Accessing abilities: Creating innovative accessible online learning environments and putting quality into practice

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***Note: Endnotes indicated with brackets.

Abstract:

This conceptual paper will discuss how faculty from The School of Library and Information Science at The University of South Carolina partnered with their university's Center for Teaching Excellence. This partnership resulted in the facilitation of professional development workshops and online tools for peer educators to better serve distance education/online students who are differently-able (students who are medically or socially labeled as having disabilities). National-level online instruction standards, instructional techniques, as well as outcomes and future plans will be discussed.

Keywords: Library and information science | LIS education | distance education | distributed learning | quality matters | ADA compliance | accessibility | universal design

Article:

1. Introduction

The University of South Carolina's (U of SC) flagship campus in Columbia, South Carolina offers a strong selection of distributed learning opportunities to students at the bachelor's, master's, and doctoral levels. When traveling across South Carolina the options become more robust with four four-year campuses and four Palmetto College campuses of the U of SC across the state that also offer face-to-face and online instruction. Palmetto College includes associate degree-granting campuses and online bachelor's degree completion programs. In total, 36 graduate degree and certificate programs are provided through distributed learning from the U of SC's main campus and four Palmetto College campuses. The main campus and Palmetto College campuses offer 1,193 distributed learning courses, and have a total enrollment of 18,862 students.

The School of Library and Information Science (SLIS) at The University of South Carolina offers approximately 80% percent of SLIS classes online. These courses are predominantly provided at the master's level but are also offered at the bachelor's and doctoral levels. In this piece we will discuss how faculty from The School of Library and Information Science at The University of South Carolina partnered with their university's Center for Teaching Excellence to enhance the delivery of accessible material and online course content for distance learning courses delivered by SLIS.

The Center's mission is to create and provide programming, resources, and opportunities that foster innovative and effective pedagogical practices for all who teach at the University of South Carolina. This partnership resulted in the facilitation of professional development workshops as well as online learning modules and tools for peer educators to better serve all students learning at a distance. Peer professional development as well as a partnership with the Center for Teaching Excellence became incredibly important for this school in staying up to date on new techniques in online instruction for all students.

2. University-led changes in distance education

In 2012, the Provost's Committee on Distributed Learning was created. The faculty-driven committee includes the Senior Vice Provost, the Director of the Center for Teaching Excellence, faculty from the main campus and the Palmetto College campuses, and ex-officio members. Ex-officio members include leaders in distributed learning across the main campus and the Palmetto College campuses. The Provost's Committee on Distributed Learning consists of several subcommittees. The Best Practices and Quality Assurance Subcommittee was tasked with creating or selecting best practice guidelines for all distributed learning courses. After considering various standards, the committee adopted the QM standards, with a few modifications for the University's needs, as best practices for all distributed learning courses. QM, which has over 900 subscribing institutions around the world, focuses on the design of quality online and blended courses [10]. The Best Practices and Quality Assurance Subcommittee selected the QM program because of the organization's reputation as being a leader in online course design.

In 2012, the University subscribed to the Quality Matters program (QM). While both Blackboard and California State University offer national rubrics and standards for distance education; QM is a nationally recognized leader in quality online course design [2,3]. The QM instrument is comprised of eight general standards and 43 specific review standards that many institutions of higher education use to evaluate the design of online courses [9].

Delivering strong and effective instruction at a distance is crucial for all students, and requires planning for accessibility, particularly for those who are differently-able (students who are medically or socially labeled as having disabilities) [5,6]. Moreover, accessibility is an essential component of services offered by the U of SC. During the 2014–2015 school year, 2,086 students registered with the Office of Student Disability Services. The University's Office of Student Disability Services staff reviewed QM accessibility standards and customized them to create specific accessibility standards for all distributed learning courses. Following meetings

between the Center for Teaching Excellence and the Office of Student Disability Services, a decision was made to create specific accessibility standards to accompany Quality Matter's "Accessibility" standards. The specific standards were created so that faculty would have a clear checklist of what was expected in terms of accessibility for their distributed learning courses. The Office of Student Disability Services also created a "How-to" Guide with step-by-step directions for how to meet each of the accessibility standards.

