

Faculty Perspectives on Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, and Access (IDEA) in Online Teaching

Ryan A. Miller
Cathy D. Howell
Beth Oyarzun

University of North Carolina at Charlotte, USA

Florence Martin
North Carolina State University, USA

Shawn Knight
Jacob Frankovich
University of North Carolina at Charlotte, USA

Abstract

This study contributes to a better understanding of instructors' perceptions of equity issues within online teaching and learning. The researchers conducted interviews with 21 instructors at one university across disciplines regarding their experience with, and recommendations for, attending to issues of inclusion, diversity, equity, and access (IDEA) in online teaching. Findings revealed that instructors characterized online teaching and IDEA issues as distinct skillsets and that they were not necessarily prepared to apply IDEA issues in online teaching. Participants also focused their attention much more on access and inclusion—with access as a baseline expectation and inclusion operationalized as relationship building—rather than on equity and diversity, areas in which faculty efforts often translated (or not) from their face-to-face teaching experience. We conclude the paper with implications for faculty, educational developers, administrators, and institutions.

Keywords: Online learning, diversity, equity, faculty, pedagogy, teaching and learning

Miller, R. A., Howell, C.D., Oyarzun, B., Martin, F., Knight, S., & Frankovich, J. (2023). Faculty perspectives on inclusion, diversity, equity, and access in online teaching. *Online Learning*, 27(3), 387-406. DOI: 10.24059/olj.v27i3.3691

This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the CC BY 4.0 license.

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused the rapid acceleration in the use of online technology to facilitate teaching and learning, and many instructors who had not previously taught online are now doing so. The health pandemic has also coincided with renewed attention to systemic racism and intersecting forms of oppression in the United States. Instructors teaching online courses contend with a variety of issues related to inclusion (defined as multiple perspectives voiced), diversity (specific social identities, categories, and groups addressed), equity (disparities in opportunities and outcomes), and access (whether and how individuals can engage), or collectively known as IDEA issues (Tan, 2019). A few of the pressing issues to be addressed included learners' access needs and social contexts, engaging and equitable course activities, representation of diverse perspectives in course materials, and professional development concerning equity and diversity in the online classroom.

While instructors can rely on a robust body of literature about online teaching (see Martin et al., 2020), issues of inclusion, diversity, equity, and access within online teaching are not sufficiently understood or highlighted. This study begins to bridge this gap, informed by the substantial literature in online teaching and learning. As part of a qualitative case study at a Southern urban research university in the U.S., the researchers conducted one-on-one interviews with 21 instructors across disciplines teaching online courses regarding their preparation for, experience with, and recommendations for infusing online courses with IDEA issues. Guided by literature on online learning at the organizational, course, instructor, and student levels (Martin et al., 2020), the primary research question is: How do online instructors across disciplines experience and approach IDEA issues within their online teaching? We were also specifically interested in how instructors perceived IDEA issues in online teaching at the organizational and course levels and through the lenses of their own identities and their students' identities and social contexts.

Relevant Literature

Issues of diversity and equity must be considered in the design and delivery of courses across the curricula in higher education (Hurtado et al., 2012). Scholars in higher education have introduced frameworks to measure the diversity and inclusiveness of courses (Nelson Laird & Engberg, 2011) and have documented positive student outcomes that result from courses with content on diversity and equity, including reduced racial prejudice and increased civic engagement (Denson & Bowman, 2017), yet attention to course modality or specific focus on diversity and equity within online courses is often lacking in higher education (Sublett, 2020).

From their systematic review of online education research themes, Martin et al. (2020) developed a framework for online learning centering on four levels: learner, instructor, course, and organization. These levels subsume the myriad elements and themes impacting online course design and development (Martin et al., 2020). In a systematic review examining over 600 empirical articles on online teaching and learning, online engagement and learner characteristics were the two themes most examined (Martin et al., 2020). Access, culture, equity, inclusion, and ethics were less frequently studied.

Learners in Online Courses

Access to online learning represents a unique challenge for learners. In some ways, online learning is a vital tool for enhancing access (Sublett, 2020), particularly for students with disabilities (Pearson & Koppi, 2002), though the Covid-19 pandemic presented obstacles to

disabled students' online learning (e.g., difficulty accessing existing accommodations; Gin et al., 2021). The flexibility of digital learning can address the varied needs of students with disabilities in ever-adapting ways (Basham et al., 2015). Progressive access is not assured, however, as heavily text-based web materials, complex online course structures, or mobility challenges with a mouse or keyboard may create inequitable struggles for learners (Pearson & Koppi, 2002). Disability status intersects with socio-economic status (SES) as learners may need expensive screen readers, alternative keyboards or mice, or assistive software (Burgstahler, 2015).

Beyond disability status, access to online learning is also complicated by SES and its intersections with race and ethnicity. In some cases, online learning and distance education can offer students access to courses that are otherwise too expensive, as some institutions charge less for courses offered online (Clarida et al., 2016). Online learning's reliance on costly high-speed internet and web-enabled devices, however, can highlight inequities and a digital divide (Cobb, 2020). Online courses tend to disproportionately attract learners who already have access to technological resources, making little impact on issues of access and equity (Hansen & Reich, 2015). Callahan and Sandlin (2007) go so far as to state that "cyber education serves as a mechanism of symbolic violence because it provides the false perception (or creates misrecognition) of increasing access and, in turn, equality while instead maintaining inequalities" (p. 10). Online learning's cost and geographic flexibility may enhance access in some ways, but new difficulties arise, and existing challenges persist for learners from marginalized SES, racial, and ethnic groups.

