Individual Education Plan Considerations for Online Learning: Accommodations

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Abstract

This article provides guidance for including students with disabilities (SWDs) in online learning. Federal special education law and research are currently outpaced by practice as students with disabilities participate in K-12 online learning in increasing numbers. While online learning has the flexibility to present content in multiple ways and to offer students multiple means for expression, IEP accommodations assigned to onground learning are often incongruent with online learning. Accommodations should be reconsidered for online learning by delineating learning profile skill deficits and filtering them through three lenses that characterize important features of online learning: synchrony in computer-mediated communication (CMC); World Wide Web (web) and technology; and curriculum.

Keywords: accessibility, accommodations, online learning, Universal Design for Learning

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Background

The Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (ESSA) has mobilized the notion of personalized learning pathways to best meet the needs of all learners. One ESSA learning pathway that has emerged, alongside significant digital advances, is online learning and its variations -- blended and hybrid learning. Online learning provides anytime, anyplace, anywhere learning options -- the spirit of ESSA. It may also open up new, adroitly flexible ways of learning for those with disabilities ("Equity Matters," 2015; Hashey & Stahl, 2014; "Universal Design for Learning," 2017).

Eleven years prior to ESSA, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) was developed to ensure a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) for those with disabilities who could not make progress in education without an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) (Individual with Disabilities Education Act, 2004). IDEA was written for the context of students who attend school in a physical building (brick-and-mortar) with in-person interaction with teachers (onground). Those who wrote it could not foresee the dimensional differences that would characterize online learning. This difference requires considerations in interpreting how IDEA applies (Rice & Carter, 2015). State Education Agencies (SEAs), Local Education Agencies (LEAs), administrators, and teachers struggle to ensure legally sound practices for online learning without specific guidance on how the laws are to be interpreted, and without timely peer-reviewed research that can support appropriate practices. Until policymakers can recommend interpretations of the law and research can catch up with practice, the IEP should be carefully reviewed prior to a Student with a Disability (SWD) participating in online

learning (Tindle, East, & Mellard, 2017; "Equity Matters," 2016). This article addresses considerations for IEP accommodations.

Maria Worthen, Vice President for Federal and State Policy of the International Association of K-12 Online Learning (iNACOL) states that, "For students with disabilities, multiple pathways mean new possibilities for the least restrictive learning environment. Leaders and educators should ensure that each is accessible for every learner, with appropriate accommodations for students with disabilities" (Worthen, 2016). Online learning incorporates flexible media which can quickly and naturally provide a variety of opportunities to accommodate learners' differing needs ("Equity Matters," 2015; Hashey & Stahl, 2014; "Universal Design for Learning," 2017). In addition, Learning Management Systems (LMSs) and Learning Platforms (LPs) have built-in tools and/or the ability to interface with external applications that can accommodate learning needs by making content accessible and providing multiple methods of demonstrating knowledge. Because of these advances from less flexible, onground learning media (a worksheet handed out to students) to significantly and efficiently flexible online learning media (digital text that can be enlarged instantaneously or accessed using text to voice application), as well as other dimensional differences, accommodations' applicability must be scrutinized.

Framework

Four Categories of Onground Accommodations. Accommodations typical to onground learning can fall into four categories when examining their applicability to online learning. An accommodation may have a counterpart, it may be inherently accommodated, it may have implementation challenges, or it may vary in the online realm by skill deficit (see Figures 1- 4). Accommodations can play out differently in online learning and must be considered by the IEP team.

Accommodations with Counterparts. Some accommodations in onground learning have a counterpart in online learning (see Figure 1). For example, let's consider that a student is assigned an accommodation for onground learning of "Reduce visual distractions." While this student may receive learning material accommodated by presenting one visual at a time or with limited text to a page, on a digital device he or she may be supported with a front-ended masking tool or with a masking application layered onto his or her browser. While there may be an accommodation counterpart to onground learning in online learning, some accommodations are no longer necessary due to the flexible nature of technology.

