The use of practitioners concepts of inclusivity to inform the planning of learning activities

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Abstract

The goal of this research is to design a prototype for a tool that represents a ‘space’ in which practitioners can become familiar with their own concepts and mental models by reflecting on the metaphors through which they express those models. Results will be presented from the initial stage of the analysis of practitioner metaphors to inform the design of a planning/decision software application to aid academic staff in identifying their own support needs in order to achieve the goal of creating a accessible learning experience within their own working context.

1. Introduction

The research described here aims to identify how current inclusivity practices are mediated by existing tools (software and guidelines) and teaching practitioners’ concepts of inclusive design. Teachers’ concepts are explored due to the need to frame individual responses to the objective of developing inclusive online learning experiences and to inform the design of a planning tool for the creation of inclusive elearning experiences.

If online learning & teaching practice is not to be constrained by following fixed rules it needs to be seen how software tools and guidelines are benefiting or restricting the emergence of inclusivity practices. It is necessary to understand how personal concepts mediate the interpretation of guidance and inform practitioners goal setting when creating elearning experiences [1]. It is proposed that the objective of software tools should be to help practitioners be creative in developing their own conceptual framework into innovative practices.

2. Background

2.1 Definition of Inclusivity

The term inclusivity as discussed here refers to meeting students learning needs through accessible practices. Accessible practices aim to meet the specific needs of students and in particular disabled students. Inclusive practices stem directly from the universal design paradigm [2] with the aim of meeting the needs of all learners.

2.2 Guidance and Models

Guidance on inclusive and accessible design is varied ranging from providing alternatives for those with specific needs to managing and planning for student diversity. Guidance materials discuss issues such as flexibility, adaptations and accommodations. The range of guidance can be potentially confusing to practitioners who must assimilate and apply the concepts from guidance to their own practices.

In an attempt to reduce confusion on how to apply inclusive educational practices. Specific frameworks and models of accessibility are emerging from research with a shift to framing accessibility as a purely technical problem towards a pedagogical problem. With this new conceptualization practitioners are being asked to directly engage in inclusivity issues from a learning design perspective and make judgments within their own context. However, it is precisely in the planned design of inclusive learning activities that practitioners require support.

2.3 Tools for Inclusive Practice

“Tools are not enough to change practice” [3]

This statement is voicing a concern that the large volume of tools have done little to change actual practices. Many specific ‘accessibility’ tools are website evaluation repair tools with a technical focus and very little if any pedagogical input. Such tools may flag potential problems for users with assistive
technologies and compatibility with web standards but do little to nothing to help practitioners adapt to the needs of their students within their own teaching context.

This research project is aimed at directly responding to this need, to help practitioners respond to the issue of inclusivity through developing their own tools.

3. The Use of Metaphor

Metaphors can be understood as ‘modeling ideas’ and providing the function to both structure and direct activities. Further the use of metaphor as an evaluation instrument can provide an enriching context with which to reflect on experience [4]. The identification of practitioners accessibility metaphors would be of benefit in gaining insight into the organization of their theoretical concepts and utilized as a means to orientate, reflect and expand thinking. Metaphor can then be beneficial in finding a way out of problem space.

4. Methodology

In the present study the evaluation techniques employed by Starr-Glass [4] have been adapted to provide a means of gaining access to practitioners’ metaphors regarding accessibility issues.

The technique involves asking respondents to provide the following contributions:

- **Semantic indicators** - Words associated with a subject producing word clusters
- **Simple metaphor** – In the form of a simile e.g. “creating accessible eLearning materials is like...because...”
- **Extended metaphor** – An extension of the original simile sentence into a short, one-paragraph story.

4.1 Aim

The aim of this technique is to provide insight into practitioner’s conceptual models of inclusivity by:

- Identifying semantic word clusters for analysis of congruence with the vocabulary of practitioners and guidance materials.
- Eliciting practitioner’s concepts and metaphors to guide approaches to practices.
- Analyzing themes in practitioner’s metaphors to inform mental models. [5]

5. Tools – A Way Forward

Despite concerns that a tool can ‘ossify activities around its inertness’ [6], practitioners are still likely to require tools to support their practice. However, the hypothesis examined in this research is that the approach to the design of tools to facilitate inclusive practices that needs re-thinking. Tools need to be bottom-down focused and allow for innovation to emerge. In order to achieve this goal future research will examine some possible approaches to tools that can be adapted for facilitating inclusive practices including;

- **Decision Making** – expert decision maps can facilitate the sharing of information, expand on concepts and bring into focus potential solutions.
- **Pedagogic Planners** – Assisting in the planning of elearning at the lesson level. [7]
- **Learning Management** – Assist in the delivery and management of learning activities (e.g. LAMS).

6. Discussion

The issue of facilitating the adoption of accessibility practices into online learning experiences needs to be contextualized. The accessibility community has produced many tools not necessarily suitable for achieving the goal of creating an inclusive elearning experience. To do this a tool is needed that can incorporate the specific conceptual models and circumstances of individual practitioners, mediating between concepts and practices within a problem space. Therefore the proposed tool will support:

- Concept identification, with metaphor and mental models to inform practice.
- Planning / Decision Making
- Creativity and reflection within a community of practice.

7. References