The inclusion of diverse learners varies in online teaching. Although access inequities exist, students in online spaces are increasingly diverse with respect to race, ethnicity, culture, native language, age, gender, and disability (Burgstahler, 2015; Salvo et al., 2019). Cultural differences and corresponding cross-identity conflicts exist in online spaces for learners in similar ways to traditional classrooms (Tapanes et al., 2009). Students and instructors in online discussions can share problematic perspectives and assumptions about race, class, disabilities, and gender, perpetuating microaggressions and bias incidents (Licona & Gurung, 2011; Ortega et al., 2018). These incidents can lead to marginalized learners performing more poorly in online courses or disengaging altogether (Reich & Ito, 2017). Perceptions of anonymity can potentially increase offensive statements from students in online spaces like discussion boards (Ortega et al., 2018). Furthermore, learners from minoritized groups around language and culture may participate less frequently or report feeling their contributions are of lesser caliber than those of their fellow students (Tapanes et al., 2009). Salvo et al. (2019) reported that financial assistance, technology training, and a non-prejudicial learning environment contributed to online course completion for African American men. That said, effectively facilitated online spaces can present opportunities for learners to interrogate their assumptions and co-construct new meaning around various identities (Grant & Lee, 2014). Online education may open avenues for learners to engage with topics they would otherwise feel uncomfortable exploring (Licona & Gurung, 2011; Madden, 2020).

Instructors of Online Courses

Views on, and comfort with, cultural diversity, identity, and equity vary for instructors in online spaces (Kumi-Yeboah et al., 2020). Sublett (2020) argued that racial equity in online learning cannot be achieved "at a transactional distance" (p. 9), and that "biases, power inequalities, mistrust, and sense of 'otherness' will continue to proliferate in online courses so long as those courses are poorly organized, culturally irrelevant, espouse hegemonic narratives,

and not imbued with student supports” (p. 9). Instructors need to be mindful of the inequities that can exist for marginalized groups in online spaces (Tapanes et al., 2009). Facilitating learning around identity and equity requires instructors to have strong foundations in multicultural education, social justice, and critical inquiry (Grant & Lee, 2014). Instructors also need awareness of their own biases and the cultural backgrounds of their students (Tapanes et al., 2009). In online spaces, however, instructors have the dual responsibility of developing knowledge on equity issues and building effective technological competence to teach using online modalities (Montelongo & Eaton, 2020). Mirroring in-person education, instructors in disciplines like education and the social sciences tend to demonstrate more effective understanding of cultural diversity and recognition of its importance in online education than their counterparts in the physical sciences (Kumi-Yeboah et al., 2020).

Instructors not only come to online educational spaces as facilitators, course designers, and curriculum developers, but also as individuals who hold marginalized and privileged social identities. Instructors’ gender, race, and age impact interactions with students online, echoing marginalization that can occur for educators in traditional classroom settings (Yao & Boss, 2020). Although research focuses on the effectiveness of online learning for students, Glass (2017) contends that the quality of teaching experiences must be considered, particularly in relation to instructors’ social identities. Faculty of marginalized identities are often tasked with educating others about those identities, which can force difficult decisions on self-presentation and vulnerability (Yao & Boss, 2020). Although lessons can be gleaned from research on how women of color (e.g., Yao & Boss, 2020), queer (e.g., Branfam, 2017), or disabled (e.g., Abram, 2003) instructors are marginalized in in-person classrooms, research is limited on minoritized instructors in online settings.

Online Course Design and Delivery

Researchers have outlined several strategies for designing effective online courses that are accessible to diverse learners. Instructors and course developers should maintain a learner-centered approach, aiming to meet divergent needs while anticipating gaps where exclusion may occur (Pearson & Koppi, 2002). The principles of disability studies highlight the need for courses to adapt to the learner rather than the other way around (Madden, 2020). Research suggests that flexibility in online spaces supports diversity by empowering students to select learning activities that meet their needs (Kumi-Yeboah et al., 2020). Although Universal Design (UD) principles are most frequently touted as supporting learners with disabilities, implementing a UD approach to online education can also help address challenges around language, race, ethnicity, gender, and other identities (Burgstahler, 2015).

Key to the access and inclusion of diverse learners are the online modalities selected and implemented. Instructors should be cautious of an over-reliance on written materials in online spaces, which can exclude some learners; alternatively, instructors can diversify activities and assignments to incorporate visual mediums, audio platforms, and learner-to-learner collaborations (Madden, 2020). When engaging complex topics like identity, equity, and social justice, researchers suggest that synchronous modalities are most effective, allowing for important interpersonal connections (Grant & Lee, 2014; Licona & Gurung, 2011; Montelongo & Eaton, 2020; Williams, 2021). Technological tools like video reflections, web-enabled dialogue spaces, and discussion forums can help learners explore their own identities and those of others (Licona & Gurung, 2011; Montelongo & Eaton, 2020). Online relationship building can potentially develop a community of inquiry, a characteristic of social justice learning spaces

(Grant & Lee, 2014). Additionally, these collaborations help foster the types of connections that students report missing from in-person learning experiences (Means et al., 2020). Whether an online class is explicitly about identity and social justice or not, intentionally incorporating cultural awareness in the curriculum is key (Kumi-Yeboah et al., 2020).

Beyond course modalities, a high level of support from instructors is necessary to enhance inclusion and equity in online spaces. Messages from instructors can help diverse learners anticipate engagement around identity differences (Tapanes et al., 2009). Building on these messages about course content is research supporting the importance of frequent engagement and communication throughout online course experiences (Means et al., 2020). The demands of social justice education require consistent feedback and engagement (Montelongo & Eaton, 2020). Holistic student support in online spaces, including a validation of marginalized identities and challenges beyond academics, is core to a feminist pedagogy (Koseoglu, 2020). Online education can create challenges for learners, particularly those from marginalized groups, but consistent check-ins and support by instructors can help (Means et al., 2020).

Organizational Support for Online Courses

Organizations have the potential to enhance equitable experiences for learners and instructors in online spaces. Research points to faculty perceptions that their institutions can do more to improve infrastructure, policy, and practices related to online education (Williams, 2021). Institutional administrators should be collaborators in the delivery of online education, supporting the diversity of faculty members who are instructing courses (Glass, 2017; Koseoglu, 2020). Part of this support may be organizational backing for affinity spaces for marginalized instructor groups, like women of color, to process and reflect on online teaching experiences (Yao & Boss, 2020). Institutional administrators should also carefully consider the workloads of faculty members and graduate assistants tasked with implementing online education, particularly instructors from marginalized groups (Callahan & Sandlin, 2007; Glass, 2017; Licona & Gurung, 2011).

