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What are Library Graduate Students Learning about Disability and Accessibility? A Syllabus Analysis

by JJ Pionke

Abstract

A study was conducted that examined readily available syllabi from library and information sciences graduate programs to discover, through an analysis of the structure and topics of their syllabi, what their instructors taught library graduate students about accessibility and disability. Of the 149 courses identified, 77 syllabi were available to examine. Findings include a lack of consistency and accuracy across syllabi structure, as well as components such as poor citations, emphasis on digital accessibility above all other types, and a lack of assessment of learning about the topics of accessibility and disability. This syllabi analysis indicates that while accessibility and disability are being taught in library and information science programs, their treatment is relatively spotty in terms of diversity of content, with a generally narrow focus on digital objects and web materials as well as generally poor syllabus design which sends the message that accessibility and disability issues are not necessarily important.

Keywords

Syllabi, disability, accessibility, library and information science education, content analysis

Biography

JJ Pionke is the Applied Health Sciences Librarian at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. His research revolves around the study of disability and accessibility in libraries for both patrons and library employees.

Introduction

Unfortunately, when people talk about diversity, they far too often mean only Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) and the track record of diversity in library education and in librarianship, even just focusing on BIPOC, is abysmal and relatively unchanging. Poole et al. (2021) discussed extensively the state of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) education in library and information science (LIS) education and their findings indicate that there has been very little change between 1971 and 2018. However, even Poole et al. focus only on BIPOC and none of the other minority groups that fall under the DEI umbrella. These groups would include any minority population such as people with disabilities, veterans, religions other than Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, etc. In recent years, there has been a

growing interest in aspects of DEI outside of the traditional focus on BIPOC. These DEI interests include disability and accessibility within librarianship and within LIS education.

In 2018, the author attempted to survey American Library Association (ALA)-accredited graduate LIS programs in the United States about how they taught disability and accessibility. This survey was part of a larger arc of surveys that sought to examine what LIS graduate students were learning in LIS graduate schools about disability and accessibility (Pionke, 2020b); what LIS graduate schools thought they were teaching LIS graduate students about disability and accessibility; and what current library employees thought they knew about disability and accessibility (Pionke, 2020c). The LIS graduate student and current employee surveys were successful. Unfortunately, the survey response from the LIS graduate programs was negligible. To overcome this problem with the research project, the author examined other ways in which to gather the data to understand how LIS schools are teaching disability and accessibility to their graduate students. Although survey data would have been an acceptable and more efficient way to understand how LIS programs teach about disability and accessibility, a much richer opportunity evolved by engaging in a thematic analysis of syllabi structure on the topic.

Literature Review

The earliest survey of LIS education programs about what they taught graduate students in regard to accessibility and disability was done by Merrilyn Gibson in her work, "Preparing Librarians to Serve Handicapped Individuals," which was published in 1977. Gibson used a survey to query LIS programs about what, if anything, their graduate students were being taught about assisting patrons with disabilities. Although very few ALA-accredited schools responded to Gibson's survey, her limited findings reported that most schools did not offer any kind of training on working with people with disabilities (p. 124).

It was not until 2004 that there was any follow up to Gibson's work. Linda Walling's (2004) research used a survey modeled on Gibson's survey. Her results showed that far more schools included some kind of course material about disability at the time of her study (p. 144). In 2005, Deborah Carlos wrote a master's thesis entitled *Instruction in Disability Services and Adaptive Technology in Schools of Library and Information Science: A Survey of the Curriculum*. Her research involved reviewing selected course descriptions, syllabi, and required readings from nine ALA-accredited schools of library and information science to examine how much and what types of information were being taught about disability and accessibility. She found that LIS programs were not teaching much at all about accessibility and disability.

While thematic analyses of course syllabi that revolve around disability and accessibility are relatively few, such analyses have been conducted in the LIS literature around other topics such as digital preservation (Yoon et al., 2021), diversity and cultural competence (Cooke & Jacobs, 2018), and information organization and retrieval (Dobreski et al., 2022), for example. However, no syllabi analysis articles have specifically examined the structure of the syllabus itself and what that structure might be saying to students. Here, structure refers to citations, layout, assignments, required statements such as where to go for disability accommodations, course calendars, and so forth.

