Identifying and Removing Barriers

How Campus Partners Cultivate Diverse Online Learning Environments

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Online courses are becoming increasingly popular in educational institutions. Enrollments in online college courses are growing at a rapid pace.[1] Online courses have the potential to attract students who may not be able to enroll in traditional face-to-face courses. As colleges and universities move toward offering more online courses, students with special needs may get left behind.[2] Universal design becomes more important every year as institutions of higher education extend their reach and course offerings to a variety of students near and far. Many students, including those students with disabilities, are opting for online versions of courses.

According to Tobin, Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is an educational framework for designing multiple ways for learners to interact, engage, and experience content.[3] UDL was initially developed to provide equal learning opportunities for students in traditional face-to-face courses, but the framework has been adapted for online courses. UDL goes beyond being helpful for students with disabilities. These principles often benefit all learners.

Online learning can present challenges for all students. If course accessibility and usability are not appropriately addressed, challenges can be particularly significant for students with various disabilities.[4] Some students may require unique support in the online learning environment, and many educators erroneously assume that all materials available online are accessible to all students. Oftentimes, faculty don't know how UDL strategies can benefit students.[5]

Overview of the University of South Carolina

USC–Columbia is a large, diverse public university with a Carnegie I research classification. The university is the state flagship institution, which encompasses many disciplines and schools, strong departmental structures, and a strong sense of faculty governance. The USC system includes three senior four-year campuses—USC–Aiken, USC–Upstate, and USC–Beaufort—which are governed by separate academic leadership. The system also includes four Palmetto College regional campuses (USC–Lancaster, USC–Salkehatchie, USC–Sumter, and USC–Union). The USC system enrollment exceeds 50,000 students—over 42,000 undergraduate students, 6,900 graduate students, and 1,800 professional students. The system employs more than 3,300 full-time faculty.[6]

In addition to traditional courses, USC–Columbia and the Palmetto College regional campuses have a wide array of distributed learning (DL) courses

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through many degree programs. USC uses the umbrella of DL to describe courses offered through a few modalities: 100 percent online, blended, and two-way video. Courses that are delivered 50 percent or more online, either synchronously or asynchronously, fall under DL.

University of South Carolina Libraries

The USC system is home to fourteen libraries. The University Libraries support learning and discovery by connecting university faculty, staff, and students with collections and support for research and teaching. Librarians collaborate with campus partners including departmental liaisons, the Office of Distributed Learning, and the Center for Teaching Excellence (CTE) to provide quality services for students who enroll in DL courses and faculty who teach DL courses.

University library staff assist faculty with addressing copyright concerns by utilizing e-reserves. Staff scan library materials for faculty and input the material in the content collection of the Blackboard learning management system. Librarians collaborate with the Student Disability Resource Center (SDRC) to create accessible scanned materials.

Instructors have the ability to include library resources within DL courses by linking to interactive subject guides where students can access pertinent course information. Librarians can create course guides for class research assignments. Faculty and students at a distance can request that journal articles and book chapters be scanned and provided electronically.

Best Practices in Online Learning

In 2000, USC introduced its first fully online course. Today, one undergraduate degree; forty-two graduate degrees, certificate programs, and specialist degrees; and seven online degree completion programs are offered through DL at the university. USC offers 1,343 DL courses, and the enrollments in DL courses was 27,879 in annual year 2017.

The CTE, as part of the Office of the Provost, inspires excellence and innovation in teaching. The center provides programming, resources, and opportunities that foster innovative and effective pedagogical practices among all who teach at USC–Columbia and the Palmetto College regional campuses. There are three instructional designers and one instructional developer at the CTE. Faculty receive grant money and assistance from instructional designers and the Division of Information Technology to design quality online courses in the grant program. The program was created to help get faculty interested in teaching online.