In 2013, the Provost announced a distributed learning quality review for all online and blended courses because of the number of distributed learning courses being designed and offered at the University. Many of the courses were still being taught via satellite television, DVD and older distance delivery models. After performing a comprehensive assessment of online courses being offered, the Office of the Provost decided to launch a process to raise the quality of distributed learning courses to the highest national standards and provide consistency across all courses.

To support the efforts of faculty during the quality review process, the Office of the Provost provided $1,500 to faculty per course for revision compensation after the course passed the review. The funding could be used for the following: faculty time invested, course materials, software and/or hardware needed for course revision, copyright fees and captioning/transcription services. The Center for Teaching Excellence provided consultations with instructional designers, who assisted with online course design and help faculty meet the University's quality review requirements. During year one of the course review process, undergraduate distributed learning courses were reviewed. With The School of Library and Information Science having such high numbers of online courses, it is one of the first graduate departments to be reviewed in year two of the quality review process.

3. Literature review

Distance learning eliminates barriers related to geographic locations, transportation, the need to navigate architectural challenges, and social environments, which can present challenges for those with forms of cognitive or psychological challenges. Today's student body is comprised of diverse demographics, including all ages, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds and abilities. Many students are opting for online courses. The online learning environment can both eliminate and create barriers to education [4,7,8]. Providing appropriate accommodations, online learning can create new paths to accessibility, including closed-captioning for students who are deaf or who have hearing impairments. Closed captioning and the ability to pause or replay portions of lectures or listen to lectures in small segments can also offer enhanced learning opportunities for English as a Second Language (ESL) students, those with learning disabilities, and students with multiple learning styles. If, however, the online learning environment feels impersonal or the student feels disconnected from the instructor or peers, he or she may be less likely to disclose challenges or to seek help. Students with visible or invisible or "hidden" disabilities may be less likely to disclose their disabilities or challenges [13]. Accordingly accommodation models requiring students to disclose disabilities and provide appropriate documentation before accommodations can be provided become less effective.

Eighty percent of online instructors surveyed did not consider accessibility in course design [1]. Nonetheless, according to United States Census data, fifty million or one in five people are

differently-able. One in seven people has a learning disability or learning difference. Learning differences represent the largest group of students with disabilities. Proactively engaging in accessible course design addresses the needs of all learners, including those students with disabilities [11]. Having standards with which to engage for accessible course design is key. Quality Matters focuses on faculty development and student learning. The QM guiding principles are continuously reviewed and improved to address the most up to date learning standards and needs of today's students [12].

4. Professional development

The faculty and staff in The School of Library and Information Science (SLIS) knew that the University's Quality Assurance Review would soon be underway. Long before the official reviews started, conversations began focusing on accessibility for online students. Faculty from SLIS had also begun to meet with representatives from the Center for Teaching Excellence to discuss the course review process and converse about course accessibility. SLIS faculty and staff strove to provide strong, effective instruction to students, whether it was online or face to face. The issue of addressing online course accessibility remained a challenge. Everyone wanted to be proactive by ensuring all documents, readings, and lectures in online courses were accessible to all students, including students with disabilities and varying learning styles or "intelligences" (e.g., Howard Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligences). Members of the department began investigating methods to provide class lectures or discussion transcriptions and closed captioning in course videos. Clayton and Heather had experience in these areas and created professional development workshops for SLIS faculty and staff. The first workshop focused on making Word, Powerpoint, and PDF documents accessible to all students as well as ways to transcribe lectures and close caption class talks and videos. The second workshop focused on the screen capture software Camtasia and how it could be used to deliver instruction for distributed learning courses.