Institutions can ensure that instructors receive training and resources to deliver equitable and accessible online education (Grant & Lee, 2014; Williams, 2021). Organizations can help foster collaborations between instructors and resources like multicultural centers, writing centers, and centers for teaching and learning (Glass, 2017; Ortega et al., 2018). Additionally, equity-minded curriculum and instruction can only go so far when software is exclusionary, so organizations must select or build online learning platforms that are accessible across identities (Burgstahler, 2015; Pearson & Koppi, 2002). Higher education institutions have a unique positionality to bring technology developers, instructors, and learners together to strategize and implement positive changes to online learning (Reich & Ito, 2017). The organization has a far-reaching role in developing equitable online learning environments by fostering collaborations, facilitating training, and providing resources.

Methods

The research question for this qualitative case study is: How do online instructors across disciplines experience and approach equity issues within their online teaching? As a qualitative case study, this research is designed to understand the experiences of faculty members' experience with IDEA issues in online courses within the bounded system of one Southern urban research university in the United States (Stake, 2006). The university under consideration generally supported the implementation of online and hybrid teaching, even prior to the COVID-

19 pandemic. This is evidenced by numerous workshops offered through the teaching and learning center, a distance education program that supports online programs, and backing for faculty pursuing national Quality Matters designation of their online courses. The university's center for teaching and learning also provides instructional consultation, support for creating instructional videos, opportunities to review exemplar online courses, and an online teaching certificate. As an instrumental case study (Stake, 2006), we are concerned less with the particulars of the research site than how instructors view and experience equity issues in online teaching, yielding insights that may inform future research, teaching, and practice.

To answer our research question, we sought participation from online instructors at the institution across disciplines and experience levels with online teaching. We sought and received IRB approval before commencing the research. Participant criteria included: serving as a faculty member/instructor at the institution under study with any title or tenure status, and teaching (currently or previously) at least one undergraduate or graduate course that is 100% online (synchronous or asynchronous) for a full semester. Specific expertise or training in online teaching and/or equity issues was not required, as we sought to recruit course instructors with a range of experiences. The researchers conducted 21 semi-structured, one-on-one interviews with instructors teaching online courses regarding their preparation, experience with, and recommendations for fully infusing IDEA issues in online teaching. Forty instructors volunteered to participate based on a recruitment message sent to all faculty members, and we employed a maximum variation selection process based on responses to a background questionnaire to maximize the diversity of the sample in terms of: online teaching experience (average of 5 years, range of 0.5 years to 15), undergraduate vs. graduate courses taught (one-third of instructors taught at the graduate level), field/discipline of teaching, and demographics. While we were able to recruit a diverse final sample (see Table 1) in terms of race/ethnicity (14% Asian/Pacific Islander, 29% Black/African American, 14% Latinx, 5% multiracial, 43% white) and gender (67% women, 33% men), we did not have participation from any faculty member who self-identified as trans* or non-binary.

Table 1
Participant Overview

<i>Pseudonym</i>	<i>Discipline</i>	<i>Primary position</i>	<i>Racial/ethnic identity</i>	<i>Gender/gender identity</i>
Abigail	Public health	Full-time non-tenure track faculty	African American/Black, Multiracial	Cisgender woman
Amelia	Nursing	Full-time non-tenure track faculty	White	Woman
Aria	Biology	Full-time non-tenure track faculty	White	Woman
Ariana	English	Tenured faculty	African American/Black	Cisgender woman
Ava	Criminal justice	Tenure-track faculty	African American/Black	Woman

Diversity, Equity, and Access in Online Teaching

Bella	Engineering	Full-time non-tenure track faculty	Latinx	Woman
Claire	Public health	Tenure-track faculty	White	Cisgender woman
Elias	Computing	Tenured faculty	Latinx	Man
Elijah	Business	Part-time non-tenure track faculty	White	Cisgender man
Ella	Student success	Administrator	African American/Black	Woman
Emma	Engineering	Full-time non-tenure track faculty	African American/Black	Woman
Evelyn	Engineering	Tenure-track faculty	White	Woman
Ivy	Sociology	Tenure-track faculty	African American/Black	Woman
James	Languages	Tenure-track faculty	Latinx	Cisgender man
Liam	Education	Tenured faculty	Native Pacific Islander	Man
Mia	Dance	Tenure-track faculty	Asian/Pacific Islander	Cisgender woman
Noah	Languages	Administrator	White	Man
Nova	Public health	Tenure-track faculty	Asian/Pacific Islander	Woman
Oliver	Chemistry	Full-time non-tenure track faculty	White	Cisgender man
Sophia	Anthropology	Part-time non-tenure track faculty	White	Woman
William	Education	Tenured faculty	White	Man

Participants were interviewed by a member of the research team via Zoom video conference for an average of one hour; interviews ranged from 45 to 90 minutes. Informed by the research questions guiding this study, the interview protocol included open-ended questions (see Appendix A) that addressed faculty members' perceptions of IDEA issues in online teaching at the organizational, course, instructor, and student levels (Martin et al., 2020).

After reading all transcripts and memos written by researchers during interviews, we met as a team to discuss potential themes across participant transcripts that were relevant to our research question. We then constructed a matrix as a visual method of analyzing data (Miles et al., 2014). In the table, rows identified participants and information about their discipline, courses, online teaching experience, and demographics. Columns represented a primary area of interest for this study, including instructors' views on relationships between IDEA and online teaching, IDEA definitions and priorities, and enactments of IDEA concepts at the learner,

instructor, course, and organization levels. In each cell, we identified relevant transcript portions and transformed the content to a mix of relevant direct quotes and paraphrases. Finally, we met as a team multiple times to look across the dataset—particularly to look vertically across columns highlighting areas of interest—to draft findings.

We took several steps to ensure quality of data collected and results presented. These steps included member checking (sharing each transcript with participants to verify their comments). A team approach enabled use of investigator triangulation, and all results presented in the paper are the product of consensus among the research team, all of whom were involved in analysis and writing. We aimed to provide a rich account of instructors' views and examples of dilemmas they faced to ensure transferability to other contexts. One participant in the study, Noah, shared with us: "This is a valuable conversation for me. To have the opportunity to be asked these questions, and to reflect, and to think about my behavior, and my beliefs. So, the whole conversation is important and valuable to me."

