

A Periodicals Librarian's Role in Technical Services : Equalizing Access to Library Databases for the Disabled

SLIDE 1

By Barbara M. Pope, MALS

bpope@pittstate.edu, 620-235-4884

Reference/Periodicals Librarian and Professor

Pittsburg State University, Pittsburg, KS

ALA Core Role of the Professional Librarian in Technical Services Interest Group

CORE Interest Group Week 2023, March 9, 2023

Hello. Welcome to my presentation about equalizing access to library databases for the disabled. I welcome questions and comments, because I want to know what librarians at other institutions are doing to support library databases accessibility. I originally became a librarian because I love helping people and I love the hunt for information. I became more aware of the need for accessibility in academic libraries, so I became even more determined to make library databases accessibility to everyone.

SLIDE 2

Our Problem

At PSU and probably many other colleges and universities, the accommodations office contacts the teaching faculty for classes student is attending so that appropriate accommodations can be made. Student Disability Services at PSU also works to obtain accessible textbooks or other learning materials. However, as the author Whitver observes, librarians are out of that loop. This impacts library instruction, service at the reference desk, and helping students who are off campus trying to access our databases. Unless a student lets us know of a need for an accessible resource, we don't know of their unique needs. I have been working at PSU for over 17 years and rarely interacted with students that I knew were disabled, so it was hard to know how I could help them if I did not know of what their needs were. Whitver notes with regard to accessibility of library instruction, "librarians ... deal with disabled students ... case-by-case basis, [but] ... should reconceptualize how the learning environment functions" by adopting UDL. While her article deals with library instruction, I think the same holds true for library databases access. So, I decided to "reconceptualize the learning environment" with regard to database accessibility

SLIDE 3

Impetus for the Project

In 2021, I began an online course on ADA & Web Accessibility offered through the university's Center for Teaching, Learning and Technology and completed it in early 2022. I recognized the difficulties that disabled students face, including accessing library services. How could I help?

The latest U.S. Department of Education data I could find says that the number of disabled college students increased from 6% in 1999 to 19.4% by 2016. However, these figures are inaccurate, as some students may not disclose and others may not know they have one. I recognized that accessibility was not just something to be aware of or to only provide accessible resources when told about a specific need. Equal access to library resources is vital to successful learning of all students and providing equal access to the disabled is law. I feel passionate about doing this but it is a work in progress.

SLIDE 4

Library Databases Accessibility

All academic libraries provide access to databases to support the university's discovery and scholarship needs, but they are not equally accessible. I wanted to find a way to make them more accessible and visible, but I was not sure how - I can't change what vendors do. So, my first step was to make a list of all of our databases. I searched the databases and accessed many full text articles in html full text and PDF formats. I also looked for accessibility characteristics like keyboard navigation, the ability to resize text, and the ability to listen to an audio recording of the article. I checked out the help menus to see what information on accessibility was available. Many vendors had a page simply labeled "accessibility" which typically contained information on what accessibility efforts they had made. It also listed vendor contact information just in case there is an accessibility problem. I compiled this information into a LibGuide for everyone to view. Later, I met with Student Disability Services. I wanted to know more about what resources, formats, and accommodations are needed. Also, I was hoping to improve library services to help disabled students and the faculty to help better align library services with Student Disability Services and campus resources.

SLIDE 5

[Resources to Support Effective Learning LibGuide](#)

As I noted in the last slide, I created a LibGuide with all of the information I found. I will show it to you now. Each tab has this box labeled "Do you need assistance?" I wanted to make sure that disabled students, faculty, and staff knew where to ask for help if they need it. I am the administrator for LibGuides in my library. I started migrating our LibGuides to side tab navigation recently, so I created this one, I created it as side tab navigation. I read a journal article that said that Side tab navigation menus have become the standard on the web. I also attended a LibGuides webinar and the presenter said that side tab navigation is more accessible than the default tab navigation at the top. I organized the LibGuide by method of learning or acquisition of the information in the resource, including audio, transcripts/captions, and other formats. I included notes indicating what each resource has in document formats, keyboard navigation, ability to resize text, or listen to an audio recording. I made the labels on tabs easy to understand. This complies with Web Content Accessibility Guidelines section 3. I also have links to screen reader software. I included a link to a file converter app and Adobe Digital Editions. I will talk more about those later. I put information about our public use scanners, which can scan a print document and output it as rich text, mp3, jpeg, and PDF. The Resources in Audio Format tab contains links to various databases that have audio recording of a journal article or ebooks as options with at least some of the documents in the database. Not all vendors or publishers are consistent across their databases with this. The Resources with transcripts and captions tab contains links primarily to streaming video sources we have from Alexander Street Press, Proquest, and some open access resources. The Other accessible formats tab contains links to databases with articles in HTML full text, plain text, EPUB, and PDF. The Link to services on and off campus tab contains links to various library services, such as reference services, interlibrary loan, library instruction, and reserving a space. There is also a link to Kansas Talking Books, which provides books and other materials in alternative formats to disabled people within the state. I copied the information about our scanners here. There are also links to Student Success, which is located in the library, and offers a variety of services, including Student Disability Services, tutoring, and orientation, for example. The Writing Center is also in the library is a valuable resource to all PSU students. The last box includes links to services within the Pittsburg community. The Vendor/Publisher accessibility Statements tab includes links to Vendor/Publisher accessibility statements that I found when I did my searching of the resources and tell what kind of accessibility efforts the publisher or vendor has made. They also often contain contact information in the event there is problem. The tabs for Ebooks and Journals about accessibility and disability I really added for the benefit of teaching faculty and staff who may be interested in doing research or finding information to support their teaching of disabled students. The last tab is titled How to Improve the Accessibility of Documents and Learning Materials and includes links to various resources that can guide you in improving the accessibility of documents and learning materials, including one from WCAG or Web Content Accessibility Guidelines.

