**BOOK REVIEW**

**Norman Coombs’ Making Online Teaching Accessible**

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*Making Online Teaching Accessible* is a timely publication, as there is on-going interest in learning in the online environment and the debate about how best to prepare teachers is long standing. Nowadays, members of faculty explicitly use online content. Recent developments in information technology have become part of all courses ranging from everyday content-authoring software such as, the programs in Microsoft Office Suite, to more complex applications for the technologically advanced.

Access to online materials is a fundamental right for all, not a luxury, but until now, the voice of disability in the use of online materials has been silent. It is only in this publication, that Dr. Coombs provides us with a truly informative and hands-on tool for anyone involved in maximizing learning for people with disabilities in the online environment. Coombs unravels what is a challenging target for any book, into an accessible piece of reading with direct application to teaching and learning. This is an essential ‘how to do it’ book for faculty at colleges and universities and all others involved in working and studying online. It illustrates that online teaching carries with it an ideology that highlights the need to make learning accessible online for all otherwise the value for people with disabilities is rendered invisible. Faculty approaches to learning, course design and delivery are an integral part of online dynamics. It isn’t being online *per se.* that assists learning; it is the faculty members, staff and administrators who are involved in course design and delivery which make online learning a mode of learning worthy of our attention.

Throughout *Making Online Teaching Accessible*, Coombs provides clear advice and strategies for educators to meet the needs of students who have difficulty in accessing the written word online. Coombs says that he is going to “demystify the processes and technology involved – to make them (content-authoring software) accessible to those of us who are ‘tech-impaired’ – and to demonstrate both the benefits and necessity of learning new skills.” The book successfully achieves this goal by demonstrating that content, which is adapted for delivery online, can also be made accessible to people with disabilities by following a series of better practices to achieve functionality. Coombs demonstrates new insights into how to make online content accessible in easily accomplishable ways that does not involve high-tech knowledge development. For the averagely computer literate faculty member, the advice given is easily followed and applied, and we recognize that Coomb’s achievements and impetus inspires us to improve on-line access for people with disabilities as we develop our repertoire. The book is clear, straightforward, and offers a robust approach to solving problems of access, as it consists largely of advice and tips which is a valuable tool box for anyone involved in online learning.

In the preface to the book, Coombs starts by discussing the ‘explosion’ of online learning and then, recounts his story of losing his sight at the age of eight in a play accident. He then went on to earn a PhD in history and has taught for 25 years. Up until the mid 1980s he relied on tape and Braille, until he sampled an Apple computer with voice synthesizer. He speaks of this as a ‘real awakening’ as he could read e-mail and accept student assignments electronically. From thereon, Coombs became a pioneer of online teaching and management systems for people with disabilities. Throughout the book, there are personal illustrations of how adaptations work in reality, as clear illustrations are given of the limitations of the disability in accessing online content, and the potential of technology to accommodate for them.

Coomb’s book is intended for educators and instructional design staff, for all technology staff responsible for maintaining the learning management system and the institution’s main Web site, student disability support staff and administrators of all departments who are directly or indirectly involved in online learning. Students would also benefit greatly from the ideas and steps this book provides as education continues to become increasingly dependent on on-line learning; more students with disabilities enter courses, and the Internet and other digital technologies continue to alter the nature of literacy.

As a member of Education Studies faculty, with a technology background, I found *Making Online Teaching Accessible* to be invaluable. By working through the tips and applying them gradually during the semester, I was quickly able to master the techniques for everyday software. I found the modifications to be equally valuable for students with disabilities and those with English as a Second Language. Overall, the adaptations were generally useful for enhancing study skills for all students, reaching a broader target group than anticipated.

*Making Online Teaching Accessible*, is divided into three clear sections.

The aim of the first part, which consists of Chapters 1 and 2, is to explain the accessibility issues related to online learning including, how people use computers; an overview of universal design principles; a brief discussion of relevant legislation and internationally agreed-upon guidelines; the problems and benefits of online learning for students with disabilities, and general recommendations for how to best ensure online content is accessible. These chapters are grounded in the theories of learner-centered teaching and demystify assistive technologies. These chapters offer a firm base on which to explore practice in section two.

Section two, which comprises chapters three to seven, is devoted to concrete tips on how to create online content that will fully include students with disabilities. Chapters three through five cover using Microsoft Word, Excel, and PowerPoint in ways that enhance online content. Chapter 6 specifically relates to providing math and graphics content. Chapter 7 is on the accessibility of multimedia presentations and on how alternate modes of communication can enhance access to course content. These chapters include a wealth of helpful tips and suggestions for effectively communicating with disabled students. It contains practical advice on purchasing accessible course management systems, developing solutions for inaccessibility issues and creating training materials for faculty and staff to make online learning truly accessible.

Chapter 8 is on the broader issue of how to provide support, and is aimed at staff and administration, so was less important for me.

As I read, collaborated with others, and applied Coombs’s advice on a daily basis, I knew that I was caught up in his commitment to the best teaching, learning and accessibility options for all students. I realized that any difficulty in planning and preparing for the online environment can be resolved by reading his comprehensive book which can have nothing but positive repercussions for teaching and learning. Of course, faculty members are the best professional judge of the suitability of the applications for their particular teaching content and context but there is sufficient explanation even for a faculty member with low-tech knowledge and experience.

The final chapter of the book explores the notion of working as a team across departments and disciplines for online learning for people with disabilities. The text is clear, precise, and the typeface is clear. It is easy to engage with, as it is divided into manageable chunks covering essential points. *Making Online Teaching Accessible* has great potential in its outreach and as a springboard for further reading and self-development. It would certainly be a valuable addition for all university and college libraries and would take an important place in teacher preparation courses, Information and Computer Technology and Special Needs programs. To sum up, Coombs’ book holds a prime position on my shelf and is long overdue in its content and inspiration.

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