Ensuring your Online Webinars are Inclusive

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities outlines the core features of an inclusive education system to include a whole person approach which…

> "offers flexible curricula, teaching and learning methods adapted to different strengths, requirements and learning styles. This approach implies the provision of support and reasonable accommodation and early intervention so that they are able to fulfil their potential. The focus is on learners' capacities and aspirations rather than content when planning teaching activities. It commits to ending segregation within educational settings by ensuring inclusive classroom teaching in accessible learning environments with appropriate supports. The education system must provide a personalized educational response, rather than expecting the student to fit the system."

It has been shown that when education is truly inclusive, it can benefit all learners, not just disabled students (Bui, *et al.,* 2010; Fisher, Shumaker, & Deshler, 1995) and so it is important to ensure that our online webinars are accessible to all viewers.

These guidelines are designed as a starting point for setting up webinars but there is no substitute for discussing particular requirements directly with your delegates.

General Good Practice

- When organising the webinar, ask if there are any accessibility requirements of which you need to be aware.
- Organise access for any disability support workers such as notetakers and interpreters.
- Institutions should be using one platform so that delegates do not need to learn multiple ways to navigate the different systems.
- Ensure that delegates are aware of the platform you are using and ensure assistance is available to assist them if necessary.
- Accessible copies of the slides should be supplied in advance to both delegates and any disability support workers.

- The presenter should have an assistant who can focus on accessibility and technological concerns.
- Structure the session so that there are points where an assistant can summarise the comments and questions in the chat pane.
- Organise your WebCam to ensure the light is falling on your face to allow lipreading, if appropriate.
- Describe the key content of all slides.
- Consider using an open microphone for some disabled delegates so that they can request clarification during the presentation.
- Save the chat pane so that the presenter can answer any questions after the session and they can be distributed.

1. Neurodiverse Conditions

The problem with online conferencing with many neurodiverse conditions (dyslexia, dyspraxia, dyscalculia, ADHD, Tourettes and Autism) is that there are too many inputs with video, audio, slides, whiteboard, chat, Q&A etc. etc.

It needs to be kept very simple and not all webinar programs are flexible enough to switch things off.

- Switch off audio for participants from the start.
- Switch of video for participants from the start
- Leave the main screen set to the slides for the majority of the time.
- Give clear warning of changes to polls etc.
- Advise people to keep to either the chat pane or Q&A - not both
- Advise that the presenter or an assistant will read out any questions added to the chat pane so students do not have to keep the constantly changing feed on their screen. This will also help those with slow reading speeds.
- Send out the list of questions from the chat pane and the answers after the session.

Access to notetakers may also be required.

2. Deaf/Hearing Impaired users.

Many of the platforms used for webinars have some form of automatic captioning available and these can be used with care.

Two examples:

- Microsoft Teams have integrated automatic captions, but members are reporting varied experiences.
- Zoom has recently partnered with Otter.ai for automatic captions in their Pro version but, once again, varied experiences are being reported.

The accuracy of the captions can depend on available bandwidth and user-accents, but the main problems appear to be connected with the user's surroundings. Some people are using small rooms with good acoustics whilst others are using large rooms with external noise and echoes.

Recommendations:

- Presenters and all users wear a headset with a microphone, if available.
- Ensure all microphones are switched off when the person is not speaking to reduce background noise.

Members have reported that the use of the automatic captions on Microsoft Powerpoint are proving very useful for direct lectures but still have the problem that the captions stop, if you take the slides off the webinar screen to use a poll or show a webpage.

Some universities and colleges are employing a company to provide live transcription which is a more expensive option but gives certainty to Deaf delegates that they will be able to participate in the session. If this system is used, it is recommended that the webinar notes or slides are supplied to the company, as well as to all participants, before the session to allow accurate transcription.

Many institutions are providing BSL interpretation for webinar sessions on an alternative platform. The has proved very successful but the Deaf delegate needs to have adequate bandwidth to allow for two simultaneous video webinars. Some platforms allow the video to be set so that the interpreter is continuously on the screen, as well as the main presenter but this adds distractions for neurodiverse students.

When BSL is the student's first language, it can be hard to keep up with multiple threads in the chat pane. Good practice is to read out the questions and comments so that the notetaker or interpreter can convey the information.

Access for notetakers may also be required.

3. Blind/Visually Impaired users

Several blind and visually impaired users are reporting difficulty in accessing webinars and many of these difficulties can be removed with correct practice.

- An accessible version of the slides should be available in advance for everyone, but this is especially important for people who have to decide whether to listen to the presenter or the screen reader.

- The presenter should read out what is being shown on the screen. This may be content on the slide that they are talking about or equations on a virtual whiteboard. 'You cancel this by that and add this' does not help anyone.
- The 'chat' pane can be very difficult to access with a screen reader and may also contain text too small for a visually impaired person to read. It is good practice to read out comments from the chat pane.

The current move to webinars can enable teaching and sharing information to be more accessible for disabled people. However, these webinars need to be accessible to ensure it can benefit all learners. Setting up your webinars to be accessible for as many as possible is simply good practice and then you can make minor alterations for those with more complex requirements.

References

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