Methods

In spring 2020, the course catalogs of all ALA-accredited library programs in the United States were examined to determine what courses might have disability or accessibility content. Course descriptions were examined for words pertaining to accessibility and disability including such terms as web accessibility, disability, universal design, accessibility, digital accessibility, patrons with disabilities, disabled, and so forth. Canadian library programs were excluded because Canada is governed by different disability and accessibility laws. Once a listing was created, course schedules between 2017 and 2020 were perused to discover whether those courses had been taught within the last three years. If the courses had been taught, searches of the library school website and a general Google search were performed to look for course syllabi. If this effort failed, the professor of record was contacted with a request for the course syllabus. Once the course syllabi were collected, an analysis was conducted of their contents and structure.

Results

Forty-nine institutions were selected from the available list based on availability of information on their websites. Courses were selected based on the probability of their having content relating to disability or accessibility, judged by their containing at least one of the keywords used when searching for courses (e.g., disability, accessibility, disabled, web accessibility, etc.). Of the 145 courses across the 49 institutions identified as potentially having disability or accessibility content, only 77 syllabi were examined due to availability of the syllabi. If there were multiple sections of a course, only the most recent syllabus was selected as a representation of that course. Courses incorporated a wide range of topics including: digital content, usability, web/internet, coding, etc. (22); instruction and information literacy (16); specific populations such as children, elders, etc. (10); school library media (8); information services and reference (6); library-specific such as public or digital etc. (5); administration (3); disability- and/or accessibility-specific course for the entirety of the course (3); information policy (2); outreach (1); and literature about diversity/disability/accessibility(1).

Syllabi were also examined for the point in the semester when disability and/or accessibility content was presented during the course. When content is presented can have a profound effect on students. For instance, if content is presented near the beginning of the semester, students are more likely to keep that content in mind throughout the rest of the semester, thereby giving them a chance to continue exploring that content either on their own or through class assignments for which they can pick the topic. Content that has not built on the early weeks but is presented at the end of the semester may be viewed as unimportant or add-on content to fill space.

Presuming a sixteen-week semester, a common length of time for courses, disability or accessibility content appeared throughout the semester: the beginning of the course (weeks 1-5) included 22 lessons on disability and accessibility; the middle of the semester (weeks 6-10) had 21 lessons on disability and accessibility; and the end of the semester (weeks 11-16) had 24 lessons about disability and accessibility. There were also instances where it was unclear or unknown when the content was taught because either there was no course calendar or the course calendar was not specific enough (20 courses). The roughly even distribution of disability and accessibility content over the course of a semester indicates that the topic of disability and accessibility has a varying degree of prominence. As noted above, generally speaking, content at the end of the semester is not seen as foundational to the extent of content discussed at the beginning of the semester, since the latter is usually what the rest of the course builds on throughout the semester. An additional 16 courses incorporated disability and accessibility throughout the entire semester because they emphasized usability, universal design, or universal design for learning. Of those 16 courses, three emphasized disability throughout the entire course.

An examination of the learning materials listed across all syllabi examined revealed 59 internet links, 57 books and book chapters, 46 journal articles, 10 conference papers/posters/proceedings, 3 videos, and 25 items that could not be identified because of a lack of adequate citation information. It was generally unclear most of the time whether items were available in hard copy or electronic copy and where these materials were located such as in an online course management shell or if the students were expected to find the information on their own. The lack of clarity regarding formats and location of materials can lead to confusion for students and is certainly not a best practice. The roughly equal distribution between the most typical formats of materials that were identifiable (internet links, books and book chapters, and journal articles) is a good indication that instructors actively sought out variety in terms of learning materials which is especially important as topics covered by each type of material vary considerably: Internet links are usually about cutting-edge topics or about industry standards; books and book chapters have a longer tail of information and are often more generalized and theoretical; and journal articles usually focus on specific topics that are more “in the moment.” Of the 200 citations of course materials across all syllabi, only 152 citations had dates

associated with them. Of those 152 citations, 141 fell between 2009 and 2019, with only 11 falling outside of that date range, making the information used in the courses relatively up to date. The year 2018 had the most citations at 26. Timeliness of materials is important, especially for content around disability and accessibility because there are constant improvements to accessibility, especially web and digital accessibilities, as well continually evolving understanding of the needs of people with disabilities in libraries.