Common Accommodations in Onground Learning	Comparative Accommodations in Online Learning
Environment	
Reduce visual or auditory distractions.	Provide a masking tool or noise-cancelling headphones.
Assessment	
Allow oral responses from and/or scribe for the student.	Provide voice to text application.
Read the test to or with the student.	Provide text to voice application.
Functioning & Learning (Executive, Social and Emotional)	
Preview/review the classroom environment and how to access different resources.	Preview/review with the student how to navigate the online course in order to access content, resources and learning.
Presentation of Content	
Provide manipulatives to support concept acquisition.	Provide simulations or interactive learning to support concept acquisition.
Pre-teach vocabulary.	Include hyperlinks for targeted vocabulary.

Figure 1: A comparison of some selected accommodations in onground learning that have a counterpart in online learning. Accommodations are organized by common categories.

Accommodations Inherently Accommodated. Some onground accommodations are inherently accommodated in online learning (see Figure 2). For example, a student may have an accommodation for an auditory processing disorder of “Provide written directions.” In online learning, directions are typically provided first and consistently in text with supplemented modalities to varying degrees of effectiveness. Therefore, this accommodation is inherently accommodated by online learning. Thus IEP team members can see that some accommodations can be by nature addressed in online learning; for others there are implementation challenges.

Selected Accommodations in Onground Learning Inherently Accommodated in Online Learning
Assignments
Provide written directions.
Assessment
Provide enlargement of text and visuals specific to the student's needs.
Presentation of Content
Present individually.

Figure 2: A selection of accommodations in onground learning that are inherently accommodated in online learning. These accommodations, occurring naturally, are no longer needed.

Accommodations irrelevant. Some onground accommodations are irrelevant to online learning (see Figure 3). A student with an attention deficit may be assigned an onground accommodation of, “Preferential seating.” The seat is assigned in an area of the classroom that is most beneficial to one’s learning, typically in closer proximity to the source of the content delivery or facilitator of learning. As the content is not delivered in person in online learning, this accommodation does not apply and should not be included in the IEP. Therefore, an accommodation in onground learning may have a counterpart, it may be inherently accommodated in online learning, or it may not apply at all. A number of accommodations, however, will vary in online learning depending on a skill deficit. An understanding of the skill deficits that comprise a student’s learning profile and the characteristics of online learning is essential to identifying appropriate online accommodations.

Selected Accommodations in Onground Learning With Implementation Challenges in Online Learning
Environment
Provide preferential seating. Provide an alternate environment.
Functioning and Learning (Executive, Social and Emotional)
Allow movement breaks.

Figure 3: A selection of accommodations in onground learning that have implementation challenges in online learning. These accommodations are no longer needed.

Accommodations vary by skill deficit. Some onground accommodations vary by the student's actual skill deficit (see Figure 4). A skill deficit is not to be misconstrued with a disability. Disability categories, such as Autism Spectrum Disorder, by no means identify specific skill deficits. They can, however, have a host of skill deficits potentially associated with them (Hoffman, Fehlinger, Stenzel, & Rief, 2015).

Selected Accommodations in Onground Learning That Vary by Skill Deficit in Online Learning
Assignments
Complete assignments at school only. Grade only what is completed. Provide extended time for assignments. Assist in initiating assignment. Check with the student for understanding.
Assessment
Allow the student an opportunity to retest.
Functioning and Learning (Executive, Social and Emotional)
Implement an incentive-based reward plan for work completion or skill application. Provide verbal reinforcement at fixed intervals of instruction, for a task, or for application of a desired skill. Provide and assist the student in understanding the daily or class schedule. Provide a verbal (or nonverbal) cue to attend.
Presentation of Content
Provide guided notes. Highlight critical information. Simplify language.

Figure 4: A selection of accommodations in onground learning that vary by skill deficit in online learning. These accommodations require the IEP team to determine the associated skill deficit to plan for appropriate accommodations in online learning.