Throughout analysis, we held research team meetings to discuss insights and possible patterns across the interviews while also considering our own disciplinary, teaching modality, and identity-based reflections relevant to the study. Collectively, our team included a variety of perspectives and identities that we believe strengthened the study and results presented. Our team included a mix of faculty members, higher education practitioners, and doctoral students; online teaching experience and knowledge ranging from novice to expert; a variety of social identities around race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation; and backgrounds in K-12 teaching, higher education administration, instructional technology, and student affairs.

Findings

Our analysis leads us to present these findings: (1) faculty conceptualized online teaching and IDEA issues as distinct, and (2) faculty emphasized access and inclusion over equity and diversity.

Online Teaching and IDEA Conceptualized as Distinct

Across disciplines and faculty roles represented in the study, participants had difficulty applying IDEA issues to the online teaching context. In essence, expertise and competence around online teaching were viewed as distinct from IDEA-related competence, with few instances of participants identifying overlaps or connections between the domains. Given this gap, participants described applying strategies from face-to-face teaching to online instruction. Instructors first teaching online during the pandemic simply wanted to make their courses accessible and survive the semester, without necessarily integrating IDEA issues consistently. They struggled with asynchronous course delivery as it related to inclusion, diversity, equity issues, and relationship building.

Online Teaching and IDEA Viewed as Stand-alone Areas of Expertise

Participants noted that knowledge and professional development opportunities around IDEA issues did not always attend to course delivery (including a notable absence of discussion around online teaching), and conversely, that workshops related to online teaching often did not address IDEA issues explicitly. For instance, James described attending a diversity symposium on teaching before the pandemic that did not address course delivery:

The diversity summer symposium was mainly to address what those issues are, not related to how you would teach them. And then I don't see a lot of like programs with the center for teaching and learning in terms of how to teach [diversity content]. I do see a disconnection between...you have people talking about diversity and [people] talking about online teaching, but they are not necessarily working together.

In this quote, James describes various resources on campus on different “sides” of the issue: diversity resources that do not focus on online teaching, and online teaching resources that do not focus on diversity. This is also reflected in Evelyn’s description of a lack of professional development opportunities related to IDEA in online teaching: “I haven't seen a lot of opportunities come across for things that are very specific and in dealing with equity and that type of training and maybe it's just that I haven't noticed them and they're there, I'm not sure.” Mia described the content of her course as

deeply embedded in diversity and inclusion and equity. So those questions are dealt with in the content. But in terms of the delivery and the online pedagogy, I would say I'm still struggling with how to make my course more equitable. I have attended a few webinars on these and I wouldn't say that they have been super helpful in terms of strategizing online teaching and equitable strategies.

Mia’s course content focused on equity and diversity in both online and face-to-face courses, but she did not find significant resources to support making online courses specifically more equitable.

Tensions in Applying Face-to-face IDEA Strategies to Online Courses

Participants disagreed about whether face-to-face teaching strategies for applying IDEA issues would translate to the online teaching context. Many instructors, both novice and experienced, noted their starting point for integrating IDEA issues into online courses drew upon their knowledge of strategies for face-to-face instruction. James described the common practice of applying face-to-face teaching strategies to online courses: “Most of the things that I described, I was doing it face-to-face and then I brought them to the online teaching, and it works well as well.” While James felt these strategies generally worked, he also thought discussion of equity and diversity issues worked more successfully in face-to-face classes:

The other issue is sometimes when we're discussing, especially on the synchronous format, when we're discussing issues such as race and ableism and concepts like that, I can really see the reaction of the students, and I think the face-to-face environment allows me to see how they are reacting to these readings.

A few participants, like Ivy, did not view online teaching strategies as especially different from face-to-face teaching practices:

[When] you say online teaching, I just think about it as teaching. So, I'm not sure if that's a disconnect or not. But I'm a scholar of inequality and race, gender, and class.... And so, it's really an all-encompassing approach when it comes to teaching in that way.

Some participants, especially those newer to online teaching during the pandemic, noted that the nature of emergency remote teaching demanded that they translate strategies from the classroom to the computer. Elias described the “improvisation” this demanded:

We switch[ed] online and I was already planning things in the classroom, and then I had no clue what that meant for online. So, I had to really improvise, and I probably covered, I don't know, 80% of what I normally would have covered in a semester, which I was okay with that, given the pandemic and all that. It was an interesting experiment, but it wasn't something that I would use as an example of anything other than, “How quickly can you react to an emergency?”

Thus, the lessons learned during emergency remote teaching may not be the best practices to carry as online instructors into the future.

While instructors did their best to apply face-to-face teaching strategies to incorporate IDEA into online instruction, several participants in this study held strong beliefs that online teaching should be approached as a distinct skillset and domain, and it could be inappropriate and even harmful to simply apply face-to-face strategies to online courses. Noah, a veteran online instructor, captured this belief:

Maybe there is the assumption that the existing policies that target IDEA for face-to-face teaching are transferred to online courses.... I think that's a very weak argument. The logic there is very faulty and dangerous because it is analogous, I think, to what happens with teaching in the general sense. That we think that [Noah] is an excellent face-to-face teacher, ergo he's going to be an excellent online teacher. And we know that that is not necessarily the case. We're talking about a different skill set here.

Difficulty Applying IDEA issues in Asynchronous Teaching

Though instructors generally found asynchronous course delivery was the most accessible to students, they struggled most with applying IDEA issues in asynchronous teaching, noting it was depersonalized and less relational. Some instructors were uncomfortable with incorporating IDEA issues too deeply in asynchronous courses and questioned how they could build relationships with students in that mode. While even experienced instructors struggled with relationship building, newer instructors were highly concerned about how students could access course content above all else.

Some instructors, including Claire, noted the benefits of asynchronous teaching, sharing that in synchronous teaching, she “had a lot of requests from students who couldn't make it to class, how could they get the materials afterwards and that was always a little bit difficult because I really valued our in-class face-to-face time.” For Claire, increased flexibility was a benefit of asynchronous teaching. Similarly, Aria found asynchronous more accessible, but synchronous more engaging:

Part of [the course is] asynchronous and part synchronous, [and] that was on purpose because I was trying to figure out how to still keep them engaged. And for me, the synchronous really helps with that, to keep them moving with the course. But I also know that these students some have full-time jobs, some of them really have issues being there at a specific time. And so over half of the course is asynchronous to allow for flexibility.

