



***Imran Ahmed, Digital Accessibility Engineer***

***Imran Ahmed is a long-term native screen reader user as he was born blind. Throughout his life, he constantly fought and overcame accessibility challenges and misconceptions about people with disabilities. One of his motivations to migrate to the US was to acquire the necessary technical skills to make the world a more inclusive place and has served in the field of accessibility for over twelve years contributing towards this effort.***



***Josh Simpson, Digital Accessibility Engineer***

***Josh Simpson, a Deafblind accessibility engineer at United Design with a lifelong dedication to disability and space. Josh has spent decades challenging humanity and pushing the barriers to include all human beings through technology and culture.***



***Anna Smith, Digital Accessibility Engineer***

***Anna Smith is a long-time accessibility advocate. She has spent 25 years in government web design ensuring 508 compliance and an adherence to WCAG. She is constantly looking for ways inclusion, diversity, and accessibility create a better, more user-centric, design that benefits all users.***



***Valorie Sundby, Digital Accessibility Engineer***

***As a certified Principal Digital Accessibility Engineer, I believe accessibility is a journey. My mission is to illuminate the path, as we walk together to improve access to digital content for everyone. I teach others and emphasize how to fully integrate accessibility into their work. My life experience and education provide me with empathy. Walking in the shoes of others helps me to be kind, calm and compassionate. My creative avocations of photography and gardening help me be observant and open to innovation.***

## ***In our own words***

***Two parents with disabilities share their experience of their family experience of school during COVID***

### ***Imran***

*It's a little too quiet in the kids' make-shift classroom where they are supposed to be sitting listening to the teacher lecture on Zoom. Quiet children are never a good sign. At least with my children, it's a sign they have lost interest and are silently playing a game on the computer rather than attentively listening to the lesson. Sighing softly for the 20th time this morning, I go to check on them ...*

**The pandemic has changed our role as parents in the dance we call our educational system. Our role, once finite, has expanded to become part parent, part enforcer, part teacher, part student ourselves. It's been an adjustment as every facet of the educational system has been modified, keeps being modified, to accommodate our distance learning requirements. This has been a giant leap for all parents and educators. We have had to learn and adapt to the use of technology. We have had to change rules and protocols to create a better learning environment. Everything has changed and the learning curve is steep. For each step forward we take one or two back, and so we continue this dance between parents and teachers, all trying to provide the best possible support for our children.**

**However, when the technology is inaccessible, that same learning curve, can become too steep to adapt. How do we, as visually impaired parents keep up with the need for technical interaction? Is it up to us? Is it up to the school system? How do we ensure**

**the best education for our children within inaccessible technical scenes?**

**Prior to March 2020, our job, as parents was to get the children to school, provide supplies, make sure homework was done, and call them in when they were sick. Now ... we still have our duties as parents, but we're part teachers, ensuring our students are paying attention and answering questions when needed. We're part principal, enforcing rules and procedures. We're part counselors, watching for evidence of emotional stress then correcting course. No one can say our parental duties haven't increased exponentially. However, what is time consuming for most can be insurmountable for parents with disabilities who have the added hardship of maneuvering through technology that is inaccessible.**

### ***Josh***

**In the spirit of humanity, and an open trusting dialogue to help convey my experience, and many other experiences as valid, I want to voluntarily disclose that I am deafblind. I have a progressive blindness called Retinitis Pigmentosa. I am deaf from birth and use an assistive hearing device called a cochlear implant. [According to Wikipedia the definition of "Deafblindness" is the condition of little or no useful hearing and little or no useful sight.]**

**I am a deafblind parent with an autistic partner and an elementary school aged autistic student. We faced unique challenges in our household with remote education during the time of the COVID-19. While many of the challenges can be removed or mitigated with the right attitude on the part of the school district, school administrators, teachers, and staff, the school day still presents additional challenges for my student, my**

partner, and me. Some of these challenges have become road blocks to providing what others may take for granted as a “normal” education.

One of these challenges is the education platform selected is in accessible in some ways to keyboard only users. The primary issue is it does not provide a visible focus indicator when the keyboard user is focused on an object on the page such as a button or link. When using a keyboard to navigate a web page, there needs to be a way to know where you are on the page. Just as mouse users can tell they are hovering over an element on the page by a change in the button or link, keyboard only users need a visual indication of where their focus is on the page. This is normally by providing a border around the focused object.