Identifying Skill Deficits. The IEP team must also consider that an onground accommodation may be in place for two or more very different skill deficits and this can impact how it is rendered to the online environment. For example, a student has an IEP accommodation for onground learning of, "Assist in initiating assignments." This accommodation could be in place, for example, because the student does not have fine motor capability in his or her hands, because the student has a planning deficit, or because the student has chronic anxiety. In online learning, the assistance with initiation for a student with a physical limitation could be unnecessary if a device has been put in place to support physical access. For the student with a planning deficit, the IEP accommodation might be replaced with a synchronous check-in each time the student begins an assignment. For the student with chronic anxiety, the accommodation may be unnecessary as the student will work on the course at a time optimal to their productivity. In conclusion, when planning accommodations for online learning, the IEP team must start by identifying the student's specific skill deficits. This methodology promises the most targeted results in developing online learning accommodations for individual student learning profiles. Once the IEP team has identified skill deficits, it is necessary to consider certain facets of online learning that have implications for accessibility.

Skill Deficit Model for Determining Online Accommodations

Three Lenses as Points for Accessibility. When considering accommodations for online learning, it is necessary to consider certain lenses that focus on critical accessibility points specific to it: synchrony in computer-mediated communication (CMC); the web and technology; and curriculum (see Figure 5). Online learning occurs by way of two methods of communication synchrony -- synchronous and asynchronous (Nowak, Watt & Walther, 2017). Synchronous learning refers to real time information exchange between education participants. This can take place, for examples, with several individuals working together on a Google Doc, via an instructor conducting a live presentation in a webinar, or through a face-to-face video session between an instructor and student. There are myriad synchronous formats available digitally; the key is that there is real time information exchange. Naturally, asynchronous learning refers to learning that is not real time (Gambino, 2006). Common to but not limited to self-paced digital learning, the student is not bound by a specific time for learning to take place. An example of this would be a threaded conversation where the student can review questions and comments at any time and respond similarly. Another example would be a student who needs to watch a video during a weekly module, but his or her learning is not dependent on whether he or she watches at the same time as other students. CMC synchrony has implications for learning media, sensory modality, social engagement, and the temporal -- all of which can impact a SWD's learning participation (Nowak, Watt & Walthier, 2017). A single skill deficit may or may not result in an accessibility issue across the two forms and, therefore, this lens must be considered. The skill deficit model for determining accommodations for online learning shows that the first step in ascertaining this is for the IEP team to ask whether a specific skill deficit needs accommodating for access to synchronous learning, or for access to asynchronous learning. To better understand the importance of this lens, consider a skill deficit of attention. In synchronous learning events, this skill deficit could impede access to learning without an accommodation. For example, an accommodation of "Record synchronous sessions for review," would allow the student to review any missed content due to lapses in attention during the real-time presentation. In asynchronous learning events, this skill deficit is inherently accommodated as the student can review or reread items as many times as needed to comprehend

the information. Therefore, the student may require an accommodation for his or her attention deficit for synchronous learning events, but may not for asynchronous learning events. In summation, it is necessary to recognize that differences in synchrony in CMC can result in different accessibility needs with regard to learning communication. There are, however, other points of access to consider in online learning.

When the IEP team considers onground accommodations, they look at curriculum (Burns, 2001). They also may examine how a student accesses a facility, its classrooms, and other physical spaces. Similarly, in online learning there are several basic points of access the IEP team must recognize to delineate any obstacles presented by those points due to a skill deficit. In "Invited In: Measuring UDL in Online Learning," Smith (2017) describes these points as 1) web access and technology access and 2) curriculum access. Yesilada, Brajnik, Vigo & Harper (2012) suggest asking this question regarding web access: What does a student with a particular skill deficit need to perceive, understand, navigate, interact, and contribute to the World Wide Web? For access to the curriculum, they suggest asking: What does the learner need to effectively use devices, software and applications? Finally, for a given skill deficit, what does this student need to access and engage with content, as well as demonstrate learning? The skill deficit model for determining accommodations for online learning provides educators with a tool for considering communication access and the principal points of access for online learning outlined by Smith (Smith, 2017). The constituent lenses allow the IEP team to consider critical access obstacles.

Curriculum access merits a larger discussion and the IEP team must have a working understanding of the principles of the Universal Design for Learning (UDL). UDL is a widely recognized methodology for leveling the playing field in onground as well as digital coursework and provides for multiple means for representation, action and expression, and engagement ("About Universal Design for Learning," 2018). When considering the lens of curriculum, look at three UDL components -- engagement, representation, and action & expression (see Figure 5).

