

Applying systems thinking to design-led online education and digital accessibility

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Abstract

In online education, digital accessibility and inclusive learning design are fundamental to enabling all learners to succeed. There exist a range of models to influence practice, from highly technical standards, such as the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (W3C, 2023), to frameworks for instruction and learner engagement, for example Universal Design for Learning (CAST, 2018). Bringing a clearer design focus, Rossi (2023) provided a model for inclusive education underpinned by values which branched into context, content and assessment. However, some learning design methods risk focusing on just the learning and teaching activity, leading learning designers to miss the broader context of the learning experience within both the setting of the educational institution and the personal circumstances of learners, and subsequent implications for administrative process and practical engagement. These considerations sharpen specifically in the design of online learning experiences that are consciously prepared for disabled students, where the approach taken must surpass reasonable adjustments typical of educational providers meeting legal obligations and puts accessibility and inclusivity as integral to course quality.

This presentation uses the example of developing a new postgraduate online degree programme in disability studies to explore and define the holistic student experience of online education. Drawing on ideas from systems thinking, by analysing the relationships between component parts of the 'online education system' at various levels (Tamim, 2020), it was possible to identify barriers and opportunities for disabled online learners. In preparing this programme, insights from specialist user testing demonstrated how adhering to standards alone, without consideration of learner context and pedagogy, can lead to misconceptions and assumptions of how students will experience the course. Further, by considering the full experience of institutional processes and platforms alongside individuals' own learning spaces, underlying issues were surfaced that either a technical accessibility or inclusive pedagogical approach alone would not have identified. The application of systems thinking in design-led online education is relatively unexplored, yet systems thinking approaches provide a means for exploring complex 'human-centric' design challenges (Darzentas and Darzentas, 2014). The intention of this presentation session, relating to the conference theme 'Emerging pedagogies & methodologies' will stimulate further discussion on systems thinking for accessible and inclusive design in online education, and to connect learning designers with the holistic student experience on degree programmes.

References

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