

MOVING TO A VIRTUAL CLASSROOM AMID THE SPREAD OF COVID-19

As countries around the world take steps to contain the Coronavirus, many educational institutions worldwide are also moving classes online. Edgewood College is committed to providing full and equal access to students with disabilities. As part of that effort, the College has invested in Ally, an accessibility tool in Blackboard that provides feedback and instruction on how to make course documents more accessible. With this in mind, Student Accessibility and Disability Services is encouraging all instructors to employ a few simple techniques when creating courses and materials to improve accessibility for their courses. Even though these tips do not cover every potential accessibility issue, they provide a good start.

Online Course Design Tips and Students with Disabilities

Table of content: Use site map to show how information is organized within your course. Include an audio description of where students can find important course information.

Headings and layouts: Use built-in styles and layouts to improve the usability and accessibility of Word documents, PowerPoint presentations, Blackboard pages, and other files. Headings help everyone recognize ordinal and co-ordinal relationships between topics and enable those using screen readers to skim the page and find what they need.

Built-in Bullet lists and numbered lists: Instead of trying to create them using tabs and spaces. The built-in lists provide a navigational structure for those using screen readers.

Built-in layouts in PowerPoint: Rather than building your own with text boxes. The built-in layouts ensure that information is presented in the correct order for those using screen readers.

Multiple means of representation: Describe course content in a variety of ways by providing the same information through different formats to ensure that key information is equally distinctive to all learners. Information can be provided through visual, auditory, or textual means.

Consistency: Rather than changing navigation bars or buttons from page to page, one navigation scheme should be used consistently throughout your online course design.

Hyperlinks: Organize long lists of hyperlinks into categories, and provide a label and a short description of the site content for each link.

Images: Include detailed captions for images and tables where appropriate. Offer additional notes on PowerPoint slides.

Videos: If using a video as part of course content, ensure that closed captions are used or that a transcript of the video is available. This should be done to enable someone who cannot see the image to access the meaning of the image.

PDFs: Minimize the use of PDFs, especially when presented as an image. Make sure that the text is accessible by testing to see if it can be copied and pasted.

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Keep it simple: Avoid using color, flashing text and unnecessary graphics to emphasize points. Avoid using media that requires special software or plugins that must be obtained from external sites.

Keyboarding: Make sure all course content and navigation is accessible using the keyboard only.

Flexibility: Offer students a choice of several possible essay questions or provide students a choice in how they will present the final product of a research project.

Labs: When working on virtual labs, students could use online simulations which features a click and drag interface, while logging the observations and results. For hands-on labs conducted at home, students may be required to purchase lab kits. Lab kits typically contain lab manuals, activity supplies, and safety equipment. Class message boards or chat rooms should be available to allow students and instructors to discuss the activities and reinforce the material.

Use asynchronous discussion: Synchronous discussions can be overwhelming for students who suffer from distractibility or factual recall limitations. Asynchronous discussions allow all students more time for reflection and clarification.

Staying Engaged in a Virtual Classroom

Blackboard: Urge students to use Blackboard to read messages and understand assignment prompts, enabling them to follow along and contribute.

Breaks: Learning from home can be a challenge for students so instructors must encourage students to take breaks between lessons to stretch and hydrate.

Interactive learning: Make lessons interactive by sharing screens during a live lesson. Give students the opportunity to take over the screen and solve problems or demonstrate their skills, just like they would in a physical classroom.

Record lectures: Record class sessions so that students can review them on their own time or in case they cannot join during live sessions.

Virtual connection: School is important from a social perspective and not seeing friends face-to-face can be hard for students. Instructors can assist students to adjust to this new reality by encouraging them to schedule lunch sessions for classmates to stay connected. If students are out sick or cannot join class because of an appointment, instructors can remind students to change their status or set a status message so that classmates are also aware.

Office hours: Let your students know your office hours and when they can reach you for questions.

Instructions: Make instructions and expectations clear for activities, projects, and assigned reading.

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Stimulate participation: Make examples and assignments relevant to learners with a wide variety of interests and backgrounds.

Individual connection: It can be difficult for instructors to assess how students are doing without seeing them in person, so connecting individually is very vital. Instructors can support students 1:1 in a chat, creating a safe space for students to ask their questions and get the extra help they need.

Academic Accommodations: Extended time on exams is a common modification for teaching students with disabilities in a physical classroom but most learning management system test modules do not allow instructors to make special accommodations for individual learners. One way to get around this modification is to leave the time limits open, but record the amount of time spent in an exam. For students with disabilities, test taking time can be extended for those who have provided documentation for their extended time accommodation.

Contact Information

If you have any questions, please contact the Disability and Accessibility Advisor at AccessDisabilityServ@edgewood.edu.

Additional Resource

<https://www.mapping-access.com/blog-1/2020/3/10/accessible-teaching-in-the-time-of-covid-19>