

Source: <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/opinion/shift-online-has-finally-made-space-disabled-students>

The shift online has finally made space for disabled students

This swift transformation highlights who among our students we think are worthy of learning and who we choose to leave behind, says Clare Mullaney

February 8, 2021

Clare Mullaney



Source: iStock

The consensus is that online learning is a poor substitute for the in-person classroom experience. Google the phrase “online learning is” and you’ll be presented with a list of unfavourable adjectives describing today’s educational experience: “not effective,” “bad,” and “stressful”.

Not everyone, however, mourns the loss of pre-pandemic forms of instruction. Disabled people have long advocated for the ability to attend class without being present in the classroom. These requests for virtual attendance, however, have been routinely denied. Disability advocate Jessica Campanile was told that online attendance “was impossible due to technological constraints and privacy and copyright concerns”.

When colleges and universities made a sudden shift online last March, disabled students and staff took issue with the way institutions became flexible when able-bodied people were at risk of becoming sick.

Vanderbilt professor Aimi Hamraie [remarked](#): “At some point, non-disabled people had decided that such things were unimaginable, and then overnight they became imaginable by necessity.”

This swift transformation in the structure of higher education highlights who among our students we think are worthy of learning and who we choose to leave behind.

Faculty, especially those running discussion-based courses, often default to Zoom for online instruction because it most closely replicates the in-person experience: voicing opinions aloud and having those opinions heard by others. But finding ways to accommodate asynchronous and synchronous learning allows more flexible attendance policies and varied forms of participation.

Non-video centred platforms such as Google Docs, Slack, Twitter and [YellowDig](#) (a new gamified learning platform that resembles social media) might serve as equally dynamic classrooms for the ways they lengthen and extend typical discussions. The opportunity to stage conversation outside the “live” format of Zoom or designated class hours is appealing to students with chronic conditions, for example, who can’t predict what they are able to do and when.

The opportunity to engage with materials at different times also allows students who may process information slower the opportunity to pause on an idea before they share it and return to posts for further contemplation.

In an end-of-semester feedback form that asked my students to reflect on their experience learning online in the spring of 2020, one submission read: “I really liked having the ability to read things over again, meditate silently on ideas people were proposing and think more deeply.” In creating an archive of course discussion, online learning allows for the revisiting of material that we might otherwise overlook in the relative rush of in-person instruction, where discussions disappear once the class session ends.

It was only after colleges’ and universities’ transition online that one of my students’ difficulties in the traditional classroom revealed itself. While she had attended all our in-person sessions, she never spoke, not once (not even in group work where I hoped that small clusters of students would make conversation less intimidating). In March, however, she was the first to check in on our class Twitter feed with a picture of her dog – and she then shared the most subtle and startling close readings of 19th-century poetry that I’ve read.

In witnessing this student’s transformation after moving online, I began to question all I had been taught to value as a teacher (which, at its core, featured the magic of in-person instruction). The classroom, where bodies huddle together in space and time and wrestle with difficult ideas, was inhibiting certain students while enabling others.

As the pandemic drags on, we repeatedly hear the lament: “I wish things were normal”. It’s an understandable plea for the return of maskless socialising with friends, hugging relatives and, for those of us who teach and learn, a return to the classroom.

But as my colleague Caroline Henze-Gongola said to me: “Some of us really don’t want things to go back to normal because they never worked for us in the first place.”

The promise of a vaccine and the restoration of campus life as we knew it might make our current online practices a thing of the past. The conversations made newly available to disabled faculty and students threaten to disappear, resulting in a loss that will feel all the more profound. The educational circumstances imposed by Covid-19 offer the possibility not of returning to life as “normal” but of remaking the ways we have been taught to think and learn.

My hope is that we carry some of this innovation and flexibility back with us to in-person teaching when and if that shift occurs. Imagine, for instance, a course that meets in person but has a consistently running Twitter conversation or text thread alongside it, which would enable students to post comments both in and outside class.

In bracing through more months of this crisis, we are likely to have higher numbers of disabled students in our classrooms. We are yet to learn the extent of Covid’s effects, especially among those who experienced a severe bout. “Long haulers”, as they have been [termed](#), struggle not only with physical symptoms such as fatigue, headaches and light sensitivity, but also cognitive effects such as short-term memory loss, brain fog and chronic anxiety.

If this is our new generation of students, we must dispel the myth of the magic that accompanies in-person learning and embrace the many students that online instruction welcomes into its fold.

Clare Mullaney is assistant professor of disability rhetoric at [Clemson University](#).