End of Year Report

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May 18, 2017

I'd like to thank the Office of Information Technology for the experience of being a Faculty Fellow this past year. It was incredibly valuable in terms of my own professional development, and (I hope) was of value to OIT and the university community more broadly.

Part of my work this year was getting fully up to speed on accessibility itself, reading articles, understanding the ADA and Section 508 standards, and the like. While there's a daunting amount of information out there, I feel much more fluent now in the terminology and issues involved in this work.

In compiling this year-end report, I reviewed the list of deliverables from my proposal and assessed my progress toward each one. Some, in retrospect, were a bit optimistic in terms of what was possible, but in many of them I saw some good results. It would have helped, I think, to have had the Campus Accessibility Plan in place, as that would have given me a bit more official imprimatur for my efforts. I look forward to continuing next year, building on some of these efforts, with perhaps a somewhat stronger administrative backup from the Provost and Chancellor.

IT Community of Practice Workshops

I coordinated four out of the six IT COP sessions: in September, the topic was accessibility in general, with Heather Hartman, chair of the Accessibility Implentation team, David Ndiaye of ODS, Adam Cureton from Philosophy (and the AIT), and OIT's own Jerry Riehl. In October, we focused on creating accessible learning environments with Jennifer Gramling, Director of Distance Learning, Kelly MacCartey from English (and a participant in the OIT summer workshop on accessibility, and Rose Sasso from OIT. In February, I stepped away from accessibility to lead a session on multimodal composition (using multimedia and web elements from a rhetorical standpoint) featuring Jeffrey Ringer and Sean Morey from the English department, along with Crystal McAlvin from biology. Then in March, I had David Ndiaye and his colleagues from ODS do a presentation to demonstrate some accessibility tech, such as screen readers, so that people could get a feel for how their documents might actually be accessed. Though I was traveling to a conference and couldn't be there physically for that session, I did record an introductory video that David later emailed to ask if he could use in future presentations or workshops.

Assemble an interest or focus group from STEM fields about the particular challenges of accessibility that they see in their fields

This deliverable proved more difficult than I'd thought. I didn't assemble the focus group I had envisioned, but I met individually with several members of the math and biology departments to talk about these issues. I ascertained that while most of the textbooks were (or claimed to be) accessible, there were issues around their homework software, class handouts, and some materials used for things like quizzes and exams. A focus on charts and diagrams was a key area. For instance, it's fairly common in biology classes to hand students cell diagrams and tell them to identify certain areas, or to provide pictures of the stages of cell division and have them give the correct order for them. After some research, I found some online resources, including most notably The Diagram Center, a project of the non-profit Benetech. At the time of this writing, I'm still developing a resource guide for accessibility in STEM based on these resources. The real trick is actually pedagogical, not technical: how do you provide an adequate description of a cell diagram, for instance, without telegraphing what the answer might be?

How would you describe the shape of a graph with inflection points—in order to have students identify the inflection points—without telling them where they are?

I now have people in the lower-division courses in biology and math starting to think about these issues—I plan to continue to meet with them and develop some strategies from a pedagogical angle to go along with the technical side of accessibility implementation.

Generate guides for making course materials accessible and how to assess the accessibility of existing materials and textbooks.

Consulting with Iryna Loboda, we decided that written handouts would just be a duplication of effort with the existing workshop handouts, and even one-pagers might be a bit redundant. Instead, I'm scripting videos to provide a brief overview of accessibility in specific ways (Word documents, PDFs, etc.). These are short (1-2 minute) videos that will give people the basics of how to make something accessible, and direct them to the OIT workshops for more information. They can reside on the OIT YouTube channel, and links can go out in newsletters and appear on the accessibility.utk site. We've got a video about why to make things accessible done, and ones specifically on Word and PDF documents are in the pipeline. Now that we have the format and structure set up, it won't be difficult to add other similar videos, including perhaps an ad for the Canvas modules that Eric is developing.

We could perhaps work with the Tenn TLC on similar workshops in a variety of areas of intersection.