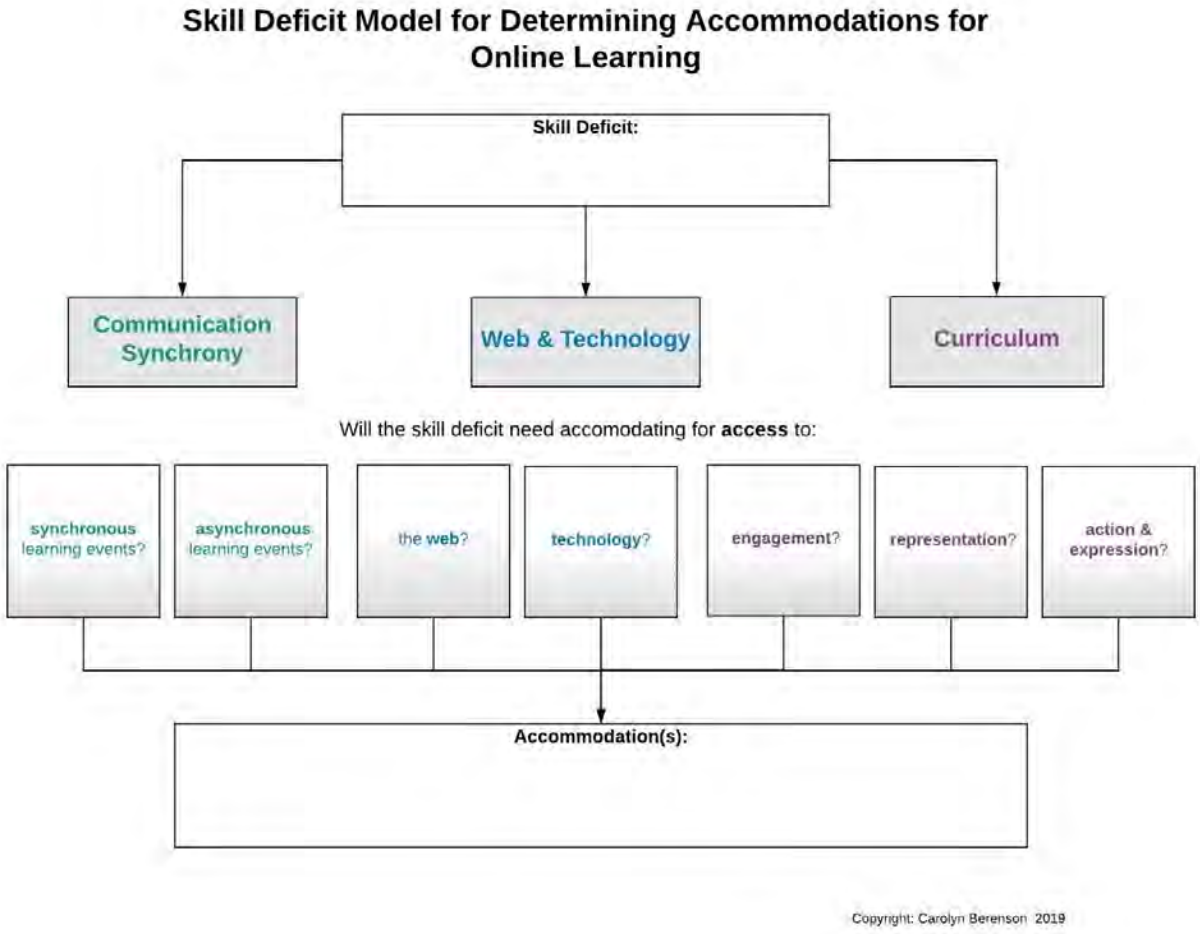

Figure 5: A skill deficit model for determining accommodations for online learning. Skill deficits associated with the learning profile of a student with disabilities can be considered through three lenses of online learning to determine appropriate accommodations