Most commonly, instructors acknowledged the benefits of access and flexibility that

accompanied asynchronous teaching but did not feel comfortable or know how to build deeper relationships or broach sensitive IDEA issues in asynchronous courses. Amelia lamented, “I can't possibly know about all of my students in my online courses and know their life experiences and their viewpoints and their perspectives.” Similarly, Oliver expressed discomfort with what he framed as “prying” into students’ lives: “I'm uncomfortable, personally, trying to pry into what I feel is my students’ private life and I know I wouldn't have responded well to that as a student, so I have difficulty prompting students for that.”

Some instructors who routinely focused on equity and diversity content in their courses noted the limitations of the asynchronous format. Ivy sometimes avoided contentious conversations that she would have facilitated in live teaching, whether synchronous or face-to-face:

If I was asynchronous, I wouldn't trust to say like, “Let me show you this image and then you can put it into the discussion board and then I'm going to come back later and see what it means.” No. To me, it's too critical of a moment to not help them process immediately on the way. And I also want to be there to facilitate the discussion of it as people lay out ideas because it's just one of those things where in real time.

Abigail described getting to know her students and focusing on IDEA issues, but being unhappy with asynchronous course delivery to do so:

So, equity and inclusion are my bread and butter because of public health. And so that spills into like, “Who are my students? What are their resources? What are they are not able to do? How can I help them along when there is a problem?” I was unhappy about having to take it into an asynchronous space. Well, a student who only has a Chromebook cannot really use Kaltura but can't even really use Canvas that well.

Abigail summed up her learning: “You don't have to be an expert; you just have to be willing to bring yourself and your ideas and be open to what students have to say.”

Instructors Prioritized Access and Inclusion over Equity and Diversity

Inclusion and access were frequently considered by the instructor when it impacted the students in the course. Many of these issues were linked to concerns regarding COVID-19. Those instructors who first taught online during the pandemic emphasized operating in survival mode (including listening to students’ needs and educating themselves) and focused primarily on making their courses accessible rather than attempting to become advanced or expert online teachers who consistently incorporated IDEA issues in a short period of time. Regardless of online teaching experience, two-thirds of instructors named access as the starting point for incorporating IDEA issues into their online teaching. The remaining third of participants named equity and/or diversity first, in line with their course content which focused primarily on equity and diversity issues in their disciplines.

Focus on Access as a Baseline Expectation

Of the IDEA issues addressed in the study, faculty participants generally exhibited much focus on issues of access (conceptualized variously as internet/WiFi access, equipment/software access, technical skills, and/or accessibility for students with disabilities) and, to a lesser extent,

inclusion (conceptualized most frequently as actively including/reaching all students in online courses, generally not focused on specific inequities or identity-based groups). Oliver shared the importance of access in his teaching:

I know a lot of my students and I know a lot of them don't have reliable broadband Internet connections or have access to the resources that we would have on campus you know so they don't they don't have time to try to do a Zoom tutoring session, whereas the same student may be quite active and going to tutoring on campus.

Oliver cared about his students' circumstances and whether they would have access to the course, but also to supplemental resources that they might otherwise engage with if they were physically present. Ivy highlighted the university's support for technical issues related to faculty competence and access:

The university supports us very well in the technical aspects of online learning... but I really think it's important to acknowledge how being technically sound and your course delivery matters a lot for diversity and inclusion.... You have so many professors who are teaching online, for the first time they're forced into doing it, they don't like doing it, they don't know how to do it and don't do it well.

Ivy positioned access as an initial hurdle to clear so that instructors could then provide equitable learning opportunities for all students.

Access was viewed as a baseline for online teaching. Some participants discussed access in terms of devices in addition to connections. For instance, Elijah states, "I had students who were going to places where they were able to access the Wi-Fi from the parking lot, and they were doing their online discussion course on their phones, or wherever they could reach a Wi-Fi signal."

Relationship Building as a Challenge to Inclusion

As for the inclusion aspect of IDEA, faculty members pointed out the importance and challenges of relationship building in the online setting, particularly but not exclusively in asynchronous courses, as noted previously. Aria emphasized the importance of empathy in building relationships. "I try to keep an open mind, and I try to put myself in other people's perspectives, how they might have different limitations that I don't have, as a student, I never had." Some participants provided recommendations to help build relationships such as including an icebreaker every week, unrelated to content, to get to know students, to set a positive welcoming tone in the online environment by using conversational language and incorporate flexible grading practices.

To provide more inclusive online experiences, participants highlighted the importance of quality course design and training as teaching online is a different skill set. Ivy summarized the need for training by stating, "Students are having issues and were having bad experiences not because there were incompetent students, but the instructors were not ready to teach online. Rapport building and trust and intimacy is eliminated online." This also speaks to the importance of relationship building for inclusion. Noah stated,

I think just being cognizant of all of the decisions that we make, in terms of instructional design, and then instruction.... So, I think that it's important for us, even those of us who consider ourselves seasoned educators, to continue to have conversations and to revisit these important constructs.

Emma offered this advice on course design: "I like to give students choice in as many ways as possible while still maintaining authority." Emma's advice is consistent with many instructor perspectives, focusing on the students' experiences.

Equity and Diversity Translated (or Not) from Face-to-Face Teaching

While faculty members seemed to have a strong grasp on access and inclusion, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, equity and diversity did not as frequently or directly translate into the online space. Equity and diversity were discussed from several perspectives, including student enrollment demographics, issues impacting students, and curricular integration of equity and diversity, or lack thereof.

It should be noted that instructors who were thrust into online teaching had not put as much thought into integrating diversity and equity into their online teaching and courses unless it was already a large part of their discipline or curriculum. Admittedly, there were difficulties in inclusion of diversity from face-to-face to online formats. For example, Liam, a faculty member with experience teaching online, discussed how "diversity and online teaching is something that I struggled with" in transitioning some course content online, especially as it related to accessibility concerns. A similar experience was shared by Oliver, a faculty member with no online teaching experience prior to COVID-19, who lamented that his "teaching online is much more generic than it would be in person." He explained that students "rarely speak up in class, [and] they rarely ask questions. I'm basically just guessing at a generic audience." It is important to note that Oliver was not an outlier within his science discipline in teaching online. He commented that faculty members within his department had very limited experience. Oliver focused on the incorporation of "active learning techniques" that he learned to address "equity and diversity issues in the classroom."