While Taimi Olsen and I discussed issues of accessibility and possible workshops at several points during my tenure as Faculty Fellow, we weren't able to work out the logistics of a workshop this year. I have hopes for next year, including a workshop for any CIRTL (Center for the Integration of Research, Teaching, and Learning) Network program participants.

Make sure First-Year Composition materials are accessible.

I had great success within my own department. I met with the leadership team of the Writing Program (Jeff Ringer, the Director, Robin Nicks, the Associate Director, and Kali Mobley, the Assistant Director) to talk about key areas within our program that we might target. We've developed a good working relationship and are planning future collaborations for the program.

I "accessibilized" (a word we generated in our meetings) the department's common syllabi for English 101, 102, 118, 198 and 298, and teachers in the department have gotten the message—even instructors who don't use the provided syllabi are contacting me to make sure that their self-generated syllabi are accessible.

I also did three workshops for the English department on accessibility. The first was during their fall workshop series, where I led a panel that included Kelly MacCartey and Heather Williams, both colleagues in the department who were also participants in the accessibility summer workshop, where we shared some of the things we'd learned in the workshops with new grad students as they prepared to step into their roles as teachers. The others were done in the spring, in collaboration with the Writing Program, where I did hour-long sessions to introduce all teachers of first-year composition to the whys and wherefores of accessibility, with an eye specifically to how some of our practices in composition could be made more accessible, and where issues might arise in some of their courses. One of those was recorded and is now available on the OIT channel.

The first section of that session—the "why should I make materials accessible" part--is basically modular. It applies to accessibility in any pedagogical context here at UT. I can pull that out as a standalone talk, or follow it with a section about specific considerations for a particular department—I could give a feasible one in biology or math, so far, and with just a little consultation with teachers in relevant subject areas, could work some up for other fields as well.

Another area within my department that I had wanted to focus on was the growing field of Digital Humanities. I talked with Roy Liuzza and Sue Hodges Kluck about the MARCO Manuscript Workshop and accessibility issues with medieval manuscripts—the illuminations and marginalia, important parts of any medieval document, present some interesting challenges for accessibility descriptions. They put me in touch with Ellen Treharne, who directs the Center for Spatial and Textual Analysis at Stanford, who I'll be corresponding with about this issue. I also participated in the UT Library/Humanities Center Digital Humanities Bootcamp in May, where we were exposed to a number of multimedia and online digital collection/exhibit tools; this has spurred my thinking about how to ensure some of these tools are used with accessibility in mind.

Attended UDL IRN Summit

Another key experience in my year as a fellow was my participation in the UDL IRN Summit. This wasn't in my initial list of deliverables, but developed as a possibility during the year. My experience at the Summit was very positive—admittedly it helped that I got to ride a little bit on the coattails of Eric Moore's excellent plenary talk. The Summit deepened my understanding of UDL in several ways: as a new member of the Research Network, I got to see how researchers at other institutions were studying the implementation of UDL at various levels. In some of the panels, I also got some specific ideas of how to implement UDL more fully in my own teaching. And in other sessions, we worked on how to better encourage uptake of UDL at our institutions. So I found it rewarding on the levels of research, pedagogy, and institutional change. Eric and I will be talking more about what we can do at UT to encourage people to use UDL principles in their course design and delivery.

Conclusion

Overall, this has been an incredibly valuable experience for me. Working as I do in Disability Studies, sometimes the scholarly end can focus a bit too much on the intellectual side of things, without providing opportunities for action and improvement in the world. I was able to accomplish things this year that will improve access for each freshman here at the University. I've spurred colleagues' thinking, not only in my own department, but across the university—indeed, even at other institutions, as questions I've asked here have rippled out into professional networks and raised issues of accessibility that were apparently not thought of before. The time I've spent as a Faculty Fellow has enabled me to unify my scholarly, pedagogical, and service components in a way I've not had a chance to before. I'd like to close by thanking everyone at OIT for their help and assistance. I look forward to continuing to work with this excellent staff in the future.