How using an iPad in the classroom allowed me to graduate

In 2012 I was an independent, busy full time student at Georgia State University, two semesters away from graduating. I unexpectedly had to have back surgery, and a complication resulted in a spinal cord injury. This was a major personal life change; I went from being able to walk miles to not being able to walk thirty feet. I had to withdraw from my courses during the Fall 2012 semester, and tried to recover. After about a year of getting used to my new normal, I felt a pull to come back and finish those remaining courses. I knew I would not be able to sit in a classroom desk or stand for long periods of time...forget about walking the campus. I looked at the online courses offered and there were none that could satisfy the requirements I had left. I felt stuck between my desire and my reality.

During the Fall 2012 before I withdrew, my English Senior Seminar class was part of the Center for Instructional Innovation's (CII) iPad education test. We worked on iPads to understand how technology impacts education. This is what gave me an idea: the iPad would be a perfect solution to include me in the class by employing video conferencing! How hard could it be to FaceTime with me in class? I specifically wanted to use FaceTime and the iPad, because I knew it was a portable device that was easy to learn and use. Since the school had already used them for CII demonstration, I knew they were on hand and available. I asked Dr. Jennifer Hall and Dr. Brennan Collins from CII to try out using the iPad FaceTime software in order to get me in a class. We discussed and decided together how coursework would be turned in, how testing could operate, how discussions and notification hand signals work. They allowed me to be as creative as I wanted throughout the development process. It was very exciting because I knew what we were doing would make a huge difference for my future, and the future of others who are in similar situations.

My experience was very good. The professor would put the iPad (“me”) on a desk, the screen facing the board or the professor. The camera is on the front of the screen, which allows me to see what was going on within the limits of the shot. I could hear everyone including the professor, and they could hear me. I have tried this method of learning in six different classes with different professors and their teaching styles. I have tried a lecture hybrid course, a lecture course, a seminar course, a workshop course, a foreign language course, and one-on-one directed readings course, all of which had their own ups and downs, but overall were very successful.

Any failures rested mostly upon the quality of wifi Internet access. The worse the signal, the more feedback echoed over the speakers, which could be temporarily disrupting to the class; the volume can be turned down to help mitigate this. Some professors noted being unable to hear me speak in class at times, or being able to hear every other word. In loud group discussions where people talk over each other, it was sometimes hard to join the conversation. The more controlled a discussion, the better it was for me to hear everyone and vice versa. Sometimes the picture would freeze, and the call would be lost and I would have to call back. All of these issues, however, are easily manageable.

The benefit of this technological adaptation was not just fulfilling my goal of graduation, but also giving me an opportunity to attend class regularly, to be a part of the classroom social experience and enjoy different perspectives. I was able to text/instant message the professors on the iPad for quick communication. I raised my hand normally, as if I was in the same room and the professor would call on me. Every professor I asked said the experience was great for the whole class.

Looking at the alternatives, strictly online courses do not provide the richness of the learning experience that you can gain from a live classroom. We learn from each other in class, and not just from the material being taught, but from other people’s lives, off handed comments or spontaneous questions or discussions that are improvised rather than planned out. Another alternative, the Blackboard conference software, is inefficient, as it is blocks the professor from using the computer for PowerPoint presentations, while also projecting the distance learning student on to the main
screen, which is awkward both for the student and the rest of the class. Why should I have to settle for a lesser educational experience just because I require distance learning?

What I have learned being injured is that a mental framework is vital when dealing with a major life change. There needs to be a reason to get up everyday, to keep moving forward — and school gave me that reason. It was something to distract myself with, to look forward to, to plan on and make efforts towards — it was something I was good at. Being able to go back to this environment and network that I created for myself before my injury was important to me.

No one would have known that I had been injured unless I spoke up, but I think that major life changes for people weigh heavy on the psyche. Some people become withdrawn and do not want to be social, and some give up. Some do this all alone, and they may think their lives are over, and that no one cares about what happened to them. My experience of putting myself out there soon after my injury is not necessarily typical, but I am blessed to have a support system that has kept me mentally healthy. But it should also be the school’s responsibility to reach out to their own students who have major health emergencies, who have invested in their education with this institution. This is why I would like to see the iPad distance learning model expand. This accommodation should be widely known around campus and easily available so that others could benefit from it as much as I have.

I would like to sincerely thank the professors who participated in this accommodation with me:
Dr. Jennifer Hall
Dr. Brennan Collins
Dr. Mario Feit
Dr. María Bermúdez
Dr. Josh Russell
Dr. Jelena Subotic