

Accessibility, Equity, and Inclusion in Online Writing Instruction (OWI) _ Indu Ohri

The CCCC Committee for Effective Practices in Online Writing Instruction (OWI) upended common assumptions in placing accessibility, inclusion, and equity at the forefront of its fifteen principles for quality OWI in 2013. The first principle states that “Online writing instruction should be universally inclusive and accessible.” This tenet is so crucial that it shapes all of the other principles and receives extensive consideration in the committee’s book *Foundational Practices of Online Writing Instruction* (2015). In Part 3, Sushil K. Oswal, Susan K. Miller-Cochran, and Michael W. Gos explore how to create inclusive online writing courses for disabled, ESL, and nontraditional students, respectively. All three authors explain that OWI teachers have a legal and ethical responsibility to make their courses accessible so they can meet Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requirements. They also contend that educators should radically change their approach to course design and **place inclusivity first, rather than devising “quick fix” accommodations for certain students after classes begin.**

In keeping with the CCCC Committee’s thinking that accessibility is *the* key principle of OWI, scholars have theorized diverse pedagogies centered on creating accessibility for different student populations, such as women, minorities, LGBTQIA+ members, and the disabled. These teaching practices include feminist pedagogy, multimodal approaches, user-experience (UX) design, Universal Design for Learning (UDL) Principles, and queer theory. Composition instructors might understandably worry about “how hard it is to add one more item to the litany of multicultural concerns already facing the writing teacher...” (Alexander and Banks 174). As both scholars remark, the pedagogies outlined above may strike faculty as too time-consuming or difficult to implement if they are to accommodate the endless range of student diversity.

While these pedagogies target a wide assortment of students, they share overlapping theoretical perspectives and concrete strategies for promoting student accessibility in OWI. Not only do these pedagogies complement one another in the online writing classroom, but they also display a flexibility that allows instructors to adapt one paradigm or multiple approaches. They can be modified and combined depending on the course topic, writing modalities, and assigned projects. **A good place for writing instructors to start is to use specific teaching strategies that promote accessibility, which include the following:**

- Creating course materials with diverse perspectives
 - Designing class content, images, and lectures to include a broad demographic range, making inclusive resources on the course topic available to students, reminding students that they are sources of knowledge and can construct it together, and inviting guest speakers to hold conversations with students
- Producing class content in accessible formats
 - Generating videos with text captions, recording synchronous classes for students to watch afterwards, scanning PDFs or finding ebooks of readings for screen readers, and devising a “one-stop” syllabus with clickable links to all course content
- Offering alternative assignments and flexible due dates
 - Crafting forgiving course policies to accommodate students in challenging situations, regularly contacting students struggling with course material, providing flexible office hours in multiple formats, give students choices for fulfilling assignments so that they can meet their academic needs and interests, and writing assignments, handouts, and rubrics in transparent language that clarifies the grading process
- Appealing to all sorts of learning styles

- Packaging course content so as to engage multiple learning styles (see Borgman and McArdle 47), using multimodal approaches that incorporate visual, written, and verbal elements, adding group or class activities that promote collaboration on a shared project, and delivering course content in several formats (video capture, Zoom, PowerPoint, discussion boards, and more)
- Building safe(r) spaces for students
 - Creating a video welcoming students to the class, setting “ground rules” for discussion with student input early in the semester, asking students to produce personal web pages or videos introducing themselves, starting class with brief written or oral check-ins about student well-being or course content, dedicating an online space where students can ask questions or hang out together, and considering how minorities, women, and LGBTQIA+ students can be silenced in digital “safe” spaces

However, Oswal and Meloncon also advise learning the underlying theory behind inclusive pedagogies in OWI and treating accessibility as a dynamic process, rather than as a series of criteria on a checklist. **Instead of being a strict set of rules, these pedagogies all aim to increase student engagement and build community in online writing classrooms that may otherwise feel alienating.** Instructors can design fun and accessible projects that students will enjoy doing, such as playing with online identities (Alexander and Banks), performing remote community engagement (Chick and Hassel), and using social media tools (Vie). The OWI research shows that the time composition instructors take to design accessible online courses upfront will improve students’ learning outcomes, sense of community, and facility with technology.