One of the grantees had an interest in the Quality Matters (QM) program as part of the grant and helped the university become aware of the nationally known organization. The QM program is recognized as being a leader in quality assurance for online courses.[7]

Some ideas for best practices in online learning and accessibility, which instructors and professors can take away from sessions with the Center for Teaching Excellence include:

- Providing step-by-step instructions for accessing the course and all course materials. This can include an "orientation" or "getting started" module that orients the students with the Course Management System.
- Offering multiple formats of materials, including Word and PDF documents. Format the documents following established accessibility guidelines.
- Checking document accessibility (built-in accessibility checkers are available for Microsoft 2010 and 2013 products).
- Providing transcripts and closed captioning for all lectures, talks, and synchronous or asynchronous interactions with students.
- Using Sans Serif fonts (Arial, Calibri, among others) to increase visibility and accessibility. Font size for documents should be no less than 12 point and with presentations no less than 24 points.
- Using **bold** to display emphasis rather than color (doing so increases accessibility for students with color blindness).
- Maintaining ongoing one-on-one and group communication with students; establishing positive relationships with students and offering accessible opportunities for interaction.[8]

Distributed Learning Quality Review

During the 2012–13 academic year, the provost announced a DL quality review (DLQR) as part of the commitment to ensure high-quality online courses. A provost's committee on DL was created to assist with the process. The committee is faculty-driven and includes the Associate Provost and Director of Distributed Learning, representatives from the CTE, faculty, and other university staff who are leaders in DL on campus. The committee consists of several subcommittees. One subcommittee, the Best Practices and Quality Assurance Subcommittee, was tasked with creating or selecting best practices for the design of all online courses. The committee adopted the QM standards as a basis for quality review because they focus on course design. Some of the standards were modified to meet the needs of the university.

The general standards for the quality assurance document include course overview and introduction,

learning outcomes or objectives, assessment and measurement, instructional materials, course activity and learner interaction, course technology, student support, usability, and accessibility. CTE instructional designers and staff from the SDRC collaborated to create in-house accessibility standards for all online courses. The accessibility standards include the following:

- Optical character recognition (OCR) has been performed on all PDF files before they are posted.
- PDF files are accompanied by their Word document equivalent or a link to the HTML equivalent.
- All posted documents (Word, Excel, PowerPoint, etc.) are accessible and usable by screen readers.
- Videos are captioned or have a transcript in Word format that made is available simultaneously with the video (on the same date that the video is made available or assigned to be watched).
- All content is accessible via the computer's keyboard, without the use of a mouse.

During the 2013–14 academic year, the first courses were reviewed. To successfully pass the review, each course had to meet twenty-six essential standards and 80 percent of the overall standards. The instructional designers worked closely with the Office of Distributed Learning, University Libraries, SDRC, and faculty to revise online courses.

The reviews were conducted by CTE instructional designers and were approved by the provost's DL committee. Faculty had access to the CTE instructional designers and were eligible to receive a small course revision grant. In addition to the grant, faculty received a commendation letter from the vice provost who is in charge of DL. The commendation letter was also sent to the faculty member's department chair and dean. Course reviews started on graduate programs (School of Library and Information Science, Nursing, and Communication Sciences and Disorders) during the following year.

CTE and Campus Partner Collaborations

Instructional designers facilitate an Instructional Designer Community of Practice (IDCoP) at the CTE. The IDCoP provides a space where staff brainstorm ideas, provide updates, share resources, and showcase examples of online learning best practices. Individuals who are involved in the IDCoP include instructional designers, directors or managers of online learning within the USC system, librarians, technology support personnel, and online learning professionals from across the state of South Carolina.

The CTE develops a calendar of events each fall and spring semester. Programming includes diversity and inclusive teaching workshops. Individuals from the CTE and campus partners conduct workshops on course accessibility, UDL, assistive technologies, approaches to fostering inclusion in the classroom, and more. Campus partners include individuals from the SDRC, Division of Information Technology, Office of Diversity and Inclusion, School of Library and Information Science, and the USC School of Medicine—Rehabilitation Counseling Program. CTE instructional designers and SDRC staff are invited by various units on campus to discuss accessibility in departmental meetings.