Faculty members readily identified the complexities of teaching online in relation to IDEA concepts. Dimensions that stood out in terms of understanding how faculty were inclusive in their online pedagogy were identity-conscious practices, diversity in engagement, and the use of videos. The cultural importance of faculty acknowledgement and intentionality of including space within online courses of student voice and identity was exemplified in various ways. For example, as William described, "I have [included] a few more chapters...articles, [and] ...assignments related to just their own identity as well as their views on equity in math." Such identity-bearing inclusivity in assignments allows students, particularly women, to have a voice, explained by Evelyn as "their willingness to step up and participate in things like the competition and to speak up." This thoughtful consideration of identity projection matters in online discourse and subject matter.

Diversity in engagement was seen as a hallmark of online instruction regardless of the format delivery. Aria described her course as "asynchronous and part synchronous" because that helps with the continuity of the course. The ability to offer "over half of the course ...asynchronous[ly]...allow[s] for flexibility." Engagement was somewhat prioritized in the intentionality given toward recognizing course participant optics. For example, there was an awareness of demographics and the efforts toward optimizing the addressing of diverse issues such as "migration, disability, language discrimination, accessibility to language, accessibility

and respect to our language rights,” as described by James. There was awareness that the online classes were diversified with students by race, gender, and identity and the importance of addressing issues that were salient to differing student populations. Faculty members discussed the application of diversity at micro levels that allowed for students to bring forth their personal identities in terms to their preferred pronouns while understanding that the scope of engagement extended into macro levels of “diversity of thoughts and opinions, and some of those are related to their lived experiences,” according to Elijah. Branching out to engage in differing thoughts was pronounced in findings related to diversity as faculty members attempted to interact with students on key content specific to their discipline. The challenge seemed to be related to the baseline understanding of diversity. The meso level was more complicated; faculty members discussed diversity as if they taught it, but really it was about the diversity of students or diverse faculty identities that gave a quasi-platform of being engaged in intentional diversity pedagogy.

Diversity juxtaposed with current events, including the COVID-19 pandemic and social uprisings. Faculty members commented that there was an awareness of the increased importance of issues of diversity due to the upsurge of online instruction. Claire explained how online instruction was able to provide instruction and “flex around different students' needs in many ways.” This was particularly important in considering how the pandemic “differentially impacts people, some of that isn't really clear cut. It's muddy in terms of how coming into a fall semester, off of the social uprisings that were happening all summer long [in 2020].” She referenced how there was essentially “reduced bandwidth for a lot of students, like BIPOC students...due to the extra noise that was happening in their lives.” She explained that instruction must be more than “just raising the awareness that this isn't just about race and ethnicity” so that faculty members “aren't perpetuating different systematic exclusion or oppression.” These statements underscore both the variety of impacts the pandemic exerted on minority groups and faculty interest in providing additional support to those students.

Discussion and Implications

This study explores online instructors' experiences and perceptions of inclusion, diversity, equity, and access (IDEA) issues within online teaching and learning. Through interviews with 21 instructors across disciplines teaching online courses, we uncovered a disconnect between competencies and experience related to online teaching and IDEA issues. Among these 21 instructors, 52% of participants indicated that they began teaching online in direct response to the global health pandemic and the necessity of moving courses online, so it may be that they did not have sufficient time or long-term investment in online teaching to use or seek out resources that would increase their competence related to IDEA in online teaching. About half of the interviewees had online teaching expertise but not IDEA expertise, and the other half of the interviewees had IDEA expertise and not online teaching expertise. Some of them participated in the interviews as they were teaching IDEA as the course content. This lack of knowledge and comfort with both areas among participants demonstrates the need for integration of IDEA in online teaching. Montelongo and Eaton (2020) reinforce the importance of instructors to have the dual responsibility in online spaces to develop knowledge on equity issues and build effective technological competence. Consistent with existing scholarship, developing IDEA competence demands that online instructors have strong foundations in multicultural education, social justice, and critical inquiry (Grant & Lee, 2014; Sublett, 2020). Consciousness of self and others is also vital, as instructors must unpack their own biases and the cultural backgrounds of their students (Salvo et al., 2019; Tapanes et al., 2009). Developing

dynamic online courses requires instructors to effectively design, facilitate, and assess courses (Martin et al., 2020) without simply imposing face-to-face content onto online courses.

Several participants mentioned their comfort in exploring IDEA issues in face-to-face courses but not in online courses. This shows a need for instructors to identify strategies that can be used to integrate IDEA in asynchronous and synchronous online courses. Instructors were generally more comfortable discussing IDEA elements in synchronous online courses than asynchronous online courses. This finding is consistent with the literature, suggesting that synchronous modalities are most effective in exploring IDEA topics (Grant & Lee, 2014; Licona & Gurung, 2011; Montelongo & Eaton, 2020; Sublett, 2020; Williams, 2021), allowing students and instructors to develop important interpersonal connections that are the core of equity-centered dialogue. Teaching in asynchronous formats will require instructors to creatively consider infusing IDEA focused activities and assignments by incorporating visual mediums, audio platforms, and learner-to-learner collaborations while mitigating an over-reliance on written components which can exclude some learners (Madden, 2020).

Findings indicate that instructors placed importance on students' access and inclusion in online courses, but that attention to access should not preclude sufficiently attending to diversity and equity issues through course design and facilitation. This is consistent with literature that focuses heavily on issues of student access (Clarida et al., 2016; Gin et al., 2021) and inclusion (Salvo et al., 2019) in online learning, but less on diversity and equity in course design and content (Grant & Lee, 2014; Sublett, 2020). Instructors' focus on access could be due to a recognition of the need for high-speed internet and web-enabled devices, potentially highlighting inequities and a digital divide (Cobb, 2020). It is important for instructors to check with their students to make sure they have the hardware, software, internet, and infrastructure access to successfully participate in their online courses. That said, instructors should note that online courses tend to disproportionately attract learners who already have access to technological resources (Hansen & Reich, 2015), showcasing a different sort of access and equity issue. Although online learning is thought to widely expand access to higher education, courses must be designed with disabled students (Gin et al., 2021), students of color (Sublett, 2020), and other minoritized populations in mind, to address all learners' unique needs and equity issues.

