

*Review*

## **Developing Inclusive and Accessible Online Writing Instruction: Supporting OWI Principle 1**

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Coombs, Norman. *Making Online Teaching Accessible: Inclusive Course Design for Students with Disabilities*. Jossey-Bass, 2010. 192 pages.

This text is also available in a Large Print edition from ReadHowYouWant, 2012. 264 pages.

In response to the rise in online writing instruction, the CCCC OWI Committee released in 2013 *A Position Statement of Principles and Example Effective Practices for Online Writing Instruction (OWI)*. The statement's first principle is: "Online writing instruction should be universally inclusive and accessible." With growing numbers of students taking online instruction—more than one in four students enrolled in an online course in 2014 (Allen and Seaman 12)—and given that eleven percent of college students reported having disabilities in 2012 (US Department of Education), the need exists for making online writing instruction accessible and inclusive. Preceding the development of the CCCC OWI Committee's 2013 position statement, Norman Coombs' *Making Online Teaching Accessible: Inclusive Course Design for Students with Disabilities* provides helpful guidance to instructors, instructional designers, information technology staff, student disability services staff, and administrators for supporting accessible OWI. A blind, Black scholar, Coombs draws from his own experiences and expertise as student, instructor, and learning technologist to reconceptualize difference and advocate accessibility as an advantage to all. Although published seven years ago, this book is an enduring volume that focuses on concepts important for supporting the CCCC OWI Principle 1. Coombs' book presents a reassuring approach by having faculty use the "everyday content-authoring applications that faculty are already familiar with—such

as Microsoft Word,” resulting in implementing accessible content more easily, and less expensively, than feared (x).

Coombs helpfully identifies early what accessibility is and why it matters. In the preface, he defines accessibility as providing online course content that “can be effectively used by people who fall into the following disability groups” and lists students who are blind, have severe visual impairments but are not legally blind; students who have upper body motor impairments; students with either visual or cognitive processing difficulties; and students with hearing impairments (x). Coombs provides administrators and instructors arguments for why accessibility matters, pointing out that in US society, “we have decided that providing access to public buildings and transportation for people who are unable to walk is the right thing to do,” and have created building codes and laws to support that decision (xii). Such decisions have extended to the educational realm (10–15), although Coombs notes that educational equal access has lagged (xii). As Webster Newbold points out in *Foundational Practices of Online Writing Instruction*, however, “it is our institutions’ legal responsibility and ours as employees to make appropriate accommodations under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990 (see also Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973)” (xiii). Coombs’ book helps instructors and administrators meet these responsibilities in online courses.

*Making Online Teaching Accessible* resides at the intersection of two writing instruction-focused conversations: OWI and disability. Online writing instruction has been addressed by Scott Warnock, Beth Hewett, and Hewett and Kevin Eric DePew, as well as others. Scholars, such as Sushil K. Oswal, Melanie Yergeau, Jay Dolmage, Stephanie L. Kerschbaum, and Margaret Price (works by Dolmage, Kerschbaum, and Price are also reviewed in this special issue), and resources, such as *Disability and the Teaching of Writing: A Critical Sourcebook*, have brought increasing attention to issues of disability in writing classes. These conversations have been addressed in combination in Oswal’s “Physical and Learning Disabilities in OWI” while Hewett provides some discussion of accessibility in *The Online Writing Conference: A Guide for Teachers and Tutors*. Although not specifically a writing instruction-focused text, *Making Online Teaching Accessible* is an important addition. Coombs’ combined attention to access and online instruction is detailed and approachable, even for individuals without extensive technical expertise.

The majority of *Making Online Teaching Accessible* focuses on faculty, primarily in helping instructors develop accessible online courses. Coombs begins with descriptions of students, describing how people with disabilities use computers through such tools as voice recognition technology, on-

screen keyboards, screen magnification software, screen readers, and audio transcriptions and video captioning, which student disability services staff can help students use. Such perspective is helpful in understanding the students who may enroll in online courses.

