

Variety, apparently it's the spice of life

For all the folk out there in the blogosphere who also work in higher education, let me just say, we made it! It's Friday of week 1 and all that work over the summer months and the craziness of welcome week / freshers week has passed and we can now get back to what we do best, as educators.

For me, this has meant the slightly more frivolous items (like personal development and my blog posts) have had to take a back seat while I concentrated on the real nuts and bolts of getting everyone I work with ready for the new semester and implementing the constant change of learning technology. It didn't mean that I stopped thinking about my blog or the various posts I had intended to write, just that they were thoughts and not actions. But here's the thing, some thinking time is a good thing and because I had thinking time, my thoughts and plans have come together and actually instead of the handful of posts I had intended, those experiences over the summer have brought that together into this one post.

In response to task 5 & 6 from 23things.ed.ac.uk

Diversity

OK hands up, who read that header and sighed and rolled your eyes? It's ok, you are in a safe space, you can admit it here.

I know exactly where you are coming from. The word diversity sparks memories of those three-hour workshops your boss makes you go to, usually with a tutor who has been brought in from some external company to help the company on its mission to meet legal obligations. Right? Oh don't worry, I know... in fact... I used to be that very tutor. So you know, it's ok, I know where you are coming from.

Thing is, I could go into trainer spiel about compliance, triple-A, disability law, the equality act etc but I know you'd glaze over. So instead let me just talk about this summer and how my experiments with emojis and bitmojis fed into the classes I was running over the summer.

I found the specific topic of bitmojis quite difficult to write about, well actually I struggled to think about what I could write about. It just felt like yeah, yeah we all know this stuff, there's nothing new to say here and nothing we write will be without some controversy. It's a hard topic, you just can't put yourself into somebody else's shoes, because those shoes only fit one person. For example, reading about the dilemma caused by having emojis representing ethnic groups and if you should use the emoji which represents your ethnic group or not. That was actually quite a shock to me. I could understand why having an emoji you felt represented you, at last, would be a celebration and why you might decide you want to use it, but genuinely it hadn't occurred to me that using one that didn't represent your ethnic group might cause offence. I was also aware that I could go around and ask people what their experience was and everything one would have a different experience or view. So it wasn't a one size fits all experience. So I've done a lot of thinking about this, which I will admit took me on a bit meandering route. But it led me to an interesting thought... visibility.

In my role, I come across so many students and staff on a daily basis. I don't always know all of them, and I usually don't have a very personal relationship with most of them, but the idea of that celebration of finally having something to digitally represent you when you haven't for so long made me think back to when I was student age. For me, back in the 80s and 90s, I was desperate for any signs of other gay people. Any adult in my life, who had a proper job, was respected and who might possibly be gay, sent me into a frenzy of hope. OMG, maybe it's ok for me to think about being a teacher. Maybe I won't be excluded because I'm gay. etc etc

Now we may seem miles away from the topic of accessibility or emojis and especially where is the learning technology in this? Well, let me put it this way.

This summer, I stood at the front of a classroom 21 times. On almost all of those occasions I was leading a class of new staff, usually much younger than me and almost all of them were very new to education. When I stand in front of that class, I am a very visual representation of an older woman in a technology-driven role. I am a very visual and audible representation of a working-class woman in academia. I am a visual representation of a lesbian in academia and I am usually the first person they have been able to speak to and ask questions of who has the kind of disabilities that we ask them to be aware of when they are using technologies in the university.

This is where my reading of the emoji articles got me thinking. Is that enough? Is it enough that we all exist in all our gorgeous diversity? Because lets face it, the majority of interactions with me will not be face to face, so most people won't know what I look like, what my background is,

usually they won't even hear my accent and mostly they won't be aware that that interaction with me has probably been more draining for me than it has been for them. So can we add another level to this in our digital interactions? And should we?

I gave this a bit of thought and a wee bit of application over the summer and this is what I have done.

Most of my interactions with colleagues are over our email/communications system. So I have added my photo to this. It means when I am in an email conversation, my image pops up so they know who they are dealing with. It also adds my image when they search for me on our internal systems.