Annotated Bibliography

Alexander, Jonathan, and William P. Banks. “Sexualities, Technologies, and the Teaching of Writing: A Critical Overview.” *Computers and Composition*, vol. 21, no. 3, 2004, pp. 273-293.

In their Introduction to a special issue of *Computers and Composition*, Alexander and Banks examine how diverse sexualities and technologies interact in computer-mediated and online composition courses. Their expansive lit review addresses four key issues in the relevant scholarship: teaching queer readings and issues, creating safe(r) spaces for students online and in class, challenging stable notions of identity, and educating students in sexual literacy. The list of questions at the end about how technology intersects with sexual literacy may be especially productive for instructors of online composition looking to make their virtual classes more inclusive for LGBTQIA+ students.

Borgman, Jessie and Casey McArdle. “Chapter 2: Accessible.” *Personal, Accessible, Responsive, Strategic: Resources and Strategies for Online Writing Instructors*, The WAC Clearinghouse, 2019, pp. 35-49.

In this chapter, Borgman and McArdle explore how writing instructors can make their online classes accessible based on user-experience (UX) research, which will result in faculty “creating a community of inclusion in your course and inviting students with all levels of ability to interact with you in a way that works for them.” The authors offer workable solutions and general advice meant to “move you beyond Americans with Disabilities Act...type accessibility issues” and allow instructors to devise courses that are usable for everyone.

Chambers, Mary-Lynn. “A Rhetorical Mandate: A Look at Multi-Ethnic/Multimodal Online Pedagogy.” *Applied Pedagogies: Strategies for Online Writing Instruction*, edited by

Ruefman, Daniel, and Abigail G. Scheg, Utah State University Press, 2016, pp. 75-89. Chambers investigates how the white-dominated academy made Standard English (SE) the main form of communication in online classes, which can marginalize minority students who do not relate to SE or use it as primary form of expression. She looks at research indicating that there are different culturally-based learning styles for African Americans, Asian Americans, Native Americans, and LatinX populations. Her findings suggest that multimodal pedagogy is necessary in order to make online environments inclusive for all members of multicultural classrooms, especially in writing-intensive OWI.

Chick, Nancy, and Holly Hassel. "Don't Hate Me Because I'm Virtual': Feminist Pedagogy in the Online Classroom." *Feminist Teacher*, vol. 19, no. 3, 2009, pp. 195-215.

Chick and Hassel use their combined experience in teaching online literary seminars, first-year writing classes, and introductory women's studies courses to explain how to apply feminist pedagogy to cyber classrooms in terms of three overarching headings: class dynamics and environment, definitions of knowledge, and habits of mind. They offer many best practices in online feminist pedagogy, along with theoretical justifications for them, and compellingly argue that virtual classrooms can be more inclusive environments than live ones, in some ways.

Vie, Stephanie. "Effective Social Media Use in Online Writing Classes Through Universal Design for Learning (UDL) Principles." *Computers and Composition*, vol. 49, 2018, pp. 61-70.

This article outlines three best practices for instructors interested in adding social media to their online writing courses using Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles to ensure accessibility and usability for diverse types of learners. Vie's best practices include making social media use optional for assignments, employing accessible digital tools beyond the "big three" (Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube), and asking students to investigate the accessibility and UDL capabilities of social media tools.

Additional Resources

Gos, Michael W. "Nontraditional Student Access to OWI." *Foundational Practices of Online Writing Instruction*, edited by Hewett, Beth et al, The WAC Clearinghouse, 2015, pp. 309-346.

Miller-Cochran, Susan K. "Multilingual Writers and OWI." *Foundational Practices of Online Writing Instruction*, edited by Hewett, Beth et al, The WAC Clearinghouse, 2015, pp. 291-308.

Oswal, Sushil K. "Physical and Learning Disabilities in OWI." *Foundational Practices of Online Writing Instruction*, edited by Hewett, Beth et al, The WAC Clearinghouse, 2015, pp. 253-290.

Oswal, Sushil K., and Lisa Meloncon. "Saying No to the Checklist: Shifting From an Ideology of Normalcy to an Ideology of Inclusion in Online Writing Instruction." *WPA: Writing Program Administration*, vol. 40, no. 3, 2017, pp. 61-77.