The majority of the book's chapters focus broadly on developing accessible course content. Citing the American Foundation for the Blind (2008), Coombs offers that accessibility depends on "three 'legs' of the online learning tripod": accessibility of the learning management system (LMS), accessibility of the actual course content, and the skill of the student in using up-to-date assistive technology" (19). Instructors can support the second leg of accessible course content by incorporating such characteristics as consistent designs and accessible graphics (24). Coombs includes additional practical advice, such as modularizing and organizing course content into bite-size chunks, providing a text equivalent for every non-text element (for instance, when including images—which he advocates inclusion of for students who learn better with visuals—incorporating also a textual description for screen readers), including captions for multimedia presentations, applying color carefully, and using headers to make data tables accessible (24–28).

A design focus facilitates implementation of accessible content. Universal design enables "products and environments to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design" (Connell et al). Coombs provides an overview of universal design, the goal of which

when applied to education is to make learning inclusive for all students, not just those with disabilities. It is an approach to designing all products and services to be usable by students with the widest possible range of both functional (physical) capabilities and different learning styles. (7)

For example, in providing instructions on how instructors can create narrated slide shows, which simulate an instructor delivering traditional classroom talks, Coombs states that although narrated presentations will cause few problems for most individuals with disabilities, people with hearing impairments will have trouble; including a transcript accompanying the video provides a means for individuals to access that content. Applying these universal design principles using familiar authoring tools "is not a burden" in creating accessible content (Coombs 124). The universal design approach supports Coombs' contention that the "first step in advancing online content accessibility is improving your quality of teaching and the

clarity of your communication for everyone, including students with disabilities” (124).

In articulating how instructors can develop accessible course content, Coombs demonstrates that instructors can utilize their familiarity with such tools as Microsoft Office in chapters Three and Four. Here, Coombs identifies features to avoid because of their incompatibility with assistive technology—although he notes that assistive technologies may support them in the future. Coombs carefully walks readers through concepts like making content accessible using such software as Microsoft Office and Camtasia’s video maker, addressing specifically such tasks as creating narration in PowerPoint and publishing formatted files through Word. One inevitable outcome from this specific description is that software changes rapidly, and thus some step-by-step instructions and images do not precisely match those in more recent software versions. However, despite such minor discrepancies, the book’s conceptual presentation remains highly relevant, and readers can accomplish the described software activities through minor adaptation. Coombs additionally provides information on a number of resources throughout the text, pointing readers to such tools as the WAVE Web accessibility evaluation tool, available online and through browser extensions, and also includes an extensive Resources list after the Appendices. Throughout, Coombs’ software discussion demonstrates accessible content can be made through the software tools with which instructors are already familiar.

The last chapter addresses the need for institution-wide support of online instruction accessibility and inclusion. Such support should be provided for students with disabilities taking online courses; faculty and instructional design staff developing online course content; and IT staff responsible for the LMS and supporting faculty learning and using it (Coombs 118). Coombs argues for an integrated, campus-wide support team. Accessible online learning requires more than just committed instructors and administrators; it also requires institutional support and input across the campus, particularly as some concerns cannot be addressed by instructors alone. For example, accessible courses require not only having an LMS that is itself accessible, but also that any pages required for the student to navigate to the LMS and any pages housing content must also be accessible. An institutional structure enables faculty and staff to support each other in supporting students. With their discussions of legal responsibilities and a proposed campus structure, the first and last chapters best support administrative considerations for supporting online course accessibility.

Covering the range of LMS software, course content development, legislation, and student populations, *Making Online Teaching Accessible*

makes clear that having accessible, inclusive courses means having multiple individuals working together toward this shared goal. Building upon the familiar—that is, instructors’ familiarity with using tools in Microsoft Office—makes accessibility easier, and less expensive, than many might fear. With its clear, concise text, consistent headings, legible typeface, and bite-sized chunks and summaries, the book itself demonstrates the kind of design principles that Coombs recommends for accessible online courses. Administrators at both programmatic and institutional levels, online course instructors, IT, and student disability support staff can look to Norman Coombs’s *Making Online Teaching Accessible: Inclusive* for guidance on developing and supporting online writing courses that provide the accessibility that US law and the OWI Principle 1 require.

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