

DISABILITY AND E-LEARNING: WHAT DOES “ACCESSIBLE” MEAN?



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It was in the year 1999 at a TechLearn Conference at Disney World that a man named Elliot Masie gave to the world the term “e-Learning”. It was the first time that the word had been used in a professional context, yet the practice, or its variations, had existed since the advent of the 19th Century, where in 1840s a man named Isaac Pitman, taught his pupils shorthand via correspondence. Designed to improve writing speed, this practice became popular amongst secretaries and journalists who just had so much to write. Over the course of the 20th Century several attempts had been made to make the lives of the hardworking student simpler and better, yet it wasn't until the 1960s when the first computer based training program PLATO was introduced in the University of Illinois and in 1980s with the introduction of the MAC allowing individuals to have a computer, making it easier for them to learn about particular subjects and skill sets, that the practice actually garnered curiosity, and begged the world to ask the question: Can learning become digital?

With the advent of the 21st Century, businesses began using e-Learning to train their employees, and in the latter half of the century, the practice permeated into the world of textbooks and blackboards, offering a new way to learn. In India, with the start of the 2010s and with the Internet becoming accessible in both rural and urban spaces, there has been a digital revolution with over

500 million Internet users added to the already existing user ship of 320 million. Technavio's market research analysts predict that the Indian online market will grow at a CAGR of about 20% by 2020 and will be worth 18 billion USD. KPMG reports that the education industries will witness a growth of about x6 times, with the number of online users enrolling in online education touching an estimate of 9.6 million users by 2021, with estimate revenue being worth 1.96 billion USD. These statistics, coupled with the advantages of e-Learning such as easy access to a plethora of varied subjects and learning material through any device at any given point of time, low cost rates, user friendly interface and the advantage of learning at one's own time and pace proves to us that the future of e-Learning is bright. With its interactive visuals and easy to follow virtual lessons, e-Learning has garnered the appreciation of many around the world with Gosper, Green, McNeil, Phillips, Preston and Woo (2007) observing that students find that online technologies such as web-based lecture technology help them to achieve better results. So where, amidst all of these advancements, do the users lie, especially the ones differently able from the rest?

An online Learning Management System (LMS) Blackboard from Blackboard Inc was awarded the Non-Visual Accessibility Gold Certification from the National Federation of the Blind in the United States in 2010, and while it is an applaud able contribution towards the betterment of the disabled, it is worth noting that Blackboard Inc was formed in 1997 and it was only in 2010 that they chose to make their material accessible to disabled people, after almost thirteen years of its inception. It is also quite troubling to note that as of 2015, it is the only e-Learning portal that offers such facilities.

In India, as per the 2011 Consensus, there are currently 2.68 crore people with some form of disability, and 1.4 crore people of this population have the ability to read or write to various degrees. Due to the lockdown induced by the COVID-19 pandemic, education has had to go online, yet unfortunately,

learning material is still inaccessible to the differently able. Government initiatives like ePathshala, launched in 2015 by the Ministry of Human Resource Development, offers to host a variety of educational resources such as audio-visual lectures, periodicals and teacher training modules, yet fails to cater to the needs of the disabled. The Javed Abidi Foundation, a foundation known for pioneering a cross-country disability movement, stated through their “Nothing Without Us” campaign that E-Learning portals such as BYJUs and Unacademy, known for teaching through audio-visual resources, still fail to provide services such as subtitles and sign language captions. The ISLRTC (Indian Sign Language Research and Training Centre) provides with interpreting services for the disabled, yet these services haven't been properly utilized when it comes to e-Learning portals.

This effectively leaves out a large section of people, which is growing rapidly due to age and environmental factors. It is also worth noting that 'disabled' is the only minority group that people may join over the course of their lives, and therefore, it is imperative to treat all people as temporarily able-bodied and promote the invention of an inclusive design that facilitates access for disabled people.

But such ambitions are often met with numerous hurdles. It is important to understand the nuances that accompany disability and those affected by it. Many people with disability refrain from disclosing their impediment, and students also do not request accommodation to help with the access to course material that is presented in an inaccessible format. The attitude of the instructor/faculty also influences the implementation of the practice of making virtual content accessible. Non-disabled students are viewed in the context of what they can do with technology, while their disabled counterparts are viewed in the context of what they cannot do with technology. Those who can have access to online technology then face difficulties when it comes to accessing websites and LMS, audio and video content, PowerPoint presentations and

course material in inaccessible PDF formats. Many e-Learning portals are not designed with the idea of universal accessibility. Students who do request for accommodation with their learning material note that it required a process of design and redesign, which came with its additional costs. It would be in the best interest of e-Learning portals to introduced universally acceptable designs at the outset to avoid costs caused by a need to engage in a digital retrofit. The learning and teaching material should also be made user friendly for any instructor/faculty with any form of disability.

It is imperative to ensure that the learning material provided by such portals are accessible and designed to accommodate to the differently able masses. These alterations are not very onerous to make, what with the increasing advancement that the world of Modern technology introduces. Electronic texts should be translated into Braille and audio texts should be transcribed. The timings for virtual sessions should be made flexible and not fixed, and if that isn't feasible, the sessions should be recorded for future access. Texts that are made available in audio form should allow for alterations in the settings to suit the needs of the disabled and subtitles should be used to read the content of a video presentation when the sound isn't appropriate.

P.T Jaegar aptly notes the need for universally accessible learning material in his book Disability and the Internet (2012) when he says “For persons with disabilities, unless technological design and implementation meaningfully focus on inclusion, the Internet may become a new means of increased marginalization in society.” The quote itself poses a question that may require an answer soon: For a country that hopes to digitize each and every single sphere of our lives, what does the term 'accessible' mean? And when will everyone be able to enjoy the privilege that the word offers?