

The creativity of community

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No one is an island, unless perhaps you work in accessibility. With so many people working in accessibility working solo, making progress can feel like lonely work. Which is where the accessibility community comes in.

We all know the value that community can bring, particularly following the restrictions of last year. Spending time with friends and peers can be invaluable to our sense of belonging. A brief conversation is often all it takes to transform a grey day. But it isn't just emotional support and camaraderie that community offers, it can also be a hotbed of innovation...

The accessibility community

The [accessibility community Teams group](#) was set up in January 2020 by [Kellie Mote](#) and [Natasha Veenendaal](#) from Jisc. By October 2020, it had reached **750 members** and now it has **well over 900**. We caught up with three members of the group to hear their experiences of community and co-creation.

The need for change

Ghizzi Dunlop, learning technologist at [UWE](#), has been involved in the accessibility community group since it started. After subscribing to various JiscMail lists, the prospect of the group offered a more interactive, collaborative, and searchable way of exploring content and ideas with others.

Described by another member as a veritable “encyclopedia of knowledge”, Ghizzi is particularly active in the group. Here, she shares how she got involved:



“Most of us are in a similar situation, we’re the only person in our institution looking into accessibility in this way, and we’re struggling to get our voices heard. We’re struggling to even get the conversation started!

"We weren't able to get anyone to take it seriously and understand just how exposed

we were or how at risk we were under the legislation and that it needed to be taken seriously. We couldn't get the momentum that we had with the previous big legislative issue, which was [GDPR](#), for some reason this was just slipping through the net.

"The accessibility community group was a way of responding to that, exploring what was possible, sharing expertise and just asking questions; 'what does a good accessibility statement look like?'. We all want the same outcome, to provide users with the support they need, be that access to the website or resources."

All about timing

Fiona Macneill, a learning technologist at [the University of Brighton](#), stresses the importance of timing:



"The accessibility community group was the right thing at the right time.

"Having Jisc staff coordinating it has been incredibly helpful as otherwise it would be hard to have that consistency and continuity. Often, working in the accessibility area is a voluntary facet of a role, and things in higher education (HE) can change rapidly - job roles change - which can affect your ability to keep that continuity going. So the structure works well; Jisc facilitates the conversations allowing everyone to share ideas, interact and co-create.

"I joined to meet my professional development goals and to make sure that I was sharing best practice by learning from what other universities are doing. Before this group, there wasn't really an avenue for me to do that. It really helped that it was all online too, as I don't have time or resource to do much travelling to meetings. That made a big difference to whether I could participate or not.

"I think the other driver for me as well was that I'm part of a small team. We don't have a dedicated accessibility or assistive technology team and the Jisc accessibility group felt like a ready formed team, a welcoming assembly of likeminded people who could help. Being able to share guides and websites that have already been made, seeing what other people have done is incredibly helpful."

Sharing best practice

"The group for me is about sharing best practice,"

agrees Masniza Sore, discovery experience specialist at [University of Northampton](#).



“It’s incredible how open everyone is with their knowledge and experiences, whether that’s a conference coming up, or a particular suggestion or idea, I’ve learnt so much. I’ve found it reassuring to chat with people in a similar situation to myself, as a sort of check in that I’m heading in the right direction.

“I work to ensure that resources are discoverable, those databases could be e-books, e-journals etc. I have a small team who I’ve rather volunteered to test the accessibility of third-party databases, sort of like an audit. It requires a huge amount of time, so I wasn’t very popular when I suggested it! We’re currently looking into screen reader testing and how to help students have the best possible experience.

“It’s a cliché but sharing really is caring. By meeting together to share ideas, challenges, and best practice, by being so open, we really are helping each other. It’s been wonderful to learn from others and take their ideas into my own organisation, and it’s saved us all a lot of duplicated effort. I think the main thing that stands out to me is the enthusiasm of the team, I think we should be really proud of that, how willing everyone is to help and support each other. It really is something to be proud of.”

The importance of shared learning is something Fiona echoes too.

“Ghizzi is such a font of knowledge. She really does know so much about accessibility, I learn from her all the time. But I also think there is sort of a wider trend in [HE](#) where, for a long time, resources were quite open; blogs and things, but changes in the trends around how universities run infrastructure (websites and intranets) mean that now a lot of things are behind logins. It makes it harder to share best practice and to reuse materials, which is why this community is so helpful.”

Meeting with peers

“The community has offered that support when you just need to go somewhere and talk to someone who understands,”

continues Ghizzi.

“If nothing else, to just share the struggles of the week. To talk about the conversations that you’d had ad nauseam about the same thing and just felt like you were putting your head against a brick wall. I think the success of it as a community,

the sheer size of it really shows how much it was needed.

"How many people from across different institutions of different sizes and types, different levels, just a massive number of people with a massive amount of responsibility, but with no power to affect change. We needed somewhere to meet.

"It can be frustrating because it shouldn't ever be down to one role. Meeting accessibility regulations is everyone's responsibility and I think until we get institutions to recognise that, and to prioritise that, getting real deep-seated change will be very difficult. But every little triumph is a win. Someone else's experience is just that little bit better. It's worth it."

Many hands make light work

Working to meet accessibility regulations is paramount, emphasises Ghizzi.

"All institutions use a huge range of tools that are provided by third party suppliers. But as the public sector body we are responsible for the accessibility of the tools, systems, or software that we use for teaching and learning in the digital learning environment, or that we use on the website that's public facing.

"So, if third party tool that we are using for teaching and learning turns out to not be accessible, we are liable under the legislation because we are using it, there is an expectation that we will have chosen it.

"Everybody in the community has been involved in adding accessibility statements to a shared database. If I came across a tool that wasn't listed, I'd add in the relevant links, so it saves someone else that work. It's been a hugely collaborative project, and just saves it all being down to one person."

Making maths accessible

Another innovative outcome of the accessibility community is a piece of work exploring accessibility in maths. Fiona is part of the project and explains:

"I've been really proud of the accessible maths group. There are five of us in total and we're currently working on a glossary of terms that support maths. We've taken a couple each which we go away and research, and input into the one document, which, once it's ready, we'll share more widely.

"The idea is, we take a maths tool, go away and research it, what VLEs is it compatible with for example, and then add the findings to the glossary, hopefully saving other people a lot of time and headaches.

"Working more with statistics, I'm not an authority on accessible maths, but I felt there was a lot of crossover between data visualisation, statistics and maths, and I'm here to learn. I can talk with more authority about things like the Microsoft Maths notation tools because I've been using those in OneNote for stats support.

"Interestingly, the kind of tools you use for different types of maths differ quite broadly. You might need a more specialist, highly powered tool to read out equations for someone who is blind or partially sighted for example. But we're starting in a place of collaboration, and that's really exciting."

The power of many

Working on a project alone can be daunting, the weight of responsibility can sit heavy on our shoulders. But as the accessibility community group is proving, working together can solve otherwise impossible problems. Knowing that others have experienced similar challenges is not only reassuring, but it also facilitates debate and prompts progress.

Many voices are louder than one, and the encouragement and shared knowledge that community offers can also shape real and lasting change. As Helen Keller said “alone, we can do so little; together, we can do so much”.

Find out more about the [accessibility community group and how you can get involved](#).

This story is featured as part of our annual review 2020-21. [Read the other stories](#).