

King-Sears, M. (2009). Universal design for learning: Technology and pedagogy. *Learning Disability Quarterly*, *32*(4), 199-201.

Lane, D. R., & Shelton, M. W. (2001). The centrality of communication education in classroom computer-mediated communication: Toward a practical and evaluative pedagogy. *Communication Education*, *50*, 241-255.

Madaus, J. W. (2011). The history of disability services in higher education. *New Directions for Higher Education*, *2011*(154), 5-15. doi:10.1002/he.429

Morreale, S. P., & Pearson, J. C. (2008). Why communication education is important: The centrality of the discipline in the 21st century. *Communication Education, 57*, 224-240. doi: 10.1080/03634520701861713

Shachmut, K. (2014, September 12). A new obstacle for students with disabilities. *Chronicle of Higher Education.* Retrieved from http://chronicle.com/article/A-New-Obstacle-for-Students/148795

The National Center for Learning Disabilities (n.d.). State of learning disabilities. Retrieved March, 20, 2016 from http://www.ncld.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/2014-State-of-LD.pdf44

U.S. Department of Justice and Education. (2010, June 29). Dear Colleague Letter. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office. Retrieved March 23, 2016 from the World Wide Web: http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/letters/colleague-20100629.html

Vaughn, S., Danielson, L., Zumeta, R., Holdheide, L. (2015). Deeper learning for students with disabilities. Deeper learning research series. *Jobs for the Future.*

Zydney, J., & Hasselbring, T. (2014). Mini anchors: A universal design for learning approach. *Techtrends: Linking Research & Practice to Improve Learning, 58*(6), 21-28. doi:10.1007/s11528-014-0799-5