**Supporting accessibility, inclusion and non-discrimination in the educational offering of the continuous and flexible learning tray**

**Podcast, part 3: Promoting accessibility on course platforms**

This is the series on “Supporting accessibility, inclusion and non-discrimination in the educational offering of the continuous and flexible learning tray”, in which we focus on examining these phenomena and their meanings, and on promoting them in everyday life.

In the third part of the series, we focus on the accessibility and equality of course platforms and content. In this part, we discuss the characteristics of accessible and equal course platforms, and what should be taken into account from the perspective of continuous and flexible learning.

Riikka Järvinen: Welcome to the Digivisio 2030 programme’s e-learning training! This is the series on “Supporting accessibility, inclusion and non-discrimination in the educational offering of the continuous and flexible learning tray”, in which we focus on examining these phenomena and their meanings, and on the accessibility and non-discrimination of course platforms and content. What is accessible and non-discriminatory in terms of courses? And, is there anything in particular that could be taken into account from the perspective of continuous and flexible learning? I’m Riikka Järvinen from South-Eastern Finland University of Applied Sciences and I have with me Matti Strengell, also from South-Eastern Finland University of Applied Sciences. Great to have you as a guest, Matti. Can you tell us a bit about yourself and your relationship with e-learning accessibility?

Matti Strengell: Thank you! Very nice to be here. I work as eLearning Environment Coordinator at the E-campus unit of the South-Eastern Finland University of Applied Sciences, and through this role, accessibility is a very important part of my work. In other words, when information systems are developed or new information systems are acquired, accessibility must be taken into account so that the systems are accessible to everyone. Of course, we have also become familiar with accessibility through guiding our teachers, as our E-campus unit also helps the teachers with accessibility issues. I'm also a member of the Xamk Accessibility Working Group. So accessibility is also a part of my work.

Riikka Järvinen: Nice to hear. When talking about digital accessibility, what challenges or problems do learners often encounter on learning platforms? What’s your experience of this issue?

Matti Strengell: What I know is that these days there are, of course, fewer and fewer problems that are purely a result of the system. The Moodle platform that we use today has become very accessible, at least since the latest update, but then there may be some accessibility challenges in similar older information systems. But then there are more challenges related to teachers’ materials and to the platforms themselves. In other words, the problems that there may be concern just such challenges related to general clarity, or it may be that, for example, videos lack subtitles or images lack captions. So quite a lot of these active challenges come from students. Maybe that kind of general clarity could be the most common feedback that comes my way, at least.

Riikka Järvinen: So how well do you think teachers think about accessibility when they design course platforms?

Matti Strengell: Some teachers take it very seriously, so they think a lot about how to make their platforms suitable for everyone and how to help students from different backgrounds to use the platforms and materials. Other teachers put a lot of time and thought into designing platforms, but then unfortunately there are also some who perhaps don't yet fully understand what accessibility is or why it’s important to consider it. It may also be that accessibility is also seen as something that’s a bit difficult to grasp, which is why it may be overlooked. It may not be appreciated that it's pretty simple stuff after all. In other words, how to improve accessibility and what kind of things should be taken into account.

Riikka Järvinen: So let’s say a teacher is planning an online course and also creating those digital learning materials or learning situations – what kind of things should the teacher consider to make the learning platform and content accessible to a wide range of learners? What comes to mind?

Matti Strengell: Personally, I think the ‘Plan for All’ principle is very important in accessibility so, whatever we start to do, be it new material or a whole course, we start from the very beginning to think about how to make it so that it‘s suitable for everyone and for all kinds of learners. So you kind of take everything into account at the planning stage. The idea is that it will be used by very different people and will be taken into account from the beginning. And then we also think about how to do it, so that we don't start thinking about how to make it achievable only after the material has been produced. For example, if you're making a video, it's a good idea to think about subtitles at the very beginning. It's like part of the process. So it shouldn’t be that you spend a lot of time making a video and then you realise “oh, I should have done the subtitles”, so then it feels like a lot more work to do because it seems like such an extra step. We should think of it as one of the stages of making a video in the same way that planning it, scripting it and shooting it are among the stages of making a video. Subtitling is just as much a step in the process of making a video and, if it's there throughout the whole process, it's part of it. Gradually, it will become part of the video-making process, in other words, the video will also include subtitles. This is something we've done quite a lot of at the E-campus unit. My own tutorial videos always have subtitles and it’s kind of part of the process of making a tutorial video. The subtitles are done immediately at the end of the videos.

Riikka Järvinen: That certainly sounds sensible. And then, if we think a little bit from the perspective of the continuous learner. Continuous learners can come from all over Finland and may speak different languages. They might be international learners. There may be self-taught people who are studying for their own reasons than for a degree, for example. Then there may be those studying for the needs of working life, for example, who want to strengthen their own skills and perhaps expect flexibility in their studies. There may also be continuous learners with disabilities. They may have special neurological features or learning challenges such as dyslexia, visual impairment or problems with motor functions. There are all different kinds of learners. What do you think are some of the things that should be included in learning platforms and materials to make them accessible to a wide range of learners?

