Accessibility and Online Teaching

When teaching online, the principles of universal design and accessibility are more important than ever. Students have varying degrees of access to technology. Some will be in supportive environments, others will have many obstacles placed in front of them. What follows are suggestions and ideas we hope will be helpful for all our community.

First and foremost, learning online is a skill and it takes practice. Be patient with yourselves and with your students.

Instructions and Organization

Online students require very clear instructions for assignments. Provide clarity of:

- What to submit
- How to submit
- Where to submit

Be consistent in the layout and organization of documents you present to students.

Create a class communication plan so students know how to get information and resolve issues. Expect things to go wrong and build it into your plan. These are some suggested considerations you will want to think about:

- Where to send questions
- How quickly you will respond to emails, forum, and discussion posts
- How to reach you if something urgent arises
- How often you will regularly communicate with the class and in what format
- How students can communicate with each other

Present content in multiple ways (e.g. video with captions and transcriptions, audio with transcriptions and images).

Offer outlines and other scaffolding tools

Lectures

Consider chunking lectures into smaller sections e.g. 10-15 minutes of lecture, followed by a short 3-5 minute break or task for students, followed by another 10-15 minutes of lecture, followed again by 3-5 minute break or task, followed by another 10-15 minute lecture and then a 5-6 minute summary.

Accessible course material

The fundamental principles of accessibility, POUR (Perceivable, Operable, Understandable, and Robust) are especially important when teaching online.

Start with your own communication:

- Use concise and clear language
- Add structure by including headings
- Use built-in styles
- Describe images, graphs, and charts in a way that a friend on the phone who can not see the imagery could understand
- Ensure good contrast between foreground and background - black text on a white background is a good example
- Use larger font sizes. We suggest not less than 14pt for documents, and not less than 22pt for presentations

Checking your course material

Course Readings and Documents

For course readings, check to see if your course materials are minimally accessible. Here are a couple of ways to do that:

- Try to copy a paragraph from assigned reading and paste it into another document. When you paste does the text match what was copied? Are you able to grab the paragraph? If not, the document is an image of the text. If you can, try to find a web-based alternative, work with your librarian, or contact the accessibility team (accessibility@swarthmore.edu).
- Use the Moodle File Scan tool and keep in mind it is an indicator of accessibility not an evaluator of accessibility. The tool is not perfect and was developed to help us get started in identifying how many inaccessible documents we had on our LMS. Documents need to be double-checked using the techniques above
- Consider running a document through Acrobat’s “Make Accessible” Wizard

Creating documents

- When creating any documents in the Microsoft suite (Word, Powerpoint, Excel) remember the basics:
  - provide structure using headings,
  - use built-in styles,
• add alternative text to images.
• create links with meaningful text that makes sense out of context
• avoid SmartArt
• avoid putting important information in headers or footers (text to speech tools can not access these)
• run the accessibility checker

With presentations such as Slides or Powerpoint keep in mind that your students are going to have varying degrees of bandwidth capability.
• Keep them as simple as possible,
• Use a font size of at least 22pt
• Ensure there is high contrast between text and the background it sits on
• If imagery is being used describe it as if you were describing it to a friend who is on the phone with you and cannot see the imagery
• Consider using SWAY, an HTML-based presentation tool

Audio/Video

The primary concern with audio and video content is that students be able to access this material by at least two different means. For audio, this means that along with the audio file, a transcript should also be provided. This practice is not only for the benefit of students with hearing disabilities but for those who have limited internet access, where English is the second language, or when there is limited space to listen to the content. Videos should be captioned and should also have transcripts. There is more discussion about this below.

Synchronous vs. asynchronous

Determine when synchronous or asynchronous meetings are necessary. Issues with internet connectivity, family expectations, privacy and time zones are going to affect all of us and our ability to participate in synchronous meetings. Consider recording most lectures and offering periodic live sessions for check-in. Having virtual office hours may work as well - take advantage of Zoom's waiting room capabilities.

Ensure recorded video is captioned and recorded audio is transcribed. Providing video transcripts as well as captions is a good idea too. In addition to helping with accessibility, students will have varying levels of internet access and bandwidth and transcripts of video sessions may be helpful.

Zoom, Panopto, and YouTube all have auto-captioning to get you started. Keep in mind that the accuracy of auto-captioning is between 70% and 90%. You can request that Panopto video be captioned and transcribed by our third-party provider but it may take longer to get these back given our national situation. If you decide you'd like to try editing the captions yourself we have guidance in our Knowledge Base.

Legally, we are obliged to provide captions and transcriptions for students who have requested an electronic materials accommodation. It is a best practice to do this even if you do not have a student with a specific request.

What can be recorded and how

Zoom sessions can be recorded, imported to Panopto and then posted to Moodle automatically. Independent video sessions can be recorded directly in Panopto or Camtasia and posted to Moodle.

Panopto and Zoom will auto-caption content to get you started. Captioning services via third-party are available, but given our current national situation, it may be faster for you to edit captions yourself. Please refer to the ITS knowledge base for more information about how to do this or contact our academic technologists with your question.

Provide captions and transcripts for recorded material. Including transcripts for video as well as captions can help all students especially those who might have low bandwidth.

Resources

• Zoom, Panopto and Moodle Integration
• Best Practices for Teaching Remotely
• Reach Everyone, Teach Everyone (eBook available at our library)
• How to Be a Better Online Teacher - Advice Guide
• 20 Tips for Teaching an Accessible Online Course
• Explore Access: Tools for Promoting Disability Access and Inclusion
• How to Make Your Online Pivot Less Brutal
• 30 Accessibility Tips