

## **The Effect of Accessibility on Grading: What Would YOU Do?**

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I find the more I come to know about students' lives, particularly the sometimes convoluted way they gain access to my online class, the more my grading of their written work is affected. I'd like to present two composite "cases" of students in my freshmen level research course (English 102). I've changed their names and fictionalized some parts of their stories to emphasize accessibility issues. They both completed what I would call satisfactory-level research essays at the end of the course; however, one completed all the online forums, quizzes, and chats to fulfill 30% of the coursework, and one (because of interference to her computer access) did not. I'll present the two cases but not their final grades. I'd like to know what YOU would have done.

First you need to know about Heritage and our mission. Heritage University is a private, four-year liberal arts college located near the Yakama Indian Agency among the hops fields just outside of Toppenish, Washington. We're a non-profit, independent, non-denominational accredited (both graduate and undergraduate) institution of higher education serving a highly diverse student body of over 1,400. Our students are 65-70% non-Caucasian (80% female, employed, average age 31), mostly Hispanic, Yakama and other American Indians, and many "blended ethnicities."

Accessibility is so important to Heritage University that it's the fourth word in our mission statement: To provide quality, **accessible** higher education to multicultural populations which have been educationally isolated. However, when we created this mission statement, the focus was on the rural and economically disadvantaged condition of our target population and the fact that the nearest university was sixty miles away. Some of our students literally walk across the highway from the hops or asparagus fields to go to their 6 o'clock class.

We came to online instruction only recently and very warily because so few of our students had the usually safe-to-assume access to "good" computers and "fast" internet access of other student populations. For those of us teaching online, accessibility has now come to mean having the economic power to possess a high-quality computer with at least a 56K modem for internet access plus the monthly service provider fees. Many of our students have that economic power, but just barely. One faculty member's survey shows 33% of her entering students had no computer access (other than on-campus labs). When factoring in Internet service, this figure rose to 45% who, although they had computers at home, did NOT have Internet access.

I am one of three faculty currently extending our class offerings to the internet using a software package called Jenzabar. We have a mandatory orientation during or prior to the first week of class including an online self-quiz, tutorial for Jenzabar, and a one-hour face-to-face session, but as you will see, sometimes students fall through this "net." The first question we ask students is what kind of computer/internet access they have; then their skill and comfort level with using word-processing, emails with attachments, the internet, etc. But even after we determine that everyone has a basic users' level, there are other factors that come into play:

access to technical support when something goes wrong, tools and skills for dealing with viruses, unforeseen changes in work schedules, changes in management's support at the job, the number of family members using the same home computer, etc. These are what students' *excuses* are made of, and my problem with equitable grading comes from the fact that often these excuses are legitimate.

I propose to establish detailed profiles of two students who were equal in completing satisfactory final research projects. Both receive similar financial aid packages that require a 2.5 GPA to maintain. I've made five categories to better compare their learning situations: 1) family interdependence, 2) support at work, 3) comfort level and skill at the computer, 4) online participation in this class (forums, quizzes, chats), 5) success in completing the final research project. I'll ask conference participants to read and compare the two students' academic "stories," analyze how they would consider accessibility issues with all their nuances and complexities, and then judge how these issues might affect their final grading.

I'll call these students Jaime and Angelica--not their real names, though details of their learning situations (taken from questions posed during orientation) *are* real.

## **Jaime**

### 1) Family Interdependence:

Jaime's a recent high school graduate; he's Hispanic, the first member of his family to attend college. His parents are proud of him and boast about their "college son," often asking him to show them things on his computer which they helped raise the money to buy. He married his high school sweetheart, a nurse's aid at a local nursing home, and they have a one-year-old son in daycare. His wife was an honor student in high school and already planned on college until she got pregnant her junior year, decided to marry, and let Jaime begin college while they both worked to support their son. She said, "The man should get the education," but Jaime jokes how she's always telling him she could do better at college than he's doing.

### 2) Support at Work:

Jaime works full-time in the fruit-packing plant where his father and great-uncle have worked for two generations. His boss has no idea and no reason to care that Jaime's taking college classes; he expects Jaime to be on time for his shift and to work overtime when needed. The boss has no funds or programs available for workers trying to improve themselves; if Jaime doesn't do the work, there are several waiting for his position who will. Jaime's dad and uncle were pleased when they arranged for him to apply for and get the job, but there's an underlying pride and expectation that Jaime will "do better."

### 3) Comfort Level and Skill with Computers:

Jaime is comfortable and quick with his Dell laptop and wireless internet access; he's adept at using MS Office 2000 (his high school had state-of-the-art computer labs) as well as with downloading and playing computer games and MP3s—he has a passing acquaintance with freessays.com.

