OTESSA PROCEEDINGS

Making In-Roads Toward Multi-Access Learning and Teaching

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Abstract
While multi-access learning can support more flexible, accessible, and equitable learning, the time and effort required of educators can serve as a barrier to adoption, particularly for those already fatigued by emergency shifts to remote teaching during the pandemic. Drawing on our own experiences as educators, we propose three practical ways to approach and gain confidence in multi-access learning: (a) contingency pathway, where multi-access is available in limited ways as a supplement in-person instruction; (b) event pathway, where multi-access is adopted for select classes rather than the full course; and (c) three-layer course design pathway scaffolding the conceptualization of multi-access in a full course. For each pathway, we discuss benefits and limitations and key considerations for the learning experience.

Keywords: multi-access learning, COVID-19, post-secondary education

Introduction

The global pandemic has profoundly changed post-secondary learning and teaching. While universities have resumed face-to-face learning, calls for flexibility to support diverse learners and learning needs have continued. Diversifying instructional modalities has become one of the most prominent issues for post-pandemic learning (Pelletier et al., 2023).

During the pandemic, the University of Victoria implemented two multi-access classrooms enabling more flexible use of face-to-face and online modalities. multi-access learning incorporates multiple modalities from face-to-face, synchronous online and asynchronous online to increase access and opportunities for flexible, accessible, and equitable learning (Irvine et al., 2013). However, multi-access learning is a challenging undertaking for educators as it can entail steep learning curves both pedagogically and technically. In this session, we addressed this barrier by drawing on our experiences as educators to describe three practical ways faculty can approach and gain confidence in multi-access learning: (a) multi-access as a contingency; (b) multi-access as a limited event, where multi-access learning is provided for specific or select classes rather than the whole course; and (c) multi-access courses designed in three layers with instructional hours.

Multi-Access Learning

Multi-Access learning is an overarching framework that allows for face-to-face, online, and asynchronous course delivery (Irvine, et al., 2013). In multi-access learning modalities, learners are the centre of the design, and the focus is on broadly incorporating course delivery methods (e.g., face-to-face, synchronous online, asynchronous online, open) in ways that enable flexibility and choice of access where possible. For example, in multi-access learning, learners can be provided with the ability to attend and participate in classes either in-person or online.

By placing value on access, multi-access learning can provide new opportunities for flexible, accessible, and equitable learning. While multi-access learning resembles the HyFlex delivery model (Beatty, 2014), it differs by recognizing that, in some contexts, providing a learner with full choice of modality (e.g., face-to-face, synchronous online, asynchronous online) is not always possible or appropriate (Irvine, 2020). Common and significant benefits of more flexible course modalities include (a) increased access to courses considering competing demands, including work, family, and commuting; (b) improved ability to support learners with diverse needs; and (c) increased enrolment and retention (Beatty, 2019; Kohnke & Moorhouse, 2021). However, multi-access learning requires careful consideration if it is to be successful. Simply adopting a multi-access format does not automatically result in better learning, especially when this approach is haphazardly adopted and educators and learners are inadequately supported (Plews, et al., 2021; Romero-Hall & Ripine, 2021). Instead, delivering a high-quality multi-access course requires faculty to invest substantial time in reconsidering and redesigning their teaching, including considering merging modes as well as blending synchronous and asynchronous class time. Moreover, multi-access learning can require significant use of technology, especially for larger classes. As such, a significant barrier to adopting high-quality multi-access learning is the time and effort required of faculty, often already fatigued by the massive pivots to emergency online teaching brought about by the pandemic. Considering these barriers, we suggest an incremental approach can support educators in implementing multi-access learning.

Pathways to Multi-Access

In this session, we drew on our experience as faculty and non-faculty educators to discuss three pathways in which faculty who are new to multi-access learning can approach and gain confidence with multi-access learning: (a) contingency pathway, where multi-access is available in limited ways as a supplement in-person instruction; (b) event pathway, where multi-access is adopted for select classes rather than the full course; and (c) three-layer course design pathway scaffolding the conceptualization of multi-access in a full course. An overview is provided in Table 1.