Assignments listed in the syllabi were examined to determine which centered on disability and/or accessibility: Sixty-seven listed no assignments about disability/accessibility, seven syllabi listed either one or more assignments about disability/accessibility, and three were unclear about whether they included disability and accessibility. While syllabi will generally list at least the assignment name and its due date, it is typical for there to be additional handouts about assignments in terms of how they should be done, grading criteria, etc. This analysis examined presence only—whether or not there was an assignment listed that could be related to disability or accessibility in some way. An analysis of the assignments themselves is outside the purview of this article.

Discussion

Poor Citation Structure

A disappointing trend throughout many of the syllabi was the lack of proper citation in any format. For instance, there were several “citations” that provided only a weblink with no additional information. This lack of proper citation clearly represents a barrier to learning and sets a poor example for LIS graduate students regarding attention to detail and accessible content. Without proper citations, all students (those with and without disabilities) will struggle with where to find reading assignments because the citations are either missing information or are inconsistent with citation standards. In some syllabi, there was a noticeable lack of citation context which also represents a barrier to understanding and is an accessibility concern. In a syllabus from the University of North Carolina at Chapel-Hill, there is a listing of links for each week with no indication of what one should do when they have gone to said links (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. *Extract from University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill syllabus example*

Jan 9
Introduction, HTML Basics

- Slides
- **Examples**
- **A1, due Jan 16**
 - [MDN: Learn Web Development](#)
 - [W3C: Front-End Web Developer](#)
 - [LinkedIn Learning: Web Development](#)
 - [w3schools: HTML Tutorial](#)
 - [MDN: HTML](#)
 - [Shay Howe: Learn to Code HTML and CSS](#)

For a student with reading disabilities or cognitive disabilities, this kind of list makes little sense because there is no indication of what the student should be doing with each of these links. The instructor is making an assumption that the student will know or remember what to do with this material, which is particularly difficult when a student has issues retaining information or needs to access information in an alternative format such as print or audio or through an alternative method such as a screen reader. Though context could have been provided in class or in a separate handout, best practice would generally indicate that context should accompany the link itself: What should the learner do with the link? Read the entire webpage? Read the entire website? Browse the webpage or website? etc. This weakness is ironic considering that the course is a web development course that has an entire week dedicated to accessibility.

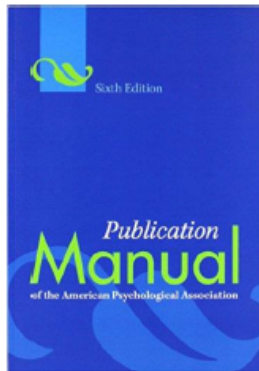
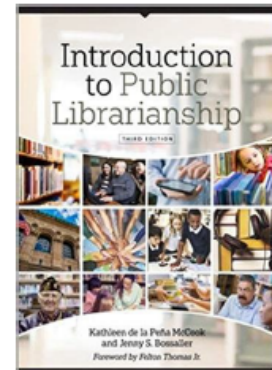
Not all syllabi had problematic citations. Though the citations might not be perfect, there were syllabi that did make an effort to have proper citations. In Figure 2, we can see this is the case for a syllabus from the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa.

Figure 2. *Extract from University of Hawai'i at Mānoa syllabus example*

TEXTS & MATERIALS

LIS 683 COURSE TEXT.

- de la Peña McCook, K., & Bossaller, J. S. (2018). *Introduction to Public Librarianship, Third Edition*. Chicago: Neal-Schuman.
- ISBN-13: 978-0-8389-1506-6 | \$72.00 USD (retail list price) | 410 pgs. | paperback
- Reading assignments are concorded for print edition, only. Readings are *not* synchronized to electronic format.
- Text should be readily available at UHM Bookstore in Campus Center.
- Also available via *alastore.ala.org* and *Amazon Prime*.



LIS 683 CITATION/WRITING STYLE = APA.

