Online learning isn't as inclusive as you may think

A pair of online instructors revisit the assumption that web-based classes are fundamentally better at accommodating a range of students and teachers.

Online education has seen tremendous growth in the last decade and student enrolment in web-based classes continue to grow. For many institutions, online learning has even become a substantial revenue stream. In principle and in theory, online learning offers numerous possibilities to practice educational inclusivity. It has the ability to reach an unlimited number of students from anywhere, at any time. Learners have the freedom to work at their own pace and build their own learning paths. It can be a convenient and flexible option for faculty and students alike. Yet, our experiences as instructors of online courses in a university setting begin to paint a slightly different story.

On its surface, online learning is inclusive and provides opportunities to those who otherwise would be excluded from or marginalized in higher education. But inclusivity in online education is much more multi-dimensional than the characteristics described above. Closer inspection reveals a different reality, one where student-to-student, faculty-to-student and faculty-to-institution interactions are limited, which may generate a sense of isolation and a lack of community for both students and faculty.

It is important to state that inclusion, or the achievement of inclusion, is not an all-or-nothing game. Nor, is the experience of inclusion the same for all students and faculty members. From what we've experienced and observed, achieving a state of inclusion in learning is a nuanced phenomenon.

Most educators recognize that students come to learning through different paths, and yet it is difficult to move past the one-size-fits-all model in an online environment. Let's take the _Netiquette_ guide (principles for considerate behaviour in an online learning community), for example, which includes norms for creating an inclusive and accountable environment. As the instructor, these really are "my" norms and there is little room for negotiations or opportunity to establish online routines that are sensitive to the individual needs of students. Although students are encouraged to share which, if any, of these norms might disturb or bewilder, the norms could unintentionally favour certain ideas, perspectives, behaviours and discourses. In turn, this can unintentionally lead students to feel marginalized therefore discouraging deep learning throughout the course.

In contrast, community guidelines in a "traditional" in-person classroom are often set through a collaborative process where both students and faculty are actively engaged. These opportunities, which aim to give students a more prominent voice in their learning and ownership over the learning process, are somewhat constrained in an online environment.

While it's true that online learning is convenient and flexible, it is mainly a solo activity in which learning, for the most part, takes place in isolation. Only when individuals talk about what they are learning and make it part of who they are, do they engage in deep learning. As instructors, we often wonder, who do students in an online class actually talk to about what they are learning? How do they tell their stories as they transfer a huge collection of individual facts into the realm of understanding?

It is also interesting to consider common teaching strategies and assignments designed to facilitate greater collaboration and discussion among students –things like group work and forum participation – applied in the context of online learning. Often, the intention behind these strategies is to foster a sense of belonging and to establish inclusive practices; yet, online they are often perceived as exclusionary due to the difficulties in bringing students together that are inherent to an online learning environment, such as time-zone differences between students.

It is important to examine online learning through the lens of the relationship between faculty member and home department or institution. One of the great joys of being a faculty member is the community of practice formed through membership in a department. As a faculty member you are part of group of stimulating and intriguing individuals who support and challenge you as an educator. You have opportunities to not only talk about teaching and learning, but also informally observe your colleagues' teaching practices and offer feedback. (Another feature often associated with in-person teaching is the allocation of physical space within the department, such as an office and a mailbox.) As an online educator, much of your work is done in isolation, in front of a computer screen, from any location with an internet connection. Although this provides flexibility and freedom, it can also produce feelings of detachment and alienation from colleagues, students and the institution.

Fostering an accountable, inclusive and stimulating environment requires an instructor to be acutely sensitive to individual differences between learners and the emotional dimensions of learning. In an online environment, in the majority of cases, the instructors cannot see the students' facial expressions, they cannot hear the tone of their voices or capture any unwritten reactions, thoughts or feelings; therefore, we should choose our words carefully, and be aware of how the message may be miscommunicated and misunderstood.

Even so, modeling values of fairness, empathy, acceptance, kindness, respect, and responsibility to and for other people in an online setting can remain elusive. The same thing can be said for capturing students' excitement for discovery, satisfaction and pride in their accomplishments. Rather than an inherent characteristic, inclusivity in an online classroom should be pursued in an intentional and ongoing way.

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