Different versions of me people will now see around the university

I've added an image to our VLE as well, in my profile, so now when I add content to courses, message students, put out announcements, bang, they can see my face smiling back at them. I think this one for me is particularly important as I want students, who are mostly young people to be able to see that there are opportunities for them in all sorts of fields and we don't all have to look a certain way, be a certain age or be a specific gender.

Now the biggest change, I have added a voice mail to my phone. Doesn't seem like a big deal huh? Well for me this is, I still, even as a proper grown-up (although that's debatable) I still worry about my accent. I have a strong Glasgow accent, quite noticeably working class and I have had comments.

However, if I was surrounded by people with a variety of accents, some of which were clearly accents I felt were relatable, maybe I'd feel different about my own.

Now that was a very roundabout and quite a wordy blog post to talk about the opportunity to be visible on our digital systems and why we should be. But I think it is very interesting how a thought on emojis has led me down a very interesting path about the importance of there being visual representation of difference and normalising the diversity in our lives in order to reduce some of the crippling societal bonds. Maybe this might just be a way to tackle things like imposter syndrome in academia. Understandings of each other and maybe, you never know, but maybe it might even have an impact on artificial intelligence, algorithms and things like facial recognition and the experiences of people who don't look like the software programmer.

Ok so maybe I am reaching here, but let me ask you, how many of you have a picture on your staff profile? I know of at least three people who have put pictures of their dogs as their staff profile picture. Maybe... it's time to be brave and get out there to the front line.

Be visible in all your diverse glory.

Some interesting reading

Brown, N. and Leigh, J. (2018), "Ableism in academia: where are the disabled and ill academics?", *Disability & Society*, Routledge, Vol. 33 No. 6, pp. 985–989.

Byrne, G. (2019), "Individual weakness to collective strength: (Re)creating the self as a 'working-class academic'", *Journal of Writing in Creative Practice*, Vol. 12 No. 1-2, pp. 131–150

Dar, S. and Salmon, U. (2019), "Inside the Ivory Tower: Narratives of Women of Colour Surviving and Thriving in British Academia edited by Deborah Gabriel and Shirley Ann Tate. London, UK: Trentham Books/I0E Press, 2017, 164 pp., £24.36, ISBN 10-185856848X, ISBN 13-978-185856848", *Gender, Work, and Organization*, academia.edu, Vol. 26 No. 1, pp. 64–67.

National Center for Institutional Diversity. (2018), "The Power of Academic Role Models 'Like Me'", *Medium*, Spark: Elevating Scholarship on Social Issues, 23 March, available at:

<https://medium.com/national-center-for-institutional-diversity/the-power-of-academic-role-models-like-me-7f4f2c59279d> (accessed 20 September 2019).

"Role model being yourself: sexual orientation and the workplace". (n.d.). <https://www.stonewall.org.uk/>, available at:

https://www.stonewall.org.uk/sites/default/files/role_models.pdf.

Accessible documentation: why and how

It's that time of year where those of us working in education are preparing for the coming academic year and one of these jobs is creating the new administration and learning material needed. This is a good time to have a review of the materials you have and update or replace things, especially if they have been created in a hurry to fill a gap and maybe haven't had time taken to ensure they are "accessible". I am so guilty of this hurried approach and it usually means more work in the long run as I have to revisit things and essentially redo them.

The Student Support Team here are currently working on one of their new students tomes and had contacted me for advice on how to make this mammoth document more accessible for our students. I thought it might be a good move to share some of this info. Also though, to show that things don't have to be overly complicated.

What does accessible mean and why do it?

Accessible really just means easier to use, particularly for someone who has difficulties, but generally, for everyone.

Many people find electronic documents better than printed material. They may just find it more convenient or it may

actually be easier for them to use a keyboard or other device to navigate through pages on a screen rather than turning paper pages, they may even use a computer to read documents or magnify them. Making your documents accessible means a little bit of extra time and attention but it could make a huge difference, not just for users with specific difficulties though, making your documents more accessible also makes them more usable for everyone so it's good practice.

Hints & tips on making a document accessible

Ok then here are a few simple things that you can do when you create a document which will make it easier everyone. I am specifically talking about using MS Word but the same principles can be transferred to the other two main accessible formats: HTML pages or PDF files. And... even your blog pages.

