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FRAMING DISABILITY: UNDERSTANDING THE FUTURE OF POST-SECONDARY STUDENT ACCESSIBILITY ACCOMMODATIONS BY DOCUMENTING PAST EXPERIENCES

Abstract

The information structures, styles and priorities of those in the disabled community are vastly different from those that make up academic culture, creating a disparity between the needs of disabled students and the support of the university accommodations system. With mixed methods data that describes the post-secondary accommodations system, a model of overlapping frames of information access and use could be created that would allow for an in-depth analysis of information and the disabled post-secondary experience. In addition to contributing to the literature on post-secondary disability and accessibility, this research will also produce concrete recommendations to improve post-secondary accommodations systems.

Introduction

Communities are built on the technologies, cultures, and practices that they use to collect and share information and stories. These stories define our past, but they also help us look to the future. To understand and support this information “system” is to create positive change in the way its people can evolve and thrive.

Context and Significance

The disabled community has its own information structures, communication styles, and risks that create a unique information culture characterized by protection and advocacy (Cole et al., 2011). When this world collides with the equally unique culture of academia, there is a profound disparity between the needs of disabled students and the support provided by the university accommodations system (Shpigelman et al., 2022). With the diverse life experiences of the different actors finding and sharing information that works within this system; including administrative officials, teaching staff, advocates and support staff, and students; each with their own set of resources, processes and abilities to access information to make decisions, and there is little understanding of the behaviors and perspectives of these actors and how their differences contribute to system disparities. Mixed-methods research into these overlapping worlds would provide the necessary data to ensure that university accommodations policies support an equitable, accessible society.

By using the Information World Mapping elicitation method to authentically describe the post-secondary accommodations system according to the perceptions and experiences of the actors directly involved, a model of overlapping and disparate frames of information access and use could be created that would allow for an in-depth analysis of information use and its relationship to access for disabled post-secondary students (Greyson et al., 2017). In addition to building an in-depth understanding of the systems of power and information interactions that impact disabled

students in post-secondary settings, this research project will act to extend Small World Theory using critical frameworks to better understand the impact of multiple actors within a closed information system, while also providing a proposed method for quantifying error in textual analysis via semantic distance to extend similar data analyses (Chatman, 1999; Leedy & Ormrod, 2015; Bedford & Gracy, 2014). Also, while this work will end in a contribution to the literature on disability and accessibility in post-secondary institutions, this research will also produce a professional, concrete set of recommendations to expand and improve post-secondary academic accommodations systems.

Objectives and Research Questions

This research would aim to map what constitutes the overlapping information frameworks used by the main actors in the academic accommodations information system, what disparities in understanding and information access exist between these actors, and how the system can be adjusted and improved to remedy these disparities and better support a more inclusive accommodations system for post-secondary students with disabilities. Answering these questions would provide insight into the lapses in information sharing and understanding between and within actor frameworks in order to improve and understand this world of information.

Methodology

This research project will use Dalhousie University as a representative case study. Gathering a sample of individuals via proportional stratified random sampling amounting to twenty percent of each of the above actor populations, data will be collected using semi-structured interviews. Within these interviews, the Information World Mapping elicitation method will be used to gather creative visual maps and verbal interpretations of information access, use and interactions in the university accommodations system (Leedy & Ormrod, 2015; Greyson et al., 2017). This method will allow for inclusive participation in this research by all actors, including disabled students, while maintain an in-depth understanding of the interactions and meaning-making of these main actors (Greyson et al., 2017).

By extending the model of unique closed systems of information customs and sharing described by Chatman's Small World theory (1999) and using critical theory to understand this world, this research will analyse the qualitative data via textual analysis to provide insight into this small world of information (Leedy & Ormrod, 2015). Additionally, this qualitative data analysis will be extended using a combination of semantic distance, or similarity in meaning in text, combined with quantitative and statistical error analysis to gain a better understanding of textual analysis accuracy and reliability (Bedford & Gracy, 2014; Baird, 1995). Combining these methods will allow for deeper understanding of how information is shared and restricted in post-secondary accommodations systems, this providing more focused insights into potential improvements.

Significance and Expected Contributions to Advancing Knowledge

In addition to building an in depth understanding of the systems of power and information interactions that support and impede the inclusion of disabled students in post-secondary settings, this research project will act to extend Small World theory using critical frameworks to better understand the impact of multiple actors within a closed information system, while also providing a proposed method for quantifying error in textual analysis via semantic distance to extend similar data analyses (Chatman, 1999; Leedy & Ormrod, 2015; Bedford & Gracy, 2014). In addition to contributing to the literature on disability and accessibility in post-secondary

institutions, this research will also produce a professional, concrete set of recommendations to expand and improve post-secondary academic accommodations systems.

Conclusion

In a time when advocating for diversity, inclusion and autonomy are at a high, there needs to be sufficient support for these values to be fostered in the post-secondary systems that control new research and knowledge systems (Waterfield & Whelan, 2017). This cannot be done without an in-depth understanding of the inadequacies of the current university accommodations system for disabled students. In bringing together concepts and experiences in disability advocacy with analyzing information systems and policies through their systems of information interaction and power structures, the research can improve the experiences of future disabled university students, while bringing in the use of quantitative error analysis to extend models of textual analysis to better represent margins of error in information systems research. My background and interests give me unique insight into this research that would allow for extended insight into this system. This work is imperative to creating an accessible and inclusive university system and completing this research through the perspectives of information systems and human interactions can provide a unique opportunity for a more equitable and accessible world of Canadian education and research.

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