

# **Disability, Access to Education and the Pandemic**

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One of the “silver linings” of the current pandemic appears to be the “sudden” realization of just how much digital content in education is not accessible to those of us with disabilities. While those of us working in the field of accessible document design and digital accessibility have been clanging the klaxon for about 20 years with no significant results and resistance even in 2020, quarantining students with only online access sharpens our focus on the inequity in education at all levels.

Students in primary and secondary school no longer have access to educational assistants who often run interference between a teacher who doesn't create accessible content and the student who needs it. While teachers will continue to provide inaccessible content through learning management systems that may or may not be accessible, there is no one at home to provide the alternate or accessible format the student needs.

In tertiary education and learning environments, students with disabilities won't have access to a disability services department whose staff often provide accessible formats of inaccessible teacher produced content as well as textbooks and journal articles.

Students who depend on being able to access a computer lab at school for access to their adaptive technology and sometimes even access to a computer will fall behind.

Schools that have a mechanism for students accessing software only while on campus will not be able to complete assignments or access software-based course material whether it is accessible or not.

Internationally, we have discussed the education of children with disabilities in conflict and how to bring education to refugee camps for children with disabilities, however, we never considered that the entire world would act as a refugee camp or Petri dish with students with disabilities at all levels of education being denied education and learning opportunities because of the vast amount of inaccessible digital content and course material.

Who will be the leaders in education and finally mandate that everything used in any course **MUST** be accessible to those of us with disabilities? There are studies on how making digital content accessible for those of us with disabilities enhances the learning of all students.

Yet in 2020 we are still looking for a perfect “business case,” academic institutions are still afraid to mandate every teacher create accessible content, that every assignment from any student be accessible to all students and that any learning tool used in a classroom for **ANY** course **MUST** be accessible for all students.

In 2020, with the microscope of a pandemic clearly showing us just how much educational content is not accessible to students (and teachers) with disabilities, we have an opportunity for leadership from all levels of education to stop making excuses and as the Incheon Strategy states: "Make the Right Real!"