



Inclusive Instructional Design for Online Learning

What is this Research About?

Inclusive instructional design, or Universal Design for Learning, is a framework developed in the 1990s with the goal of making classrooms more accessible and inclusive. Most applications and research into Universal Design for Learning has been focused on in-person classrooms. Since the Covid-19 pandemic, we are increasingly relying on online environments which present new accessibility challenges for learners (e.g., inexperience in using required digital tools). The authors of this paper sought to make recommendations for how educators could apply and translate principles of Universal Design for Learning into planning online classrooms.

What did the Researchers Do?

This paper summarized the main principles of Universal Design for Learning, offering recommendations for online course development and execution. The research also reports successful application of Universal Design for Learning for both K-12 and postsecondary classrooms. The researchers discussed potential limitations of online classrooms (e.g., may create barriers for learners with additional access needs such as English language learners). This paper also addressed how overall online course structure could be planned, as well as specific recommendations for applying Universal Design for Learning to online education (e.g., “chunking” lesson plans to divide online classes into a series of short-activities, feedback without a corrective nature, and synchronous meetings to support learners).

What did the Researchers Find?

Due to the pandemic, we are becoming increasingly dependent on online classrooms. Online learning risks creating access barriers for learners. These potential barriers include everything from requiring learners to have access to appropriate technology, to learner’s pre-existing proficiency in using technology, as well as the executive function skills required for asynchronous, independent learning. Incorporating elements of Universal Design for Learning into course design and implementation can help counter some of these learning barriers and help instructors create a more inclusive, accessible online classroom.

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Snapshot

A synopsis of a scholarship of teaching and learning journal article

➔ How to Implement this Research in Your Classroom

When designing classes for online or hybrid environments apply elements of Universal Design for Learning by:

1. Considering access needs of learners in an online setting (e.g., devices, internet access, familiarity with digital tools).
2. Set overall learning goals (e.g., identify and apply main definitions) and compose your lessons with short learning activities or “chunks” addressing these goals.
3. Integrate synchronous learning into your course plan instead of relying solely on asynchronous activities. Examples of synchronous learning activities could include office hours or sessions where students work together using collaborative tools like Google Docs.
4. Provide feedback that is both timely (returned quickly) and learning focused. Structure this feedback so that it tells the learner what they are already doing well and what they need to work on.

Know the purpose of the digital tools you use. Don’t assume that because a tool is digital that it is also inclusive. Consider the meaning of the tools you use and how they relate to your course goals. For example, consider using a text-to-speech tool (these are built into many textbooks and are also available as a browser extension).

➔ Citation

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➔ Keywords

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