Limitations

In this qualitative study, instructors were from a single university. Also, about half of the interviewees taught online for the first time during the pandemic. Potentially, they were under pressure to transfer their face-to-face courses online and may not have had sufficient time to intentionally design and facilitate dynamic online courses. Even in courses that had IDEA focused content, shifting online was hectic for many instructors.

Implications for Practice and Research

These findings have implications for faculty, course managers, and institutional administrators related to online teaching support. Our findings point to a need for dynamic, intentional training for instructors on competencies related to online instruction, IDEA issues broadly, and a combination of the two. Research supports a need for collaborative approaches to instructor development that incorporates academic units, multicultural centers, writing centers, and centers for teaching and learning (Glass, 2017; Ortega et al., 2018). Our findings also suggest a need for instructors to have space to develop their own knowledge, awareness, and skills around IDEA issues, both intra- and interpersonally. Instructors need to be prepared to be

uncomfortable with their own learning, role modeling the discomfort in learning that is often asked of students. We would advocate for instructor communities of practice (e.g., faculty learning communities as conceptualized by Cox [2004]), dialogue groups, or workshops that offer opportunities for critical engagement (Yao & Boss, 2020). Importantly, organizations should support this type of instructor development as central, rather than peripheral, incorporating IDEA engagement into staff evaluations and tenure and promotion processes. Similarly, organizations can spotlight IDEA issues as central to all academic curricula, helping bridge the divide that can exist between social sciences and physical sciences (Kumi-Yeboah et al., 2020) and ensuring an IDEA emphasis whether classes are taught online or in-person.

There is a need for more research on IDEA issues in online learning broadly. Future research can seek to understand the perspectives of novice online instructors compared with more experienced online instructors. Also, research with students will develop understanding on student perspectives on IDEA elements that can be integrated to meet their needs more effectively. Observational methods could also be used to understand how a faculty member infuses IDEA issues into a synchronous or asynchronous online course. Perspectives of instructional designers would assist in understanding effective ways to include IDEA in online courses. A study centering instructional technologies could help showcase the successes and areas of improvement of various media, course management software, and emerging technologies in infusing IDEA concepts, as well as how instructors navigate students' access issues such as slow internet connections or completing coursework from a phone. Lastly, future studies could also spotlight identities and issues such as race, gender, disability, or sexual orientation to understand in a more nuanced way how these specific issues are addressed in online coursework.

Conclusion

Focusing on inclusion, diversity, equity, and access is vital for student learning and belonging in college courses. Bringing these IDEA issues intentionally to the fore is critical in online modalities, which have expanded during the COVID-19 pandemic and amidst financial challenges faced by many higher education institutions. Participants in our study highlighted the differentiation in the skills and knowledge needed for effective online teaching and IDEA facilitation. Likewise, instructors tended to emphasize access and inclusion more than diversity and equity in their development of online courses. These findings point to important implications for research and practice, emphasizing knowledge and skill development, connecting IDEA and online education more directly, creating space for critical intra- and interpersonal development, prioritizing IDEA throughout curricula.

Declarations

The authors declare no conflicts of interest for this study.

The study was funded, in part, by funds provided by the University of North Carolina at Charlotte.

Human subjects approval for this study was granted by the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, USA.

References

- Abram, S. (2003). The Americans with Disabilities Act in higher education: The plight of disabled faculty. *Journal of Law & Education*, 32(1), 1-19. <https://heinonline.org/HOL/LandingPage?handle=hein.journals/jle32&div=8&id=&page>
- Basham, J. D., Stahl, W., Ortiz, K. R., Rice, M. F., & Smith, S. J. (2015). *Equity matters: Digital and online learning for students with disabilities*. The Center on Online Learning and Students with Disabilities.
- Branfam, J. (2017). “(Un)covering” in the classroom: Managing stigma beyond the closet. *Feminist Teacher*, 26(1), 72-82. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5406/femteacher.26.1.0072>
- Burgstahler, S. (2015). Opening doors or slamming them shut? Online learning practices and students with disabilities. *Social Inclusion*, 3(6), 69-79. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.iheduc.2008.12.001>
- Callahan, J. L., & Sandlin, J. A. (2007). The tyranny of technology: a critical assessment of the social arena of online learning. *New Horizons in Adult Education and Human Resource Development*, 21(3/4), 5-15. <https://doi.org/10.1002/nha3.10286>
- Clarida, B. H., Bobeva, M., Hutchings, M., & Taylor, J. (2016). Strategies for digital inclusion: Towards a pedagogy for embracing and sustaining student diversity and engagement with online learning. *IAFOR Journal of Education*. <https://doi.org/10.22492/ije.3.se.06>
- Cobb Jr., R. (2020). Developing self-regulated learning behaviors in online learning environments: A conceptual framework for inclusion. *Journal of Research Initiatives*, 5(2), 5, 1-17. <https://digitalcommons.uncfsu.edu/jri/vol5/iss2/5>
- Cox, M. D. (2004). Introduction to faculty learning communities. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, 2004(97), 5-23.
- Denson, N., & Bowman, N. A. (2017). Do diversity courses make a difference? A critical examination of college diversity coursework and student outcomes. In M. B. Paulsen (Ed.), *Higher education: Handbook of theory and research, Volume 32* (pp. 35-84). Springer.
- Gin, L. E., Guerrero, F. A., Brownell, S. E., & Cooper, K. M. (2021). COVID-19 and undergraduates with disabilities: Challenges resulting from the rapid transition to online course delivery for students with disabilities in undergraduate STEM at large-enrollment institutions. *CBE—Life Sciences Education*, 20(3), ar36.
- Glass, C. R. (2017). Self-expression, social roles, and faculty members’ attitudes towards online teaching. *Innovative Higher Education*, 42(3), 239–252. <https://doi:10.1007/s10755-016-9379-2>

