Core 120 Accessibility Redesign Project

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Overview

This project is inspired by the students who learn in different ways. In my UWW History classroom, I work with students with a range of learning styles. For students with learning differences, on-line education can be an invaluable steppingstone towards personal growth and financial independence. However, students with disabilities face some specific challenges in college-level on-line classes. My goal in designing my new CORE 120 online class is to begin developing an environment that is accessible to as wide a range of learning styles as possible. There is always new research and new technology focused on improving access for students who learn in diverse ways. Each academic discipline will need its own specific tools. Thus, it is difficult to draw up a generalized list of resources. The UWW CSD (Center for Students with Disabilities) helps instructors decide what discipline-specific tools they might want to implement. This project focuses on the needs of History students who are expected to read a large amount of text, analyze primary sources, and conduct library research. Over the years, I've worked with many different students who have taught me a great deal about improving accessibility in my on-line classes. I'd like to thank these students for being upfront about their needs and helping me become a better teacher.

UWW Statistics

- Number 20 in the nation on College Choice's 50 Best Disability Friendly Colleges and Universities.
- UW-Whitewater's commitment to universal design was featured in University Business magazine, Pushing ADA Beyond the Limits (2009)
- Universal design in University housing featured in Reslife.net, "Beyond ADA: A 'University Design Team and Plan' for Renovating and Building for the Future" (2016)
- Research authorship by UW-Whitewater about Universal Design, "Implementing Universal Design: A Collaborative Approach to Designing Campus Housing", Journal of College and University Student Housing, Vol 39/40, Issue 2/1 (2013)

Goals
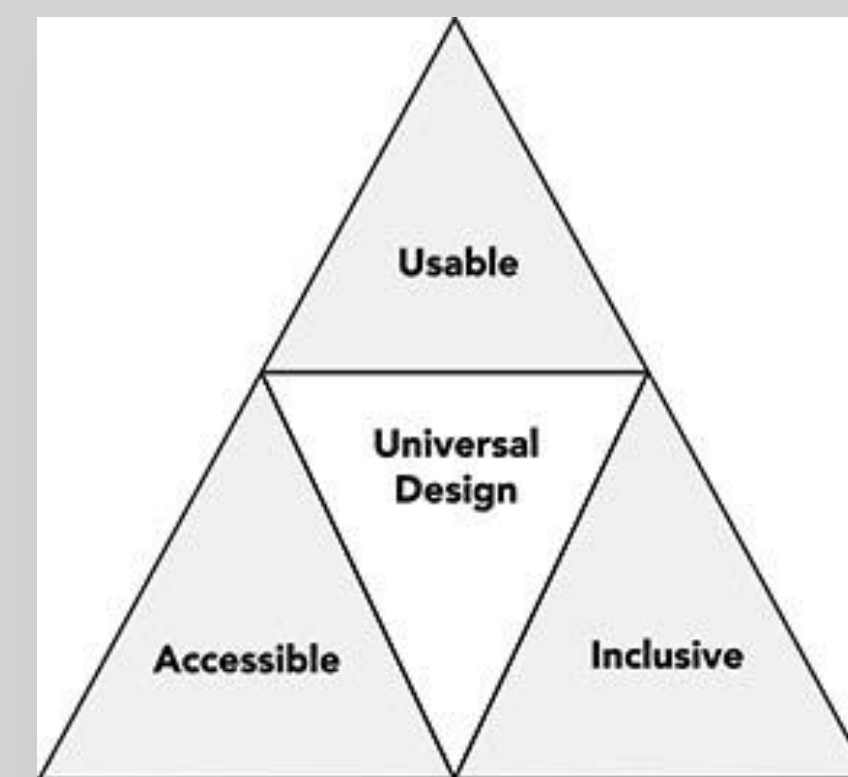
Implementation

Accessible Textbooks: For this project, I chose to use Cengage-on line. Cengage regularly conducts audits to ensure that its products adhere to WCAG 2.1 AA/Section 508 (a federal law that requires all electronic information technology developed, procured, maintained, or used by the federal government be accessible to people with disabilities). Cengage also supplies its documents in both PDF and Word format upon request for students with specific visual and hearing needs. (https://www.cengagegroup.com)

Accessible Ancillary Readings: Ideally, readings should be available in both PDF and Word formats to accommodate screen readers. PDF documents do not always scale properly for students needing large print. I also read most of my ancillary material in my own voice and record them in MP3 format.

Closed Captioning / Transcription: All on-line videos need closed captioning and / or transcription. Most automatic closed captioning programs (for example YouTube Studio) are quite inaccurate. For this reason, I do my best to provide transcripts for my own video lectures. I also preview all required videos from external sources to ensure as accurate closed captioning as possible. This is the most difficult and time-consuming part of my project.

Image Descriptions: There should be an easy-to-find image description for all data and primary source images. When I record a video lecture, I try to describe images verbally.

Resources for Research: Students with dyslexia and vision disabilities often have a hard time conducting independent library and lab research with no guidance. It is essential that these students meet with both their instructor and library / lab staff regularly for research meetings. Instructors should ensure that it is possible to complete research assignments with ADA compliant materials. In my CORE 120 class, I like to have a few ADA compliant research project ideas on-hand to get a student started.

Further Work & Recommendations

- **Regular Training**: Extra training for instructional faculty and staff on ADA best practices for on-line curriculum design. This training should include both training and access to tools such as: Dragon Natural Speaking, Live Screen Speak, Kurzweil, and Book Share.

- **Assessment**: Regular auditing of on-line courses by both instructors and students to ensure that on-line courses are meeting the needs of students with diverse learning styles.

- **Support for Closed Captioning and/or Transcription:** Closed captioning and transcription are time-consuming, and it is very easy to make unintentional errors. Support for professional closed captioning would be an ideal solution. Barring professional closed captioning; training in, and accesses to, closed captioning and transcription software would be immensely helpful.

- **Notification of Student Needs:** Not every student will know exactly what they need when they come into an on-line learning environment. This is especially true of freshmen, first generation, and non-traditional students. It is essential that students feel comfortable advocating for themselves. This can be done directly or via a student's CSD contact. It would also be wonderful if there were some student peer-mentors with learning difference for incoming students who might share similar challenges.

- **Improvement not Perfection:** No course will ever be perfect for every student. Both instructors and students are human and will make mistakes. Strive for improvment and learn from mistakes.

Thank You