



An alternative approach

Accessibility is about access to all, not just 'disabled' people.

Rosie Sherry, from DrivenQA, reports on the changing requirements of accessible learning.

Amendments to the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) announced that businesses operating websites would be subject to the same or equivalent accessibility requirements as physical premises. Organisations like W3C reacted by introducing guidelines and advice to validate online accessibility. At first, the community seemed to either panic or take the path of least resistance. Whichever route they chose, the result was often the same: a rag bag of quick and easy fixes introduced simply to comply with legislation.

The result has meant one group has been significantly overlooked: the user. The same approach to accessibility in e-learning could be a threat to the integrity of training strategy. If the user is ignored, then training will be less effective.

The reality of accessibility is that the human population is so diverse that it is physically impossible to make something, be it a website or a chair, completely accessible to everyone. The point is that to ensure that everyone can sit down, you might need to make some extra chairs accordingly.

The same applies to training software and content. If you want everyone to learn the same information, you'll have to deliver it differently for different people. It's a simple question of context.

Graham Sherry of learning technology consultancy, Driven Systems, observed: "Across the entire software and online community, the focus has been so fixed on

standards compliance that we are guilty of too easily forgetting about the diversity of the needs of end users. The good news is that more organisations see their training as a whole business issue, so the impact of their training on the end user is more important than paying lip-service to standards compliance."

The requirements enforced by the law and W3C guidelines should not be ignored but, in practical terms, accessibility issues can be a matter of commonsense. You may, for example, have a blended learning course with a Flash based application that a user finds difficult or impossible to use. Standard tests would deem this as inaccessible. However, it is often acceptable

Key points

- Amendments to the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) announced that businesses operating websites would be subject to the same or equivalent accessibility requirements as physical premises.
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to leave these files as being inaccessible. What is not acceptable is to have no reasonable adjustment to the learners. A popular option – depending on the context – would be to also produce a non-Flash based course or provide face-to-face tuition.

Another example is the issue of compatibility which, often, does not fall under the remit of accessibility. In the simplest terms, if a website works in Internet Explorer (IE) but not FireFox (with a target audience of both), this means that it is inaccessible to users – disabled or not. Accessibility is about access to all, not just ‘disabled’ people. These issues are not covered when reviewing accessibility.

The community is waking up to the fact that changes are needed. WCAG 2.0, W3C’s accessibility guidelines, have been years in the making and the draft guidelines were received with interest. Unlike WCAG 1.0, they allow multiple content technologies (described in the draft as BASELINES) to be treated separately and there is no requirement that each be accessible.

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Learning professionals need to be given the opportunity to decide how to implement e-learning, be innovative and create solutions without the fear of being deemed ‘inaccessible’. While WCAG 2.0 tries to do this, this one approach is not enough. We still need ways to place the learner at the focus. We need technologies that acknowledge that, sometimes, the best way to meet a real need or context is by providing alternatives that match the context.

Learners should be the focus. This can only happen once we acknowledge that placing all of our efforts at the point of authoring and design can never quite fill the bill – unless we have some way to mediate with the learner and ask, ‘does this meet the real need in context?’.

There are existing standards as well as standards being developed. IMS Global has the IMS Learner Information Package Accessibility for LIP specification (known as ACCLIP). This standard allows users to have their functional accessibility requirements recorded in a standard way so that delivery software and systems can customise provision, based on the learner’s preferences.



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(see <http://www.imsglobal.org/accessibility/>). If this standard is implemented, it not only has the potential to benefit learning environments but could be extended to general web environments. IMS ACCLIP alleviates this difficulty by providing a common format and content for the expression of personal needs and preferences for accessibility. Imagine, when you subscribe to a new Yahoo, or Google or Flickr, that you will no longer need to set up your preferences because your ACCLIP data could be used for this.

There is research out there and much research in progress. What is needed is effective research, implementation, support and testing. The problem is that people want solutions now and, while there are some solutions out there, they should not be seen as ‘complete solutions’.

While there have been good intentions, the approach of evaluating accessibility has had significant flaws. The good news is that we are learning from everyone’s mistakes

where the internet is allowing for greater communication and understanding of the hurdles being encountered.

Where e-learning accessibility and the growing impatience of the community is concerned, it is essential that the community focuses on user needs rather than on accessibility as a sole issue.

With advancements in technology, it is now possible to learn in ways that were previously not possible. Rather than concentrating on the negatives, such as ‘Flash is not accessible’, consider what these technologies can achieve. We now have videos, audio files, interactive animations, and textual content at our finger tips. Would we advance if we got stuck on saying we cannot use videos because they are not fully accessible?

By Rosie Sherry, with thanks to Andy Heath, Brian Kelly and David Sloan for their advice and contribution.

About DrivenQA

DrivenQA is a quality assurance and software testing consultancy specialising in the internet and e-learning. Based in Brighton, DrivenQA strives to improve the quality of applications and processes.

DrivenQA was established to help fill the gap of assuring and improving quality across software applications. While processes are important, it believes that success is mostly down to the people involved in projects – and this is the focus of DrivenQA: applying experience and knowledge, not processes and standards.

The overall goal is to help deliver visibly better software through quality assuring and testing for areas such as business processes, usability, accessibility, compatibility and functionality – delivered in a way that works for everyone involved.

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