- Professional attention to detail requires producing work that respects language conventions, even if they are not our own. In this vein, we are using APA style for citation and writing conventions for this course. Unless otherwise specified, all course assignments should follow APA standards for spelling, grammar, and for concise, unbiased writing conventions. Additionally, all assignments should be written expressing correct diacritics for all native/indigenous languages (Hawaiian, Spanish, etc.).
- The text is:
 - American Psychological Association. (2009). *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association, 6th edition*. Washington, DC: APA.
 - ISBN-13: 978-1433805615 | \$29.95 USD (retail list price) | Paperback
- Text should be readily available at UHM Bookstore in Campus Center.
- Text is also available via *Amazon priority shipping*.
- Additionally, the course-approved online resource for APA style is located at: <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/560/01/>

What makes this example particularly excellent is that not only is there a proper citation and additional information such as ISBN and listed price, the instructor is clear as to what format is preferred, there is a picture of the book that will definitely help visual learners find it, and the instructor also discusses where to find the book.

Disability Accommodation Statements

Perhaps even more concerning is the state of accommodation statements in the syllabi. For the purposes of this discussion, an examination of the disability accommodation process itself, as well as the term “accommodation” as a source of ableism, are set aside. Instead, the focus of this section is on the actual content of the syllabi. Disability accommodation statements generally instruct the student what to do if they have a disability and need an accommodation in the course. Of the 77 syllabi examined, only 54 had some kind of disability accommodation statement. It was clear that some institutions had boilerplate statements that were used across syllabi and that the boilerplate was kept up to date. For example, all

five of the disability accommodation statements made by Emporia State University syllabi were identical. It was also clear when disability accommodation statements changed but were not updated, as in the case of the Pratt Institute which had two different disability accommodation statements that were used multiple times. However, the most deeply concerning part of some of the disability accommodation statements was the ableism present in them.

In a syllabus from Indiana University, the disability accommodation statement reads: “Please contact us if you have special needs that is due to a disability so that we can arrange any accommodations that you may need. This conversation needs to take place in the first week of class.” There are multiple ableism issues surrounding this statement: 1. The term “special needs” is outdated and considered offensive in the disability community. 2. The instructor(s) are not qualified to determine what disability accommodations, if any, a student does or does not need. This is the purview of the disability services office on campus. 3. There is no mention of disability services or how to contact them. 4. While the instructor(s) might like for the conversation to happen in the first week of class, there are many reasons why that might not occur, including but not limited to, a flare-up of the disability that precludes attendance in class during the first week and/or no diagnosis or registration with disability services until after the first week of class. Any of these four issues taken alone signals that disability accommodations, accessibility, and disability are not necessarily welcome in this course. Taken together, however, there is a clear message being sent that to have a disability in this class is not welcome or acceptable.

On the other hand, a good disability accommodation statement, like the one from the University of Texas at Austin, can be informative and reassuring in its blandness. “The University of Texas at Austin provides, upon request, appropriate academic accommodations for qualified students with disabilities. For more information, [contact information].” This statement is short and to the point. There are no value judgements or ableist language. The statement is informative and points the reader where to go for more information and assistance. Far too often, when students with disabilities need accommodations, the process of getting assistance, especially from the instructor, can be overwhelming and anxiety-producing so having an accommodation statement that is clear, concise, and informative is reassuring.

Assessment

While the bulk of the syllabi examined (67) had no assignment that focused on accessibility or disability topics, seven syllabi did have such assignments. Some included multiple assignments in the same course, depending on course topic. In courses covering disability and accessibility topics, the lack of corresponding class assignments that require students to use what they learned means that they are

less likely to retain the information, since practicing the application of theory in a safe environment is key to creating more confident working professionals. It will also be difficult for instructors to assess whether students have mastered the materials being taught if there are no assignments to determine what students have been learning. As Angelo and Cross point out in their book, *Classroom Assessment Techniques: A Handbook for College Teachers*, “Too often, there are gaps, sometimes considerable ones, between what was taught and what has been learned” (1993, p. 3). By not assigning course work so that course instructors can assess what the students have learned, course instructors are signaling to students that these topics are not important.