Matti Strengell: My experience is that, for learners from the continuous learning side, accessibility is much more important than it is for degree students. There will be very different people from different backgrounds, and that’s why, when we start to create a course aimed at continuous learners, it’s actually very important to take into account that there will be different kinds of people and try to make the platform as clear and accessible as possible. Clarity is the core issue here too, and that's perhaps my main message. Clarity often helps a lot. When you make it clear, you often also make it accessible. Of course, accessibility also includes technical issues that need to be taken into account, but it all starts with clarity. Another interesting thing to note is that continuing learners may also be those who are not so embedded in the higher education world. So the very language or terminology that we use on the platforms or that the teachers use in the materials may be very unfamiliar to continuous learners if their previous learning experience was several years ago. Studying is quite different now from what it was 20 years ago or even 10 years ago. Yes, it's changed quite a lot from what it was then. In other words, we would start by taking into account the fact that it may be that these continuous learners may not have the same level of study skills as, for example, degree students who are studying constantly and daily. They’ve already mastered the routine and the terminology we use. It’s good to pay attention to such things but, in my view, the most important thing is clarity and also to take into account the technical aspects of the materials.

Riikka Järvinen: Good. So do you have an example of what students feel is particularly good in terms of accessibility and non-discrimination?

Matti Strengell: Well, what’s become clear from feedback on the learning environment or from our ‘Digiope’ (online teacher) award at South-Eastern Finland University of Applied Sciences where students suggest good ways to do things online, is that often clarity is particularly appreciated. Of course, there's also a lot of praise for a teacher's personality and interesting way of teaching, but clarity is often the thing that is most appreciated. On the other hand, there may also be criticism if there’s no clarity as people say that they really want it. I would say that’s the key. When you make simple, clear and coherent courses or materials, yes, they are the ones that students like the most. When they don't have to learn how to use the platform or the materials, when they're simple and clear to use in that sense, they can then focus on the learning itself. Then you don't have to struggle with the technical or user interface challenges. Yes I'd see it that way.

Riikka Järvinen: So clarity is everything.

Matti Strengell: Yes, that's certainly the basic message.

Riikka Järvinen: Okay, great. And, do you have any ideas on how we can ensure that the courses and content are really accessible and of high quality? For example, are there any ways to assess accessibility and quality, or to evaluate and test the content and accessibility of a course in general?

Matti Strengell: Digivisio has really good quality criteria, so accessibility is also quite well reflected in the criteria. It's a really good thing that they're there, because it is of course an important issue. Naturally, there are different materials and checklists that many universities have and we too have our own. In our own learning environment, we have a checklist for how teachers should consider accessibility on these platforms. We also have a kind of self-study course that teachers can use to familiarise themselves with the checklist in more detail, to see how they can improve accessibility. But of course it’s important to use the tools that are available in existing tools. So, for example, the tools in the Office suite, such as Word and PowerPoint, have their own tools to check that the material is accessible. Just remember to go through the material once it's finished and correct it according to the instructions in the tool. That’s going to get you a long way. Of course, we must always remember that these technical verification programs also have their own problems. They do check technical accessibility, but much of it is left to people themselves to figure out. For example, a clarity issue is one where it’s difficult for a technical checking tool to say whether something is clear or not. So for these types of things, you yourself have to think about what would be the most sensible and clearest way to present them. Nor can a tool comment on whether, for example, the headings are clear or descriptive, or whether the links have been made in such a way that you can understand where clicking on them will take you. Such things are left to people to decide for themselves. Similarly, colour contrasts may be such that some tools can assess them a little, for example whether there is a contrast problem, but often people have to judge whether the contrast is sufficient. It's important to use the tools that are available and then to familiarise yourself with the basics of what you need to consider from an accessibility point of view and incorporate them into your everyday life.

Riikka Järvinen: Sounds good. Finally, what advice would you give to universities and teachers who plan and implement courses specifically for the needs of the continuous and flexible learner? Do you have a final tip to conclude with?

Matti Strengell: Well, I'm pretty sure it's clarity again here. I mean let's start from the premise that the structures are clear and the contents are clear. That will go a long way. I would also tell people to remember that accessibility is often quite small things. Things that can be done really quickly. Not big issues that will be tackled later. It's just the day-to-day work and the small changes in the way we work. As you gradually learn, you’ll be able to make more and more accessible materials and, as you learn new ways of doing things, they’ll gradually become routine, so that you’ll no longer notice that you’re making something accessible – it’ll just come automatically as you work.

Riikka Järvinen: In other words, just small everyday actions.

Matti Strengell: Yes, that's right.

Riikka Järvinen: This was a really interesting and inspiring discussion and maybe a lot was left unsaid, but thank you, Matti.

Matti Strengell: Thank you, it was nice to be involved.

Riikka Järvinen: I hope this podcast opened up some perspectives on accessibility in education. Hopefully we’ll start targeting more of them in our schools. Thank you all!