My most important guidelines are:

- Use styles and headings instead of direct formatting
- Construct tables correctly
- treat text appropriately
- white space is your friend

Styles & Formatting

Appropriate layout and formatting help any user to understand the structure of a long document. Headings are a great

indicator of each section, for people and screen readers, and subsections and bullet lists help emphasise important points. I mentioned screen readers, well following some basic rules about headers makes it a much better experience for folk using screen readers too. It helps to make navigation consistent.

You can use direct formatting to achieve the same visual result, for example making a line of text bold and increasing its size. This would make it look like a heading, but it wouldn't appear in a document map and a screen reader wouldn't interpret it as a useful navigation item. So it's good to remember that visually, you are sometimes interpreting what's there rather than seeing what is actually there.

Headings

- Use title style for the document title
- Use headings for major sections such as chapters
- Start with heading 1 for the most important headings
- Continue with heading 2 and heading 3 etc.
- Don't skip from heading 1 to heading 3 or 4 if you can possibly avoid it

Lists

If you want to display an ordered item, use the appropriate list formatting rather than manually typing it yourself. Screen reader programs can announce the beginning and end of a list that is styled in this way. Some will also announce the number of items in the list.

Example

- apples
- oranges
- strawberries

1. Cars
2. trucks
3. buses

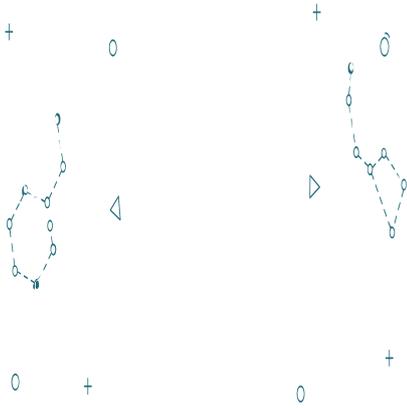
Tables

Another important thing to think about is tables and how you use them.

Please don't use tables to display lists. Remember that it may make the document look pretty, but it won't behave as expected when someone is using a screen reader. Tables should only be used to display tabular information. This goes for using tables to layout a document. A screen reader will read out the tables of the cell in order from top left to right and then downwards, regardless of how you want the document to be read.

Be careful using tables to show text, make sure that all the text which should be read together is in one cell.

Do it like this



Don't create a table this way



Otherwise, a screen reader will read the text as:

Jack and Jill Old King Cole
 Went up the hill Was a merry old soul
 To fetch a pail of water. And a merry old soul was he.
 Jack fell down He called for his pipe
 And broke his crown And he called for his bowl
 And Jill came tumbling after. And he called for his fiddlers
 three.

Font

It's a good idea to keep fonts to around a size 14 but definitely no smaller than 12. This will help users with visual impairments. It is also good to avoid what's called a non-serif font like Times New Roman. The little tails on the letters make it harder for some people to read. Think of it as the more ornate the font, the more people will find it harder to read.

I tend to stick to:

- Arial
- Verdana
- Calibri
- Tahoma
- Helvetica

Use dark text against a pale background, this is best for users with specific learning difficulties such as dyslexia, but it's good to know that a dark grey works better for most people than black. Black text on a white background is a very dramatic contrast and can cause blurriness for some people. However, just to contradict myself, some users with visual impairments may find a pale font on a dark background easier to read. The importance is that there is sufficient contrast between the text colour and the background colour. For example, black font on a cream or buff background is a good contrast and is usually popular amongst those with difficulties s is dark grey text on white. I use purple paper with black text.

Backgrounds should always be plain.

Some individuals may require printed documents on different coloured paper as this can assist those with Irlen Syndrome (Scotopic Sensitivity Disorder), Dyslexia, and other specific learning difficulties. See my aforementioned need for purple paper.

When aligning font, don't justify text as this makes the spaces between the words uneven and difficult to read. The spacing it creates is called rivers and can pull the readers' focus away from the text.



Always align left.

This was a very brief tour of some accessibility hints for your documents, but you could go investigate if you'd like to get into this in more detail. Speak to your disability officer and ask for their advice for your particular workplace or institution.