SLIDE 6

Outcomes

My research revealed that our databases are more accessible than I thought, but it is not good enough. I feel like there is a lot more work to do. Some file formats, like PDF, are not always accessible, I decided to see if there is a way to turn that around at the point of need. I knew that if I had a patron who has a file that is not accessible for their needs and we don't have access to it elsewhere, I want to have the ability to change the format to an accessible format. I did some searching and found a file converter called AllFileConverter that can convert a PDF, for example, into other file types like plain full text, HTML full text, or EPUB. However, it causes pop ups, so I am trying to find an alternative. One thing to be aware of with EPUB documents is that the person accessing them needs to have Adobe Digital Editions. One unexpected thing that I learned is that the accessibility feature and formats that some vendors have are inconsistent across the database and across various databases of a vendor. For example, full text EBSCO article sometimes only have PDF as an option, but others have html full text or audio recording as options. That inconsistency bothers me. Talking with Student Disability Services was a good idea and one that bore fruit. I listened to what they had to say about student needs and they provided me with insight about resources and file formats. I presented them the LibGuide. I revised it based on their input and provided them with LibGuide link that they can post anywhere. I also gave them my contact information in case they need to refer students or faculty. I Presented at PSU Faculty Professional Development Day in August 2022 about accessibility and showed them the LibGuide.

SLIDE 7

Future Plans

My plans for the future include continuing to evaluate our databases because they change from time to time. I will continue to look at document formats, accessibility features, and accessibility statements. I will also evaluate websites for publishers, because some of our content comes direct from publishers. I want to look closely at our databases and online journals in the sciences and see how they represent formulas and data for disabled. I know that there are browser extensions and programs that purport to be able to make this data accessible, but I want to see what would work for PSU. I also want to evaluate usage data of the Resources to Support Effective Learning LibGuide and our databases over a year or two to gauge if usage has increased, but I will put that task off for later. I think it is too early to come to any conclusions about whether these efforts have results in increased databases usage. I will maintain relationship with Student Disability Services in order to seek out their expertise on the needs of disabled students and teaching faculty teaching them. I will keep talking with and presenting to faculty about accessibility and how it can help all students. However, the real issue I want to deal with is to communicate with database vendors about the consistency, or lack thereof, of accessibility in their products. There is still more work to be done.

SLIDE 8

References

[Accessibility for LibGuides](#). [webinar recording] SpringShare.

Ouellette, (2011, Dec) "[Subject Guides in Academic Libraries: A User-Centred Study of Uses and Perceptions.](#)" Canadian Journal of Information and Library Science . 35(4). 436-451.

Pope, Barbara M. (2022, August 17) [Increasing the Accessibility of Library Resources & Services for Improved Discovery in the Classroom](#). PSU Professional Faculty Development Day, Pittsburg, KS.

[Resources to Support Effective Learning LibGuide](#). (2022) LibGuides, Pittsburg State University, Pittsburg, KS.

[Students With Disabilities. Fast Facts. National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education](#). 2015-2016.

National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education. (2000). [Postsecondary students with disabilities: enrollment, services, and persistence](#). (NCES 2000-092).

[Web Content Accessibility Guidelines \(WCAG\) 2.1](#). (2018, 5 June) World Wide Web Consortium.

Whitver, S.M. (2020) "[Accessible Library Instruction in Practice.](#)" portal: Libraries and the Academy. 20(2). pp. 381-398.