However, with this platform, as a keyboard only user, he has no idea where he is on the page. And we ask keyboard only users also are unable to know where our student is on a page when he has questions. Since my student requires keyboard accessible formats of the class assignments, readings, and other materials and these materials are not being provided in a natively accessible format, my partner and I have the added task to make them accessible.

Once we hurdle the issues in accessing the assignment, and our student completes it, we then need to upload them on the inaccessible system. This whole of process takes both of us about two hours per day whereas it may take one parent 5-10 minutes to accomplish. If the system and materials were accessible, our student would be able to work independently, or with occasional assistance, as most students do. Providing an accessible system and materials would lift a major burden from parents who are

**themselves disabled and provide independence for students with disabilities.**

**To date, the school has been unwilling to provide the materials ahead of time. This means both parents are necessary daily to keep the student on task, convert the materials to an accessible format, provide clarity and answers while completing assignments, and aid in uploading the completed assignments. If the school delivered the materials to the parents a week ahead, we could use weekends and evenings to prepare the materials rather than consistently trying to play catch up by staying up late in order to submit completed work by the stringent due dates.**

**The hybrid classroom approach is difficult for a neurodivergent student to stay motivated. By adding another level of inaccessibility, it is exponentially harder for a uniquely divergent family to attain the same level of education and meet requirements in a timely manner.**

## **Commentary**

**Most schools have programs to accommodate students with disabilities providing personalized help when the students are onsite in the form of teacher oversight or even a para who moves with the child from class to class. However, when the learning is not onsite, this responsibility moves to the parent. When it is the parent who has the disability, schools are generally ill-prepared to accommodate the parent or aid them in providing the same level of educational experience to their student.**

## **The law for parents with disabilities**

**Knowing the laws in your country, state, and local government is the first tool you will want in your advocacy toolbox.**

In the United States, both the **Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)** the **Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)** covers parents with disabilities.

The National Center for Learning Disabilities has a story about a parent's advocacy for themselves (**ADA Accommodations When Advocating in Your Child's School - NCLD**). This is to let you know that advocating for yourself when you are disabled is as important as advocating for your child.

*"I receive accommodations at my son's school when I advocate for him. Every meeting, all written correspondence, everything must be accessible for me because of my disabilities.*

*Let that sink in for a minute."*

### **Advocating to get materials early**

The reasons for not wanting to provide material ahead of time range widely. There may be fear that the materials will be shared with the students (yours or friends) early giving them an advantage.

Some schools have students and parents sign an agreement for materials released early including not sharing. If a school does not have such an agreement, you can advocate for one. This way the school will know that you, the parent, are serious about respecting the wishes of the school.

Coordinate with your student's teacher or the Learning Management System (LMS) administrator for early access to materials. Ask if the LMS has a parent role or parent sign in

**capability to access materials early. If not, find out if you can be enrolled as a student with early access accommodation.**

**This may be a new concept to the teacher or administrator so maintain a collaborative mindset while working through the details. The administrator may need to coordinate with leaders as well.**

### **Know your accommodation needs**

**Knowing what you need to be successful in advocating for your student is important. People with life-long disability are likely familiar with advocating for accommodations such as recorded meetings, sign language interpreters, and large print materials. People who are new to their disability may not have figured out what they need yet. This is the first step in successful advocacy, know your accommodation needs and ask for them.**

**Learn from the experience of others. If you do not know other parents with disabilities, seek them out online. Find blogs and articles on how to know your accommodation needs. Learn what accommodations are available.**

**Here is a list of resources to help you get started:**

- [\*\*ADA Accommodations When Advocating in Your Child's School - NCLD\*\*](#)
- [\*\*Schools Can Accommodate Parents With Disabilities | The Mighty\*\*](#)
- [\*\*Helping parents with learning difficulties to speak up \(bristol.ac.uk\) \(PDF untagged\)\*\*](#)
- [\*\*Parents with Disabilities Have Rights - PAVE \(wapave.org\)\*\*](#)

