The Accessibility Lessons Learned (and Not Learned) from COVID

Did educational institutions become more inclusive post-pandemic?

In my spring 2020 column, I explored the isolation experienced by pretty much everyone in the wake of COVID-19, and compared it to issues people with disabilities face every day. I wondered how we would be judged by history: Would we race back from the pandemic abandoning what we learned about accommodating people with special needs (which, when it came to COVID, was all of us), or would we apply what we learned and use it to make life more accessible and inclusive?

As we're coming out of the pandemic, finding a new normal, it seems like a good time to revisit this topic. Have businesses, including educational and healthcare institutions, kept the changes that made it possible for people to shop, eat, work, and learn? I'll address education in this column, and I'll cover other sectors in a subsequent column.

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Fifteen percent, or 7.2 million, of public school students ages 3 to 21, received special education services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 2020–21.

"We're learning more and more how insufficient schools' support and services offerings are," says special education attorney Kevin Finkelstein. While kids were home during the lockdowns, "parents got a big window into what their kids are capable of." They were able to see the areas in which their kids needed more support, and they became able to more fully participate in their child's IEP.

Districts, however, are less collaborative and agreeable to offering appropriate supports and services than they were pre-COVID. "Kids lost so much precious time and educational opportunities, and the districts are not doing enough to make up for that," says Finkelstein. "A lot of them can't pay attention for two minutes, so what are they watching on a screen? They lost more than a year of education."

When speech technology is provided as an accommodation, it's supposed to also include appropriate training, but that's not necessarily how it plays out. There also seems to be confusion as to how to successfully integrate speech tech into the educational setting.

Julia Nicholls, speech language pathologist and professor at California State University, Los Angeles, says, "We've discovered some helpful things during COVID," including remote learning, which has been very beneficial for her patients, most of whom don't drive.

Nicholls credits breakout rooms (which enable people to work in small groups) and live transcription in these apps as being transformative for people with disabilities. Breakout rooms enable someone with a brain injury or sensory disability to discuss a topic with three or four people without having to hear the other 40 people in the room. With live transcription, those who are hearing-impaired, are visual learners, or like to see and hear at the same time can use the method most effective for them.

People who have difficulty speaking can type in the chat box; people who are visually impaired or who read lips can zoom in on the speaker; and those with hyperacusis or who are hard of hearing can adjust the volume, none of which can be done in an in-person setting.

Remote learning also obviates the need for participants to wear masks, which is helpful for individuals who rely on being able to see their communication partner's mouth to be able to understand them. This could be in a speech therapy setting, for those with apraxia, or for people with hearing impairment or other conditions due to which they read lips.

These apps made it possible for us to avoid a complete shutdown of society. But they also happen to be powerful accommodations for people with disabilities.

"In many ways, digital platforms are great for people with disabilities—the phone, PC, tablet—that's where the services and interaction are," says Claudia Center, Disabled Rights Education and Defense Fund's legal director.

At the same time, though, we need to build access into these digital platforms. Center points out that many educational institutions use platforms like Blackboard and Canvas, which may not be accessible for people who are blind.

Nicholls believes live in-person classes with live remote options should be available so students learning remotely are able to participate with their peers in real time, as opposed to viewing a recording after the class has been held.

It wouldn't take much to make these apps truly accessible, and in so doing, to level the playing field for people with disabilities, in and out of the classroom. ⊠

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