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COVID-19, accessibility, and libraries
A call to action

As the COVID-19 pandemic manifested, institutions of higher education moved their teaching online, libraries closed, and there was a rapid shift in libraries to more fully support digital learning environments as much as possible.

During this pandemic, how are college and university libraries supporting their most vulnerable patrons? Times of crisis are exactly when we should be thinking about diversity, equity, and inclusion. Many academic institutions and libraries have recognized that students need wireless hotspots and laptops if they are in situations with limited access to technology, but have we thoroughly considered the needs of patrons with disabilities?

The answer is, in my opinion, that libraries largely didn't in the early days of the pandemic. An examination of the COVID-19 announcements and policies of the 125 Association of Research Library (ARL) members on April 6 and 7, 2020, revealed that only a literal handful (five) of libraries mentioned topics related to disability or accessibility anywhere on their pandemic announcement pages.

These five announcements largely centered on adaptive/assistive technology, such as in the case of Penn State University who point out that "Adaptive Technologies staff are available for assistance and services by appointment."[1] The question then becomes, why aren't libraries highlighting assistive technology and the access that students have to it?

The answer to that question is most likely because, as a profession, we don't always prioritize accessibility to the extent that we should. The model that most libraries follow is often a passive one. For example, if a patron needs assistance because of a disability, we expect the patron to ask for assistance. This is counter to the spirit of the Americans with Disabilities Act, which is to make our spaces and services accessible to all people so that they are empowered to navigate our spaces and services in the ways that work best for them.

As a profession, we don't always think of assistive technology or universal design principles as being useful for all people from cradle to grave, even though if we proactively made our spaces and services more accessible, they would get more use. Common assistive technologies are often overlooked in our daily lives. For example, glasses and contacts are so ubiquitous that we don't think of them as being assistive technology, even though they are.

If you've ever listened to an audiobook, you are using assistive technology. Audio-

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books had their start as an adaptive technology for World War I soldiers who had lost their sight in Great Britain.[2] Screenreaders that are built into every Microsoft and Mac operating system can easily read Microsoft Word documents. If PDFs are formatted correctly, they can also be read aloud. Kenning Arlitsch gives excellent examples of how and why our documents and websites should be, and could be, accessible.[3]

Why does this matter? Think about the students who are taking courses remotely via online learning. Many of them are trying to do their full course load along with household chores, interacting with whoever they are living with, including perhaps taking care of and homeschooling children. For the student who has dish duty, is cutting the grass, commuting to an essential job, or even going out for a morning run, having a PDF of homework being read to them on their phone or by a laptop can help them keep up with and complete their learning. But most people don't even know that this incredibly common technology is available to them. This need is compounded for patrons for whom assistive technologies are a necessity, not merely a convenience.

Now is the time when libraries need to be reaching out to our communities and educating them about the availability and variety of uses of such technologies. Now is when we need to continue getting creative with how we market our e-resources and how we assist our patrons. Further, are we aware of how accessible those e-resources are? The Big Ten Academic Alliance E-Resources Accessibility Task Force has been testing e-resources for years and the test reports are freely available on their website.[4] As we've all moved online to various conferencing platforms, are we using them to the fullest capability? Are we captioning our videos? Are we including sign language interpretation or live captioning during large scale sessions? Are we providing tips and tricks on how to use assistive technology to engage learners in multiple ways in their new realities? Are we investigating what books are available as audiobooks or

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how we can help students access textbooks across multiple formats?

While the analysis of ARL Libraries from the early days of the pandemic shows that we were perhaps not engaging our patrons as fully as we could be in terms of accessibility, COVID-19 is still a major factor as we move into the fall term regardless of whether instruction is happening online, in person, or as a hybrid of the two. Until there is a viable and effective vaccine, there will be a need for creative thinking and outreach to support learning of all types to communities with a variety of different needs. We have a real opportunity to not only support our patrons in learning and research but to actively engage our communities in ways that they never thought we could.

Notes

1. "Remote resources for Penn State Library users," Penn State Library, last modified March 20, 2020, https://libraries.psu.edu/remote-resources-penn-state-library-users.

2. Matthew Rubery, "From Shell Shock to Shellac: The Great War, Blindness, and Britain's Talking Book Library," *Twentieth Century British History,* 26, no.1 (March 2015): 3.

3. Kenning Arlistch, "My User is a Machine: Making Information Accessible to Disabled Users by Structuring for Machine Intermediaries," *Journal of Library Administration* 58 (2018): 728-738.

4. Big Ten Academic Alliance E-Resource Accessibility, "Library E-resource Accessibility-Testing," last modified June 10, 2020, https://www.btaa.org/library/accessibility/library-e-resource-accessibility--testing.