While not a cure-all for students with disabilities, it can significantly expand the access and participation for many learners. Virtual learning schools incorporate UDL into their coursework to varying degrees. A 2016 report by The Center on Online Learning and Students with Disabilities (COLSD) entitled, "Invited In: Measuring UDL in Online Learning," states, "While data suggest limited alignment to the UDL framework, it is difficult to determine the added supports offered to students by their teachers, parents, or other support personnel" (Smith, 2016). The success of the SWD, consequently, may vary along these supports. There are two tools, however, that COLSD recommends to gauge accessibility to technology and the web as well as to curriculum (Smith, 2017). The Voluntary Product Accessibility Template (VPAT) is a tool that can evaluate the application of information accessibility from a sensory and mobility standpoint ("Voluntary Product Accessibility Product {VPAT}", 2018). The UDL Scan Tool, similarly, can ascertain the provision of accessibility to online curriculum and content. If a SWD is struggling with online learning, the IEP Team may employ the VPAT and/or UDL Scan Tool to delineate any further accommodations that may be needed. When considering accommodations for a student in online learning, assuming sound UDL practices may be premature.

Using the Model: To use the skill deficit model for determining accommodations for online learning, begin with an identified skill deficit. Apply it to three online learning lenses: 1) synchrony in computer-mediated communication; 2) web and technology; and 3) curriculum. By asking, "Will the skill deficit need accommodating for access to..." across the lenses, the team can flesh out any accommodations necessary to support the skill deficit in order for the student to participate in online learning. Chart, for example, a skill deficit in reading (see Figure 5). A student is reading below grade level and is participating in an online social studies course. By applying the model, the IEP team might determine that the student needs the following accommodations: 1) For synchronous activities involving text documents, allow the student to preview text and ensure collaborative text is read aloud (Communication Synchrony); 2) Provide voice over training for Alt text (Web and Technology); 3) Provide a text to voice application for text-based information and content (Curriculum); and 4) Provide opportunities for non-text based demonstration of knowledge (Curriculum). Though this list may not be exhaustive, the model, with its three lenses, provides a means by which the IEP team can, with some degree of confidence and due diligence, determine accommodations needed for online learning. They begin by considering the constellation of a learner's skill deficits that can impact learning. While online learning can be inherently accommodating and can provide more flexible learning medium, it is inequitable to assume that SWDs do not need accommodations and remiss to assume that onground accommodations can be applied. A skill deficit model for determining accommodations for online learning ensures that SWDs can experience the benefits of online learning and can participate in this personalized learning pathway.

Summary

Transferring IEPs from a brick-and-mortar school to an online school, or from classroom-based learning to online learning, is not an exact process. "Moving to a technological environment (and the notion that the online environment is inherently accommodating) needs interrogation at every level (practice, research, and policy)," (Carter & Rice, 2016). Practice outpaces research, and there is no clear guideline on how IDEA applies to the virtual learning path (East, Mellard &

Tindle, 2017). COLSD, in 2015, completed a state and territorial policy scan and found that, "roughly 75% of all states and territories had Unclear, No with Evidence, or Nothing Found across the six major pillars of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)," (Equity Matters, 2015). Until research converges with practice and policy guidelines are clear, the recommendations set forth in this paper provide the IEP team with considerations for IEP accommodations in online learning that are practicable and judicious.

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About the Author

Carolyn L. Berenson holds a M.Ed. in elementary education from The George Washington University, a certification in special education from the University of New Hampshire, and a graduate certificate from Lesley University in advanced online instruction. Berenson has taught general education in the Fairfax County Public Schools in Virginia and special education in the School Administrative Unit (SAU) 16 in New Hampshire, where she also served as Learning Area Leader and Inclusion Facilitator. Berenson was awarded Educator of the Year by the Vienna, VA, branch of the American Association of University Women (AAUW) and a year-long sabbatical by the Exeter Region Cooperative School District (ERCSD), SAU 16, NH, to pursue her research interests in special education and online learning. Berenson, a member of iNACOL, AASEP and NHSTE, has presented on online and blended learning for students with disabilities. She is the founder of i-Pedagogy LLC which continues her mission to promote online learning as an exciting and effective way to learn for anyone, anytime and anywhere and as a way to build stronger communities of learners. She can be contacted at cberenson@i-pedagogy.com.

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