### 4) Online Participation—Forums, Quizzes, Chats

Jaime passed ENG 101 easily last semester and jumped at the chance of an online 102 class that he could do on weekends or after 8 pm when his son was sleeping. He completed all minimum requirements for participation, 30% of the Weighted Course Average in Jenzabar. His forum answers were rote, uninspiring, as though he didn't think the posted discussions had much to do with him. He seemed to know what was expected and gave just that, nothing more. During chats, I got the impression he was simultaneously playing a computer game. He completed all online quizzes on time, averaging between 70 and 80%.

#### 5) Success in Completing Final Research Paper

Jaime's major is Computer Science, and his research topic was on the computer industry outsourcing jobs to other countries—he argued that they shouldn't. The essay satisfactorily demonstrated his ability to argue a thesis statement, to fairly present both sides of an issue, to accurately document and use a variety of source materials. His final Weighted Average for the course was 74.89%.

### **Angelica**

#### 1) Family Interdependence:

Angelica's a middle-aged, Native American, the first member of her family to attend college. She has a history of high-risk behavior as a student: it's taken four years of part-time enrollment to complete the pre-college-level math and English courses. She withdrew (WX) from ENG 101 twice, not bothering with an Administrative Withdrawal either time, and finally passed with a C. This is her second attempt at Eng 102.

She recently divorced from a drug-and-alcohol-abusing husband who is under a restraining order against seeing her and their children. She has two teenagers, a son and a daughter (the daughter is also enrolled in the social work program at Heritage). The son is still in high school but doesn't think of college as part of his future: he calls it a "female" thing with both his mother and sister attending and often makes fun of them. Her father died years ago, and her mother doesn't directly discourage Angelica but says things like, "My daughter, she thinks she can do *everything*. We'll just wait and see." Her sister says, "You have a good job. What more do you want? You're 42! Why are you wasting your time with college?"

Angelica only decided to try this online class on the third day of the semester, so she added late. Half-way through the second week of classes her cousin died, and Angelica was excused from work and class attendance for the next 10 days to attend native funeral rites. It is Heritage policy to recognize and honor cultural customs.

#### 2) Support at Work:

Angelica works full time in the business office on campus; she worked her way up to this job through a series of work-study positions over the last four years. She has no computer access at home, but her supervisor at work (who is Hispanic) seems fully supportive of her taking classes. He has allowed one hour per day during the lunch period for Angelica to use her desk computer for her online class work, but he lets Angelica know that this extra hour is NOT to detract from her expected office work load. After Angelica missed 10 days of work for the family funeral, her boss said she'd have to make up missed work whenever she could, including her lunch hours. Catching up on late work took priority over catching up on late English assignments.

### 3) Comfort Level and Skill with Computers:

There is no computer in Angelica's home, and she wouldn't know the first thing about procuring an ISP. She is naturally wary but gradually getting more comfortable—she's been using MS Office at her job, but mostly she works in Excel spreadsheets. There were no computers in high school when Angelica graduated in the 70's; her first exposure was in 1999 in the Heritage computer labs where she was enrolled in English 99A, a pre-college, non-credit writing course. Because she typed well and fast, she appeared very comfortable with computers. Angelica was too embarrassed to ask the white male instructor, so she never received the extra help with functions like copy/paste, save/print. Instead, she gleaned what she needed from fellow Native students seated near her. She's had work-specific training sessions, but has never understood many of the basic time-savers. For example, 1) she never clicks an icon in the tool bar—she learned the drop-down menus, and that's all she ever uses, and 2) she uses the arrow keys to maneuver the cursor but never learned that CTRL ARROW skips the cursor to the beginning of words.

Rather than upload her papers to the forums for peer editing, she chose to send her hand-written papers to me through campus mail with a note saying she could no longer use her work computer—they were getting too busy.

### 4) Online Participation—Forums, Quizzes, Chats

Angelica has earned only 6 of the possible 30% for participation in this course. Because of her adding the course late and then missing days during the funeral, she never seemed to get caught up. She responded late to one of four required forum questions the first week and received no reply because other students were already on the next week's forum. She entered no responses the second and third week because she was involved in the funeral. She completed three of the six quizzes required before midterm, but because the missing forums offered direct preparation for the quizzes, she did not pass them. She made an attempt to make up missed work, but couldn't complete it.

### 5) Success in Completing Final Research Paper

Angelica did satisfactorily complete, *on time*, all the short papers leading up to the final research project as well as the research paper itself. Angelica's major is Business Administration, and her research topic was on the rate of success for Native American women who own their own businesses compared to those who work for white owners. The essay satisfactorily demonstrated her ability to argue a thesis statement, to fairly present different sides of an issue, to accurately document and use a variety of source materials. Her final Weighted Average for the course was 64.91%.

Both students demonstrated similar ability in writing an argumentative research paper—the purpose of the course. Jaime completed the minimum online participation requirements; Angelica could not due to computer accessibility issues beyond her control. Would *you* grade according to their individually accumulated percentage points?

