Tips for Designing an Accessible and Inclusive Online Course

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Context

Many online courses are not accessible to students with disabilities even though
- accessibility is required by federal and state laws,
- hundreds of civil rights cases have required institutions make online courses accessible, and
- Millions of students, including students with disabilities, are taking online courses.

"When you plant lettuce, if it does not grow well, you don't blame the lettuce. You look for reasons it is not doing well. It may need fertilizer, or more water, or less sun..."

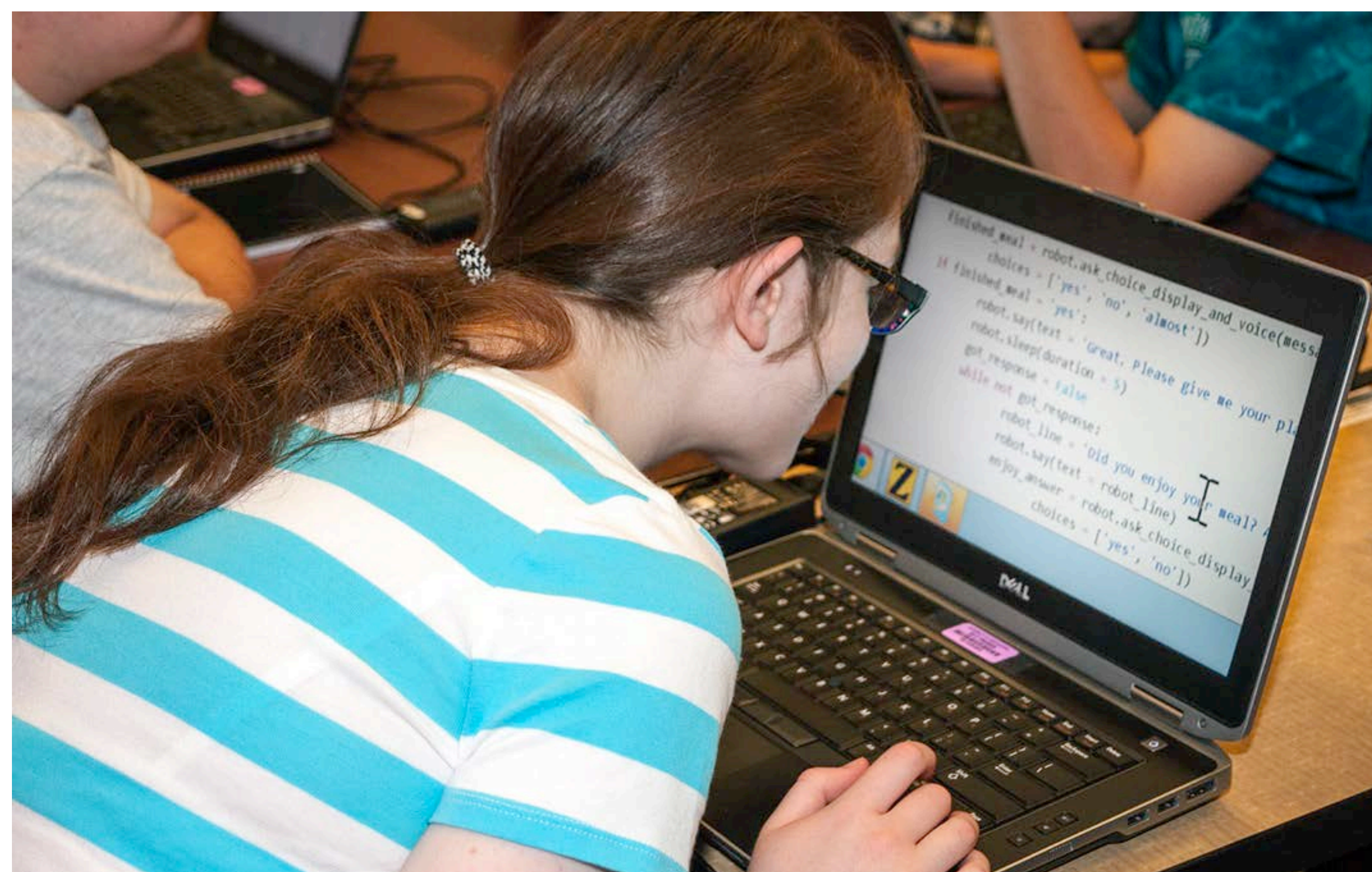-Thích Nhất Hạnh
Vietnamese Buddhist Monk