With initial Quality Assurance Reviews underway in spring 2015, faculty and staff are using the skills, information, and technology gained from the professional development workshops and the support of the Center for Teaching Excellence and its instructional designers. More peer instruction and one-on-one advice continues to be offered and will be offered in future semesters. There was also a request for an online component for those who could not attend the face-to-face workshops. Heather created a YouTube Channel titled Tech 15, which offers instructional videos focused on one technology tool or idea at a time in 15 minutes or less. All of the Tech 15 videos are closed captioned, embeddable, and available to anyone who wants to learn about technology tools and how they can be used in instruction. New technologies are being released every month to aid in accessibility endeavors. Learning about new tools and sharing them with peer members of The School of Library and Information Science and beyond will continue to benefit our students for years to come.

5. Best practices

The following best practices are recommendations in the area of accessibility and universal design for online and distance education courses. These ideas and suggestions come from Quality Matters as well as procedures learned through the personal practice of the authors.

1. Apply Universal Design for Learning (UDL). More information is available from the National Center for Universal Design in Learning: http://www.udlcenter.org/.

2. Provide step-by-step instructions for accessing the course and all course materials. Consider including an "orientation" or "getting started" module that orients the students with the Learning Management System or Course Management System.

3. Offer consistency and repetition. Formatting of all materials and assignment submission instructions should be consistent and accessible, and information should be repeated in multiple locations within the Learning Management System (LMS).

4. Offer multiple formats of materials, including Word and PDF documents. Format the documents following established accessibility guidelines.

5. Check document accessibility (built-in accessibility checkers are available for Microsoft 2010 and 2013 products).

6. Provide transcripts and closed captioning for all lectures and synchronous or asynchronous interactions with students.

7. Use Sans Serif fonts (Arial, Calibri, among others) to increase visibility and accessibility. Font size for documents should be no less than 12 point and for presentations no less than 24 points.

8. Use bold to display emphasis rather than color (doing so increases accessibility for students with color blindness).

9. Maintain ongoing one-on-one and group communication with students; establish positive rapport with students and offer accessible opportunities for interaction.

10. Monitor and adjust. Ask the students what they need and address those needs. There is no greater teacher than the "lived experience."

6. Assessment

Designing quality and accessible distributed learning courses is a part of the University's academic leadership and mission. The Quality Review process is centered on the faculty but the true focus is on student learning [12]. The Provost's Office created and requires the quality review process, but the process itself is not top-down. The process is administered by faculty, academic units, and support personnel.

During the assessment of courses, faculty work one-on-one with Instructional Designers from the Center for Teaching Excellence, who then partner with faculty to help re-design courses. Faculty restructure their courses with their students in mind, gaining feedback on course content, layout, and overall accessibility of their course. After the course has been re-designed, the designers, using the quality review checklist, review courses for quality and accessibility. Instructional

Designers provide faculty with comments regarding their courses. When the faculty member and instructional designer feel comfortable with the design of the course, feedback is sent to the Best Practices and Quality Assurance subcommittee of the Provost's Distributed Learning Committee. The subcommittee reviews all materials and provides recommendations regarding the course. The entire Provost's Distributed Learning Committee conducts a final vote regarding the overall quality and accessibility of the course.

7. An eye to the future

When looking at distributed learning courses and accessibility for all students, SLIS faculty and staff as well as The Center for Teaching Excellence have their eyes toward the future. How can continuous accessibility for students be supported, both at departmental levels and via enterprise solutions? How can we further implement principles of Universal Design for Learning in instructional practices? What new technologies can aid in these endeavors, how do we stay up to date, and provide necessary professional development and support for our peers? What infrastructure is being planned for the university at large for accessibility in online learning? What changes will occur in the Quality Matters Review process over time? These are all questions we continue to ask, and questions we do not have answers to at this time.

Currently there are plans for future professional development. Adobe Presenter 10 is another type of software, in a similar vein to Camtasia, which allows the user to create video lectures; a workshop for this program is planned for the fall, 2015. Clayton and Heather will be teaching workshops in online course tools and accessibility for The Center for Teaching Excellence in fall, 2015 furthering partnerships with this group on campus. The faculty in SLIS has requested more professional development to attain their instructional goals and face-to-face workshops as well as online instruction will continued to be offered to support full-time faculty, adjunct faculty, and graduate teaching assistants (GTAs).

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