- Grant, K. S. L., & Lee, V. J. (2014). Wrestling with issues of diversity in online courses. *Qualitative Report, 19*(12), 1-25. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2014.1275>
- Hansen, J. D., & Reich, J. (2015). Democratizing education? Examining access and usage patterns in massive open online courses.” *Science, 350*(6265), 1245–48. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aab3782>
- Hurtado, S., Alvarez, C. L., Guillermo-Wann, C., Cuellar, M., & Arellano, L. (2012). A model for diverse learning environments. In J. C. Smart & M. B. Paulsen (Eds.), *Higher education: Handbook of theory and research* (Vol. 27, pp. 41-122). Springer.
- Koseoglu, S. (2020). Access as pedagogy: A case for embracing feminist pedagogy in open and distance learning. *Asian Journal of Distance Education, 15*(1), 277-290. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.3893260>
- Kumi-Yeboah, A., Dogbey, J., Yuan, G., & Smith, P. (2020). Cultural diversity in online education: An exploration of instructors’ perceptions and challenges. *Teachers College Record, 122*(7), 1-46. <https://www.tcrecord.org/content.asp?contentid=23332>
- Licona, M. M., & Gurung, B. (2011). Online multicultural education: Asynchronous discussions in online multicultural education. *Multicultural Education, 19*(1), 2-8. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ986884.pdf>
- Madden, J. (2020). Teaching online: Issues of equity and access in writing-centric formats. *Feminist Studies, 46*(2), 502-509. <https://doi.org/10.15767/feministstudies.46.2.0502>
- Martin, F., Sun, T., & Westine, C. D. (2020). A systematic review of research on online teaching and learning from 2009 to 2018. *Computers & Education, 159*, 104009. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2020.104009>
- Means, B., Niesler, J. & Langer Research Associates. (2020). *Suddenly online: A national survey of undergraduates during the COVID-19 pandemic*. Digital Promise. https://digitalpromise.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/ELE_CoBrand_DP_FINAL_3.pdf
- Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M., & Saldana, J. (2014). *Qualitative data analysis: A methods sourcebook* (3rd ed). SAGE.
- Montelongo, R., & Eaton, P. W. (2020). Online learning for social justice and inclusion: The role of technological tools in graduate student learning. *The International Journal of Information and Learning Technology, 37*(1-2), 33-45.
- Nelson Laird, T. F., & Engberg, M. E. (2011). Establishing differences between diversity requirements and other courses with varying degrees of diversity inclusivity. *The Journal of General Education, 60*(2), 117-137. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/jge.2011.0012>

- Ortega, A., Andruczyk, M., & Marquart, M. (2018). Addressing microaggressions and acts of oppression within online classrooms by utilizing principles of transformative learning and liberatory education. *Journal of Ethnic & Cultural Diversity in Social Work, 27*(1), 28-40. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15313204.2017.1417945>
- Pearson, E. J., & Koppi, T. (2002). Inclusion and online learning opportunities: designing for accessibility. *Research in Learning Technology, 10*(2), 17-28. <https://doi.org/10.3402/rlt.v10i2.11398>
- Reich, J., & Ito, M. (2017). *From good intentions to real outcomes: Equity by design in learning technologies*. Digital Media and Learning Research Hub. https://clalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/GIROreport_1031.pdf
- Salvo, S.G., Shelton, K., & Welch, B. (2019). African American males learning online: Promoting academic achievement in higher education. *Online Learning, 23*(1), 22-36. doi:10.24059/olj.v23i1.1390
- Stake, R. E. (2006). *Multiple case study analysis*. The Guilford Press.
- Sublett, C. (2020). Distant equity: The promise and pitfalls of online learning for students of color in higher education. *American Council on Education, 1*-12.
- Tan, T. Q. (2019). Principles of inclusion, diversity, access, and equity. *The Journal of Infectious Diseases, 220* (Supplement_2), S30-S32. <https://doi.org/10.1093/infdis/jiz198>
- Tapanes, M. A., Smith, G. G., & White, J. A. (2009). Cultural diversity in online learning: A study of the perceived effects of dissonance in levels of individualism/collectivism and tolerance of ambiguity. *The Internet and Higher Education, 12*(1), 26-34. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.iheduc.2008.12.001>
- Williams, J. R. (2021). Designing for the margins: Addressing inequities in digital learning starts with hearing and engaging the student voice. *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning, 53*(1), 23-26. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00091383.2021.1850118>
- Yao, C. W., & Boss, G. J. (2020). “A hard space to manage”: The experiences of women of color faculty teaching online. *Journal of Women and Gender in Higher Education, 13*(1), 1-15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19407882.2019.1639197>

Appendix A Interview Guide

Background

1. Tell me about your experience with online teaching.
2. How do you define inclusion, diversity, access, and equity (IDEA)? How do these inform your online teaching?
3. Tell me about your experience with inclusion, diversity, access, and equity (IDEA) issues, as they relate to your field/discipline and/or your course(s).

Organization

4. How are you supported by the university, college, and/or program in your online teaching and IDEA? How could you be better supported?
5. How does the university, college, and/or program support students in their online learning and IDEA? How could they be better supported?
6. Are there university, college, and/or program policies that support online teaching and learning and IDEA? What might such policies include?

Course

7. What do you see as major IDEA issues within your discipline/field/course(s)?
8. How much freedom and autonomy do you have in designing and facilitating your online courses?
9. In what ways do you address IDEA issues in your online course design and facilitation?
10. How do you assess and evaluate your online courses, in general and with respect to IDEA issues?

Instructor

11. How do aspects of your own identity, background, and social contexts (i.e., IDEA issues) affect your online teaching?
12. How do you seek to develop your knowledge on an ongoing basis as it relates to: online teaching, IDEA issues specific to your field/discipline and/or course(s), IDEA issues within online teaching?

Learners

13. Who are the learners in your online courses—what are their identities, backgrounds, social contexts? How do you know?
14. In your view, what are the major IDEA issues affecting learners in your online courses?

Conclusion

15. How do technical/technology issues affect your online teaching and the learners in your courses?
16. In what ways would you like to address IDEA issues in your online course design and facilitation in the future?
17. What advice would you give to other instructors teaching online courses who wish to promote IDEA?