Of the courses with assignments regarding accessibility, all of them engaged in digital accessibility evaluation. The assignments usually required students to evaluate a website or, more rarely, a digital object such as a web form. Some courses gave students options as to what accessibility topics they could spotlight in their assignments. For instance, a course at Indiana University has a “focus project” as part of the assignments. The syllabi lists several options, some of which include doing a web accessibility assessment, creating a Universal Design for Learning lesson plan, or doing a physical accessibility assessment. Of the two full-semester disability/accessibility courses that have assignments listed, both include papers, projects, and presentations with a range of topics from web accessibility to physical accessibility.

The third full-semester class, which has its assessments counted as unclear as they were not explicitly discussed in the syllabus, lists a service project with multiple components like the assessments in the other two full-semester courses. However, the syllabus does not include additional information on how the service project as a whole is structured. There may be additional documentation from the instructor available to students at a later date in the course, but in the syllabus, there is a definite lack of information.

Lack of clarity surrounding assignments is a major accessibility issue and absolutely leads to confusion around what and how students should be doing with assignments. This is a major issue for any student with cognitive disabilities, i.e. having difficulty understanding what the assignment is and what is expected, as well as students who have learning disabilities such as attention deficit disorder and potentially struggle with time management, executive function, focus, and frustration, among other symptoms. While there is some diversity in types of assessments and topics of assessments, it is clear that there is an emphasis on digital accessibility which messages to students that other types of accessibility are not as important. More discussion of digital accessibility is examined in the next section.

Focus on Digital

The majority of the courses examined focused on digital accessibility in some way. In the courses that were not focused on disability/accessibility throughout the entire term, there were 105 lessons. The topics of these lessons ranged from web/digital accessibility (30 lessons) to applying universal design or accessible design often in a digital context (30 lessons). Course content that focused on other aspects of disability and accessibility was rarer. Some of these topics include Universal Design for Learning (24 lessons), specific disabilities such as colorblindness and visual disabilities (12 lessons), and diverse patrons broadly defined (9 lessons).

Based on a review of the syllabi included in this study, discussion of disability theory, disability culture, and disability life is largely absent with these topics being barely covered in less than a handful of courses. While a focus on digital accessibility is important, in part because digital library resources tend to be inaccessible and represent a considerable barrier for patrons and library employees alike, it is only a small part of the services that libraries provide (or should provide) to patrons with disabilities. Public libraries tend to have a better track record of providing to patrons with disabilities services such as sensory storytimes (Cottrell, 2016), accessible maker events (Brady et al., 2014), and other activities that focus on disabilities and accessibility. Academic libraries are starting to become more aware that they need to provide services and spaces for people with disabilities. These include services such as multiuse meditation rooms (Pionke, 2020a), therapy dogs for distress/mental health events (Jalongo & McDevitt, 2015), and understanding trauma and its impacts on students (Conley et al., 2019). Institutions often decide that accessibility in general is expensive and difficult to implement. Most institutions also fail to consider the histories, theories, and cultures of disability, all of which is reflected in the lack of focus on these topics in the syllabi. The lack of discussion around these topics signals to LIS students that these topics are not important or, in the worst-case scenario, that these topics just don't exist.

Conclusion

Through an analysis of syllabi and topic structure, this study examined what and how LIS programs are teaching their students in regard to accessibility and disability. The findings show that there is plenty of work to be done to improve the content of these courses. Most concerning was the overall lack of concise, clear, and professional presentation within the syllabi themselves. If LIS syllabi are careless about how they present information, it sends a message to students, especially those with disabilities, that these topics are not important. There is room for growth within LIS programs in this area. LIS programs should be more rigorous in syllabus structure and creation, including using proper citations and standardized disability accommodation language that is not ableist. LIS instructors should also make sure

that their materials, which include handouts, PowerPoints, and course management shells, are accessible. Growth within LIS programs should also include the development of courses that go beyond digital/web accessibility to examine topics such as physical access to library spaces, programming options, and the histories, theories, and cultures of disability. Even if creating semester-long curricula around these topics is not possible, bringing in, via Zoom, professional development speakers to address disability and accessibility topics would be invaluable for both LIS students and instructors. All types of libraries and information institutions would benefit from having future librarians learning about these topics. Libraries would be more welcoming to everyone if they were truly accessible and if library workers better understood their patrons with disabilities.

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