Goal

Make online courses welcoming to, accessible to, and usable by students with disabilities

Research Question

How can instructors make online content accessible to students with disabilities?
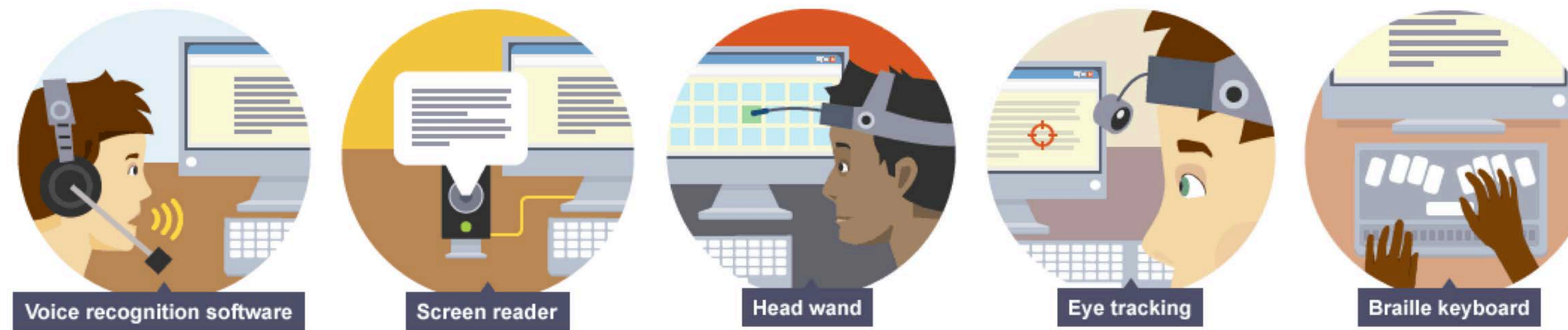
Methods

Review of research and practice literature

Results

Thousands of assistive technologies make computers accessible to students with disabilities. Examples include:

Voice recognition software   Screen reader   Head wand   Eye tracking   Braille keyboard

Assistive technology:
- Emulates the keyboard, but does not emulate the mouse.
- Cannot read content presented in images.
- Can tab from link to link.
- Can skip from heading to heading (and subheadings!).
- Cannot accurately transcribe audio.

Therefore:
- Design websites/software to operate with keyboard alone.
- Provide alternative text with images .
- Make links descriptive.
- Structure with hierarchical headings.
- Caption video and transcribe audio.
- Make PDF, Word files, and other documents accessible.

"Universal design" (UD) offers a framework for accessible online learning. UD = *"the design of products and environments to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design."* -The Center for Universal Design, NCSU

A UD practice gives students multiple ways to learn, demonstrate what they learned, and engage in a course. UD strategies benefit all students. For example, captioning videos benefits students who are deaf, but also students who are English language learners and students who simply want to know the spelling of words.

