

Reflections on the White Rose Learning Technologists' Forum, 17th April 2019

The Forum met at the University of York recently to consider issues surrounding accessibility and inclusivity. There were three very different sessions, considering legislation and content creation.

Of course a pressing issue at the moment is the Public Sector Bodies (Websites and Mobile Applications) Accessibility Regulations 2018. Alistair McNaught from JISC kicked off proceedings with an overview of the implications of this legislation for learning technologists and other HE staff, including a rather snazzy graphic to summarise the timeline for compliance. I think everyone appreciated this, as the timeline is pretty complex! I won't go into details of the regulations and deadlines here, but if you're not yet familiar with them, I recommend this report on [Accessible VLEs](#) (particularly Chapter 2), or [UK Government guidelines](#).

From my perspective as a 'technology-enhanced teacher', Alistair's key point was that this legislation isn't really new accessibility requirements, but more a shift in the burden of responsibility. Instead of students having to request adaptations to overcome barriers, it's now the institution's responsibility to provide natively accessible websites and documents. So essentially, the new legislation demands an inclusive design approach to materials design.

Next up was a hands-on workshop on "Everyday inclusion in everyday teaching" by Kirsten Thompson from the University of Leeds, focusing on content creation. This was a really enjoyable session, with two key takeaways. Firstly, to build an inclusive learning environment we have to consider the needs of all our students, especially in light of internationalisation and widening participation efforts. So although the new legislation focuses on removing barriers arising from disability, to be fully inclusive we need to go further and also think about how to remove barriers due to diversity in linguistic, cultural and religious backgrounds, being a mature, part-time or distance student, having caring responsibilities or a low income etc.

My second takeaway from Kirsten's workshop was that a key strategy to develop accessible materials is to allow students to adapt a document's format or how they interact with it. For example, instead of giving module information on a static PDF, using a cloud-based document like Microsoft Office 365 or Google Docs lets students change features such as the text size, background colour and line spacing to suit their needs. Kirsten also demonstrated the [Microsoft Immersive Reader](#) tool, which visually enhances text and can also read the text aloud. This seems a really useful tool to support a diverse range of students - it gives students a lot of control, and it's based on familiar technology so doesn't need specialist skills to use. Check out the [University of Leeds Inclusive Teaching](#) site for more tips.

The final session was an introduction to the [Blackboard Ally](#) tool, from Nicholaas Matthijs, Gillian Fielding and Peter Hirst from Blackboard. The main function of Ally is an automatic accessibility checker for pages and documents on a VLE or website. After checking, an icon reflecting the [accessibility score](#) is shown next to each document (staff-facing only). A tutor can then click this to see what the issue is, learn why it's problematic and also get instructions on how to fix the issue. A lot of my colleagues have reported that they don't really know where to begin with creating accessible materials, so I think this could be a really useful nudge to raise instructor awareness and empower them to create more accessible VLE sites and documents. The second key function of Ally is that it can create [alternative formats](#) of documents for students, such as a braille or audio version, or an ePub file for use with an e-book reader. Giving students this control lets them select the most appropriate format, removes the need for specialist tools and doesn't add extra burden to instructors. Winning all round!

Thanks all for a thought-provoking and productive afternoon, and especially to the speakers and organiser Graham McElearney and Lilian Soon.