The CTE offers an eight-week short course, "Getting Started Teaching Online at USC," each fall and spring semester. This fully online course is offered with support from the Office of the Provost and has the goal of supporting and developing a community of faculty prepared to develop and teach high-quality online courses. Any faculty member who teaches as instructor of record at USC–Columbia or the Palmetto College campuses may apply, including adjunct faculty. Enrollees who successfully complete the course receive a small grant, a certificate of completion, and a letter of commendation from the CTE director. A week of the course is devoted to accessibility and UDL. Many faculty didn't consider accessibility before the short course and expressed an appreciation for the accessibility course materials.

The CTE also offers a short course "Teaching Online for Graduate Students." The eight-week course introduces graduate students to online teaching and develops their knowledge and ability for implementing and teaching online courses at USC and throughout their career. The goal of the course is to support and develop a community of graduate students prepared to develop and teach high-quality online courses. A week is devoted to accessibility and UDL.

The CTE established a Distributed Learning Summit. Key individuals involved in online learning on campus meet to discuss updates and challenges, seek assistance, and work together on various assignments each month. Involved offices include the CTE, Office of Distributed Learning, University Libraries, On Your Time Initiatives, Division of Information Technology, Palmetto College, and the SDRC. Campus partners discuss ways to remove barriers for students with and without disabilities.

The Office of Distributed Learning has two recording studios for faculty. These studios include instructional technologies that are used in an online environment. Dragon Naturally Speaking, a speech-to-text program, is also loaded on the computers. Staff at the Office of Distributed Learning help faculty create transcripts for lecture videos and audio presentations. The College of Nursing at USC–Columbia purchased Dragon Naturally Speaking for faculty to help with creating accessible lectures. The School of Library

and Information Science conducts its own accessibility trainings for faculty.

Before a class can be converted from face-to-face to an online course, a faculty senate instructional development committee reviews course syllabi for quality. The committee uses a rubric to check for a wide variety of components, some of which include the following:

- course designator, number, and title
- academic bulletin description
- measurable learning outcomes
- overview of how the course will be conducted
- specific technologies to be used in the course
- minimum technical requirements and skills
- rubric information
- grading policy
- statement that identifies provisions and resources for students with disabilities
- statement with the university's academic integrity policy
- module-by-module schedule for course topics and activities
- justification for offering the course online

The committee consists of faculty, representatives from the CTE and University Libraries, student representatives, and other key university stakeholders.

School of Library and Information Science Quality Reviewed Courses

The School of Library and Information Science (SLIS) at USC expressed interest in becoming one of the first graduate programs to be quality reviewed. Representatives from the Office of Distributed Learning and the CTE met with SLIS faculty and support staff to discuss the process. To date, twelve SLIS courses have passed the quality review.

SLIS wanted to proactively create accessible online courses. Two faculty created professional development workshops for faculty and staff on how to create accessible Word documents, PowerPoint presentations, PDF files, and instructional videos.

New Distributed Learning Quality Review Process

Beginning in 2018, the DLQR process changed to provide increased collaboration among units on campus. Part of the new process is to develop a peer reviewer program consisting of faculty who will conduct reviews both within and external to their college or school. Instructional designers from the CTE will continue to conduct reviews and will be partnering with faculty peer reviewers to review courses. The CTE recruits potential faculty peer reviewers from each college and school and provides faculty funds to complete the Quality Matters program "Applying the Quality Matters Rubric" and "Peer Reviewer Course." A training module will be created to introduce the faculty peer reviewers to the process. Reviewers will serve a two-year term and receive stipends. The faculty will be recognized for their service and will be showcased on the CTE's website. In addition to serving as faculty peer reviewers, the faculty will serve as champions for quality online courses in their colleges and departments and around the university.

Conclusion

The CTE at the University of South Carolina–Columbia continues to seek partnerships on campus to cultivate diverse learning environments for students. Collaborating with administration, librarians, faculty, and other staff plays a vital role in creating a culture on campus of proactively creating accessible and universally designed online courses. Ideas in this chapter have worked for our faculty and students and are easy to integrate into any instruction. Hopefully this chapter has given you some ideas to pursue in your own learning institution. By working to create a culture of accessibility and universal design, your institution can more readily reach your mission of being more accessible to all users.

Notes

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