Contingency Pathway

In our work, we have observed that educators often begin with contingency when considering multi-access learning. In this approach, educators allow learners to participate online in cases where they experience short-term, unavoidable absences interfering with their regular ability to attend in person. However, online participation is not intended to fully substitute in-person instruction. For example, an educator may allow students who are ill or experiencing other unexpected events to join the class remotely via Zoom. While they would have otherwise not been able to attend, students can participate in the class remotely, such as by watching a lecture, virtually raising their hands to ask questions, or posting comments in the chat. In this mode, multi-access serves only to supplement in-person learning; it provides limited access that may offer a partial experience of the in-person class instruction. In a well-equipped multi-access room, students can participate more fully, but without specialized room technology, students may not be able to fully hear or see their peers. As such, in a contingency setting, it is essential to communicate these limitations to students. Although limited, this experience can support educators in becoming familiar with the technology required for multi-access, reflecting on their course design, and identifying various aspects of their courses that could be offered effectively in different modes.

Table 1
Overview of Pathways

Pathway	Focus	Recommended Location	Participation
Contingency	Supplemental Only	Standard Room	Partial / Limited
Event	Single class	Multi-Access Room	Full
Three-Layer Design	Full course	Multi-Access Room	Full

Event Pathway

Multi-access events provide educators with a second pathway for becoming familiar with multi-access learning. In this case, the educator chooses one or two classes to be multi-access "events." Within these events, learners have the choice or ability to participate online or in person. However, the educator teaches the remainder of the course in its original mode (e.g., in-person). One example of a multi-access event is a remote guest speaker. In this approach, the guest speaker can connect with the class through a video conference. Learners can join the session remotely or participate by attending a physical classroom. It is important to note, in this pathway, the event would require the use of a multi-access classroom equipped with technology that would allow learners and guests to participate and interact regardless of location, online or in-person. Some educators may also experiment with providing an asynchronous option, such as by posting a recording, supplementary resources, and opportunities for interaction, such as

in an online discussion or backchannel chat. Another example of a multi-access event is dedicating a class session to student participation in multi-access group work. In this approach, learners collaborate in small groups (e.g., to solve a problem or discuss a resource), and groups can meet in-person, synchronously online, or a combination of both depending on group assignment or group preference.

Three-Layer Design Pathway

For educators who are interested in delivering a multi-access course at scale, adopting a three-layer course design in a specially equipped multi-access classroom can be a helpful way to conceptualize instruction (Irvine, 2021). In a three-layer design, the instructional hours are divided into three components that mix modalities. The first component is whole-group learning, in which the class meets together for an hour each week, mixing online and in-person learners. The second component is decentralized synchronous learning pods, in which groups meet for an hour at a time or location of their choosing. The third component is asynchronous online engagement, in which learners work independently with online resource materials and activities. Critical barriers to adopting and implementing multi-access learning include the time and knowledge required to redesign instruction. As such, the three-layer design can provide a framework for kickstarting this process.

Conclusions

Overall, multi-access learning offers exciting possibilities for more flexible, accessible, and equitable learning. However, it requires faculty to invest considerable time in redesigning and integrating technology effectively. In our experience, three different pathways can provide educators with in-roads towards multi-access learning include the contingency pathway, event pathway, and three-layer course design pathway. Each pathway provides educators with a way to reduce complexity and develop essential confidence and skills needed for successful multi-access learning. However, it is important to recognize that contingency and event pathways serve as incremental steps toward more deliberate and comprehensive multi-access learning. While they provide a foundation for deliberate and comprehensive adoption and implementation, their impact in terms of creating more flexible, accessible, and equitable spaces is limited. Ongoing reflection and assessment of multi-access approaches will be necessary to refine and enhance the learning experience for all students.

Author's Contributions

MM, HH, and VI conceptualized and designed the presentation.
MM transformed the presentation into this proceeding paper.

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Ethics Statement

Ethical approval is not applicable because this paper involves a reflection on practice and no research with human subjects was undertaken.

Conflict of Interest

The authors do not declare any conflict of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Not applicable.

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