Are We Still Struggling with Accessibility? A Case Study Reflecting on Potential Transformations

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This project aims to share reflections and potential transformations for instructional design practice around accessibility. Prompted by a situation involving an instructional design unit at a large state university as a case study, the two goals are to understand how accessibility concerns are treated when confronted with a lack of time and resources; as well as find appropriate actions to take to transform how accessibility and equity is achieved within our sphere of influence.

Purpose

This project aims to share reflections and potential transformations for instructional design and educational technology practice around accessibility, both for ourselves as individual designers and our organizations as a whole. Prompted by a unique personal situation involving a small instructional design unit within one college at a large state university, the goal is to understand how accessibility concerns are treated when instructional designers are confronted with a lack of time and resources, as well as find appropriate actions to take to transform how accessibility and equity is achieved within our own sphere of influence. This work in progress report explores the concrete work of achieving accessibility, reflecting on ethics, social justice, barriers, and potential solutions.

According to the Post Secondary National Policy Institute (2022), students with disabilities made up 19% of undergraduates and 12% of graduate students across the US. Both percentages are below the estimated prevalence of disabilities in the population at large, which the Center for Disease Control (2022) places at 26%. This means that not only are students with disabilities underrepresented in higher education, but those who do choose to pursue further education face additional barriers when attempting to complete their coursework. Equal educational provision for those with disabilities was codified into law with Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act passed in 1990, yet many institutions have failed to meet these requirements, resulting in lawsuits and large payouts which can further diminish funds for accessibility training and personnel as well as the university at large (Carlson, n.d.). As instructional designers or higher education professionals, the condition of documented barriers to access persisting despite legal requirements to mitigate them creates for us a dilemma. In order to live up to our professional obligation to individual learners, and to professionally safeguard our institutions so that they function legally, we have an ethical imperative to ensure accessible content is being produced.

Context

Working as part of the instructional design team of an established college focusing on online education, a recent change in how the Accessibility and Disability Resource Center (ADRC) of our university handles accommodation requests has put us in a unique situation. As a relatively new team, responsible for a wide variety of legacy instructional content, the institutional changes necessitated making hundreds of preexisting courses accessible in a short amount of time, putting strain on an already full workload. This often meant compromising the quality or attention that was paid to making those courses fully accessible to all learners. Seeing this as an opportunity to reflect not only on how we got here, but on how accessibility is treated more broadly, the first author chose to explore this issue further as part of a course-related praxis project. If we truly wish to create equitable campuses that provide students the opportunity to participate fully, more attention and resources should be given to accessibility concerns; however, we may not always be in an administrative or leadership position to mandate changes for our organization. With much of the inquiry into improving accessibility focused on administrators and institutional policy and reform, what can we do as individual professionals, in less-than-ideal situations, to promote equity and belonging for all learners?

Guiding Frameworks

This exploration was also inspired by Bradshaw's (2014) call for the field to engage in questions of race, ethnicity, and social justice. The theoretical and practical foundations are critical pedagogy (Freire, 1990), the equity literacy framework (Gorski & Swalwell, 2015), a lens of critical humility (European-American Collaborative Challenging Whiteness, 2005), and a conception of instructional designers and educators as being transformative intellectuals instead of merely "technicians" (Giroux, 2013). Epistemologies of ignorance (e.g., Alcoff, 2007; Takacs, 2007) related to this context will also be explored. This involves looking into how we got here, and analyzing the forces that may prevent transformative change.

Taking guidance from the equity literacy framework (Gorski, 2015), the first author recognized that the instructional design team was perpetuating inequities in our work, and yet did not have the institutional support to find alternative solutions. Among a myriad of issues, these courses included PDFs that had not been — and in some cases could not be — tagged due to poor scans. Instructional videos lacked closed captions or, if they had them, they were incorrect. Additionally, entire programs were using a course template that was inaccessible in its design, on top of being generally broken. And yet, these courses had been running and needed to be ready to run again next term. With support from the curriculum team leadership, initiatives were begun to begin to address some of these issues, such as developing a new, accessible, template. Nevertheless, the lack of adequate time, personnel, or additional college or institutional level support, meant compromises were being made and barriers to learning persisted. Wanting to confront this inequity to the best of our abilities, we turned to exploring the issue and addressing what could be done.

As this problem cannot be solved in a vacuum, bringing in other viewpoints and experiences serves to highlight the issues and barriers faced in remediation of courses by other professionals involved in this work. Through engaging with the wider community and capturing interactions with decision makers and other stakeholders, the aim is to develop transformations that may be informative to other individuals and instructional design units.

Initial Approach

Qualitative data were collected via surveys and interviews with colleagues in the first author's work unit and the broader university community. Initial participants in this project were two instructional designers and an instructional technologist, all of whom were responsible for ensuring that online course offerings are accessible to all learners. The average experience level in addressing accessibility concerns in this initial group was four years. In the second iteration, ten participants from the Office of Digital Learning on campus were recruited, seven of whom completed the initial survey. All of this second group of participants were instructional designers engaged in making courses and materials accessible. The average experience level in this group was slightly lower, with four having 1-2 years' experience and three having 3-4 years of experience.

The initial Qualtrics survey gathered demographic information and asked participants about their familiarity, training, and attitudes regarding accessibility. Participants were also asked to share what accessibility meant to them as a concept, how much time they spent working on accessibility each week, and what kind of training they had been provided or sought out independently. Further, they were asked to rate how important accessibility was to them, their work unit, and the institution. Finally, participants were asked if they felt they were given adequate time and resources to make courses and materials accessible and what barriers they perceived limited their ability to do so. Most questions included open-ended response sections to allow participants to go more in depth about their experiences with accessibility work. Six of the ten participants so far have agreed to participate in follow-up interviews. These will be conducted via Zoom and will primarily consist of delving deeper into the personal experiences of participants and asking them to expand on responses they gave during the online survey.

Discussion

This study is grounded in a particular problem in a particular context. Results are expected to support future practice as well as inform future study design. Preliminary findings indicate a lack of time, resources (personnel/training), and institutional support related to making materials and courses accessible. This lack of time and personnel allotted to accessibility concerns highlights a view of accessibility as a secondary goal, instead of a requirement. Insufficient training on accessibility also appears to be an issue, as participants frequently cited either a lack of organizational training or an inadequate level of training being provided. Additionally, participants indicated lack of clarity regarding who is responsible to ensure accessibility is achieved, and that efforts and expertise among ADRC specialists, instructional designers and technologists, and course instructors are often siloed.

Two immediate implications are the need for increased training and collaboration. First, designers and instructors need structured, consistent training that moves beyond the basics to develop a comprehensive understanding of the principles of accessibility, as well as the technical knowledge to practically apply it. Second, intentional and institutionally supported collaboration is needed among ADRC, designers and technologists, and instructors. Findings will inform a larger research agenda focused on improving instructional design practices regarding accessibility. This study is on track to be completed by summer of 2024.

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