Conclusion

Training is needed to help online learning designers and instructors employ accessible practices. More research is needed to determine best practices for accessible design.
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Resources

Creating Inclusive Learning Opportunities in Higher Education: A Universal Design Toolkit. Harvard Education Press. Order from HEP for a 20% discount with code INLEHE
uw.edu/doit/cude

Center for Universal Design in Education uw.edu/doit/cude

DO-IT Center & AccessINCLUDES uw.edu/doit

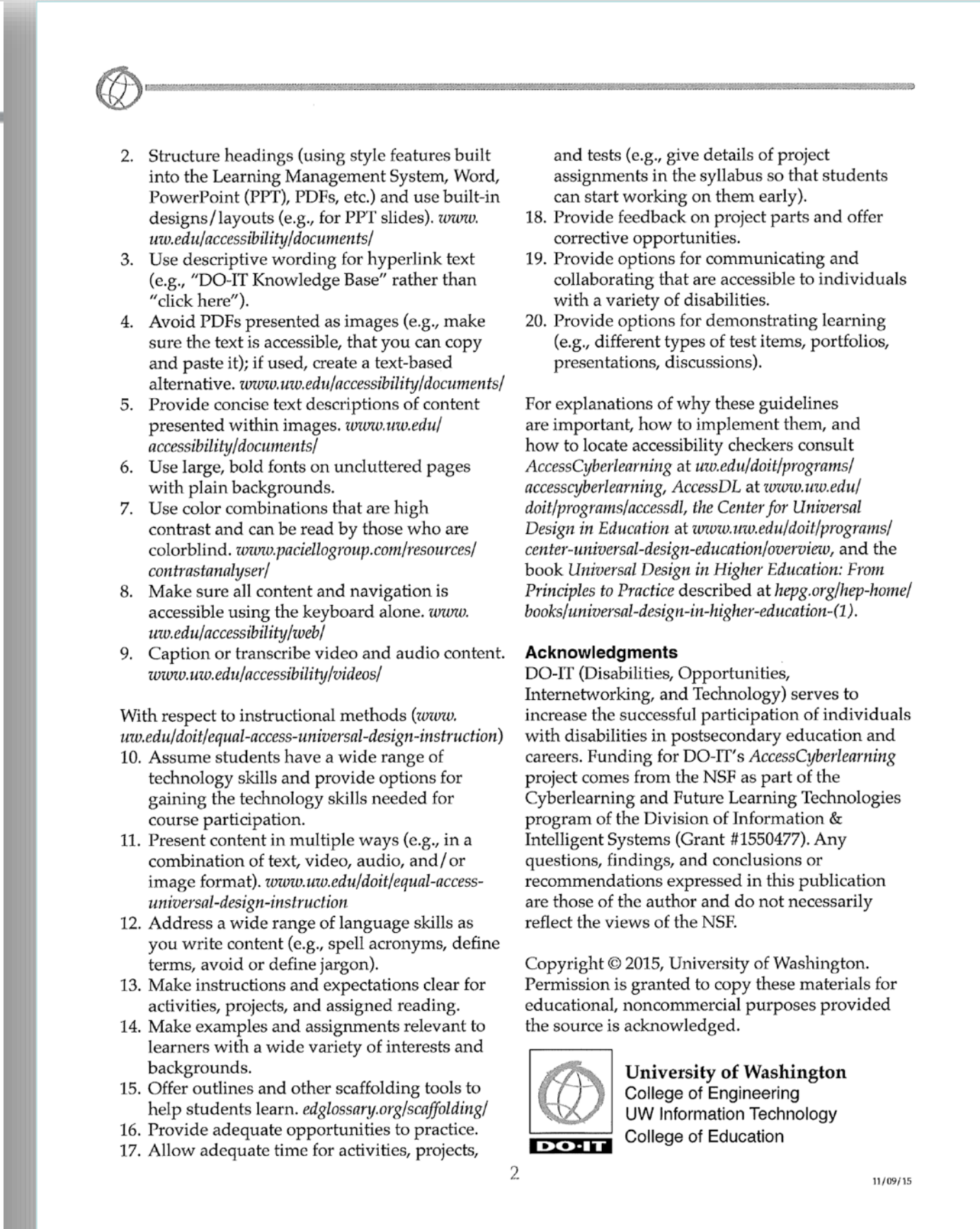*Accessible Technology* uw.edu/accessibility

Poster "Handout:"
20 Tips for Teaching an Accessible Online Course
uw.edu/doit/20-tips-teaching-accessible-online-course