Learning Differences and Adaptations in a Virtual Classroom

The pandemic caused by the COVID-19 virus shed light on numerous issues relating to how businesses and schools operate. From cleaning and disinfecting protocols to grab-and-go dinners to remote work and learning—and everything in between—no department operates now as it did before March 2020. Some changes hopefully will not become commonplace, such as mask-wearing, social distancing, and limited capacity inside of buildings. Some of the changes will be in place for years to come because they have positively affected health and safety standards, such as hands-free bathroom fixtures, hand sanitizer stations, and outdoor learning spaces.

Alternative Methods of Access to Classroom Content

One area of improvement in private colleges and universities is alternative methods of access to classroom content. The pivot to every course being taught in a virtual format came with trial and error and definite learning curves in the early stages of the pandemic. Through the summer and into the fall of 2020, faculty, staff, and students adapted old systems and learned new ways to distribute and interact with coursework. Technology companies developed new platforms and improved existing ones for virtual teaching and learning. The flexibility that remote learning offers has broadened access for all students as the pandemic forced limited social interaction. A year into the pandemic, campuses are discovering both advantages and disadvantages of such adaptations, particularly for students with learning differences.
Since 1973, all institutions of higher education have been required to comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act. This legislation prohibits discrimination against individuals with disabilities and requires services that allow access and opportunity for such students. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, an estimated 19% of students have been diagnosed with a condition that affects their learning.

Empowering Students
On the campus of the University of Southern California in Los Angeles, the Kortschak Center for Learning and Creativity (KCLC) provides support for those with learning differences. The mission of KCLC “is to apply and engage in research and training to serve individuals with diverse learning needs and to empower students to reach their full academic and creative potential.” A team of specialists in areas such as academic planning, occupational therapy, and educational psychology work to ensure all students have the tools they need to succeed.

These tools include on-demand videos covering topics ranging from transitioning to online learning and time management to self-care and learning theory. Additionally, the center provides daily drop-in group sessions where students can ask questions, discuss concerns, and share success stories with an academic coach. One-on-one meetings are also offered if a student needs specific and private assistance. Support groups provide discussion and strategies for specific populations, such as those with ADHD or who are on the autism spectrum.

Benefits and Challenges
Educators at USC have found online learning to be beneficial for some students served by the Kortschak Center. Students can learn at their own pace with recorded content; they can also learn during the time of day that suits their biorhythms. Time zone differences between faculty and students are eliminated with recorded, asynchronous courses. Students for whom crowds, noise, and light create anxiety no longer have to

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Students for whom crowds, noise, and light create anxiety no longer have to be in an environment that may trigger them. Those who use wheelchairs find it easier to learn from home rather than navigate campus spaces that have not been updated. Students with medical conditions that may force them to miss class can participate from home.

Virtual Support Services
Virtual learning has also been a challenge for students with diverse learning needs and who depend on the services provided by their campus resource centers. On many campuses, these centers were closed due to health and safety protocols and forced in-person visits and consultations to be done by phone or video conferencing. For students with attention issues, spaces in these centers designed to limit distractions while taking a test were inaccessible due to the campus closures. Students who need American Sign Language assistance and were accustomed to the interpreter standing slightly behind the instructor struggled with viewing them in the virtual space during synchronous classes. Additionally, online media can be difficult to process for some students, and real-time feedback to questions is non-existent in asynchronous classes.

One year into the pandemic, private colleges and universities are more clearly understanding what types of learning work best for their student population. Remote, asynchronous classes work well for some, while in-person class meetings work well for others. Hybrid real-time classes provide some compromise, yet this modality comes with challenges related to classroom participation. For those students with learning differences, remote learning may help increase their academic participation and achievement. Support centers such as the Kortschak Center for Learning and Creativity have focused on such populations and continue to work diligently to ensure academic success.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: PUPN staff writer Lisa Gibbs earned her Ed.D. in Higher Education Administration in 2018. She is an advocate for arts, particularly dance, in education and for increasing the financial well-being of artists through financial education.
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