## **Patience and collaboration**

**Patience is hard to hold onto if your student is falling behind. Lainey Feingold, [Patience: A Negotiation \(and Accessibility\) Strategy – Law Office of Lainey Feingold \(Iflegal.com\)](#), defines "active patience" as the combination of staying calm while being persistent in solving the problem. It takes practice to stay patient while following up on communications and setting up meetings.**

**Lainey uses the vision of the deep sea [octopus that sits on her eggs for 53 months](#), and then dies as a metaphor for the patience it sometimes takes. Sometimes that is the kind of patience it takes.**

**Collaboration starts with understanding that everyone's goal is to help your student succeed. Remember that each Teacher, Principal, or administration may also have a disability (hidden or visible) and have a student at home. Look upon them as part of the team, allies with a common purpose. Taking on the collaborative mindset will help things go faster and will lay the groundwork for processes that will help every parent with a disability that comes after you.**

**It is exhausting to advocate for yourself, your spouse, and for your student. If you are fortunate to not have a disability, keep this exhaustion in mind. Help carry the load for someone else by being an ally. An ally is someone who steps up to help identify barriers; becomes a member of the advocacy team; and educates others about working with people with disabilities.**

**In summary, students with parents with disabilities can succeed. As a parent with a disability, know what accommodations you need and ask for them. For everyone, practice active patience and**

follow up with communications. For everyone, help put processes in place that will help others. Be an ally by being a member of a collaborative team.

*...to my surprise, this time the kids are sitting attentively, listening to the teacher tell a story that is accessible to all the children and me. I follow along on my refreshable Braille display and my child can follow along with the*

what you are collecting and what you are reading as you move through the data to get a feel for what is happening within each story (p. 82).

**Step One: Create Familiarity.** This process was conducted by re-reading and listening to the interview recordings both while transcribing and while reading the finished transcripts. **Step Two: Create Codes.** The codes created for this data set are based on the analytical question, "What is ableism?" (discourse). Using the semantic object, a derivative of the analytical question, initial coding began. **Step Three: Create Discourses (Themes).** Once we had completed the initial coding, we began to compare my coded data against each other, grouping different statements and stories together based on similarity. Throughout this process, an in-depth research log and memo were created, annotating and listing direct quotes and exemplars, and coding statements in different colors. **Step Four: Review Discourses (Themes).** Once the discourses were named and identified, a definition with an in-depth description and exemplars were created. A review of the exemplars was necessary to define the boundaries of the discourses and to ensure that there was little to no over-lap within the tenets of the identified discourses. **Step Five: Defining Discourses (Themes).** After completing the

review of discourses, a robust, analytical memo was created outlining each tenet that constructed the discourses identified. **Step Six: Use of Exemplars.** Using exemplars for this process involved identifying specific passages of spoken dialogue from participants as they answered questions.

## **Verification Procedures**

Although this work does not seek to predict or explain how a phenomenon works, there is an importance placed on ensuring that data is analyzed with rigor, validity and reliability in mind. To accomplish this, three different verification procedures were used. The verification process included referential adequacy, audit trail and data exemplars. In total, 32 exemplars were pulled with 11 unique, non-repeated examples that illustrate the presence of ableism in implementing UDL.

## **Results**

To answer the research questions, themes were identified from the responses provided by the participants. These themes provide space for exploration on the role of ableism in the utilization of strategies in implementing UDL. For research question one, four themes emerged from how UDL was being implemented. They include: the use of multimedia in applying UDL principles, using the discussion tool of a Learning Management System (LMS), the creation of self-assessments and practice tests, exams and quizzes are highly used and the creation and implementation of rubrics.

The utilization of multimedia as a tool of implementing UDL was often reported as the sole task being used by instructors. This aligns with the multiple means of representation principle within UDL. The use of the LMS as a tool for creating engagement was

identified, but specifics of how the tool was used were not provided. Self-assessments, practice tests, exams and quizzes were also identified, but specifics on the implementation remained unclear and the creation and employment of rubrics echo the need for finite and tangible assessment.

The second research question provided the following themes. They include: the diversity in needs for a diverse population; challenges in communicating between instructor, students and the course materials; lack of consistency in design; and student challenges in adapting to evolving classroom environments. Additionally, there was an overarching theme across both questions of lack of support and resources available from the institution itself.

There is a level of irony present that the diversity in population emerged as the largest and most common challenge faced by course designers. Virtually every participant mentioned the challenges in