Evidence Based Library and Information Practice

Users with Disabilities, Especially Invisible Disabilities, Provide Insight into How Libraries Can Frame Accessibility Webpages

Brunskill, A. (2020). "Without that detail, I'm not coming": The perspectives of students with disabilities on accessibility information provided on academic library websites. College & Research Libraries, 81(5), 768–788. https://doi.org/10.5860/crl.81.5.768

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Evidence Summary

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A Review of:
Brunskill, A. (2020). "Without that detail, I'm not coming": The perspectives of students with disabilities on accessibility information provided on academic library websites. *College & Research Libraries*, *81*(5), 768–788. https://doi.org/10.5860/crl.81.5.768

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Abstract

Objective – To understand the needs and preferences of users with disabilities for libraries' accessibility webpages (webpages dedicated to information on disability and accessibility).

Design – Semi-structured interviews.

Setting – A large public university in the United States of America.

Subjects – 12 students who self-identify as having a disability.

Methods – Participants were asked about their expectations (if any) and experiences using library accessibility webpages, how they felt they should be organized, and where and how they would expect to find such webpages. Two lists were printed out and provided to the participants. The first, compiled from a previous study, listed common website headings (categories) under which accessibility webpages had been found, and this aided participants in selecting where they would go to find such a webpage. The second listed common types of information found on accessibility webpages. Participants were asked to use the second list to come up with their five highest priority items for accessibility

webpages to cover. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed for responses to specific queries, but inductive coding was also used.

Main Results – In most of the five response clusters of interest to the author (experience/expectation of such a page existing, navigation and language preferences, overall tone and feel for the website, organization for the page, and content for the page), answers were mixed. No consensus emerged with respect to participants' expectation of an accessibility webpage existing, how they would find the page (including the best website heading), and what content the page should contain. Participants noted that language should be welcoming and inclusive and vetted for sensitivity. The physical layout of the library and information about ambiance and furniture was frequently noted as being an important and overlooked detail to include. Some services, such as shelf pulling and online chat, were highlighted as appealing to those with "invisible" disabilities.

Conclusion – The needs and preferences of users with disabilities are varied and sometimes mutually conflicting. Based on the findings, fourteen recommendations are suggested, including providing detailed information about sensory aspects of the library, listing contact information (preferably to a named individual or group), providing useful headings within the page, and evaluating whether language on the website is welcoming.

Commentary

This paper is part of an area of research that looks at accessibility in libraries. Unlike some earlier studies that look only at users with mobility and vision issues, this one takes a broader view of the concept of disability to include "invisible disabilities," defined as anything that interferes with day-to-day functioning without having a physical manifestation. Examples include ADHD, depression, dyslexia, and autism. This paper examines library webpages that are devoted to providing information to users with

disabilities, referred to by the author as "accessibility webpages." Addressing a gap in the literature mentioned by Cassner et al. (2011, p. 49), the author interviews users who self-identify as disabled to get their perspective on the organization, content, and look and feel of the accessibility webpage at their university.

This commentary relies on the critical review tool of Letts et al. (2007). The purpose of the study was clearly stated and motivated by a gap in the literature, although there did not seem to be an explicit research question. This is not necessarily a problem, but had there been one, it could have added some focus to the findings section. The study design was adequate given the exploratory nature of the study purpose. The sample of participants was small and unrepresentative of users with disabilities within the setting, but the author acknowledges this and does not attempt to make generalized claims. The data collection process was well explained. One puzzling finding was that some participants did not view their disabilities in terms of accessibility, assuming the term pertained specifically to mobility accommodations such as ramps for wheelchair users (p. 774). Given the broad range of disabilities, as well as expectations of how libraries should respond to them, perhaps a term such as accommodation or inclusivity, rather than accessibility, would have better conveyed the concept discussed in this article.

It is often said that accessible design translates into better design for all users. A key lesson from this study is that the same thing applies to targeting library services and resources beyond a preconceived audience. For example, displaying information on the noise level and lighting of a space is helpful to all users, even if the original motivation is to accommodate users with anxiety and sensitivity. The author's recommendation to provide detailed information about sensory aspects of the library, and more generally to avoid assuming who might need what kind of information, is probably the most unheeded one on library websites. This recommendation can be incorporated into a website redesign process or even a content audit of webpages. It would also be a wise idea for libraries to survey and

interview users with disabilities in their own setting since they may discover perspectives not discussed in this study.

References

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