Approaching Web Accessibility as a Community of Practice: Enablers, Challenges & Lessons Learned

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Abstract: In November 2010, a community of practice was formed at McMaster University around accessible teaching and learning with an emergent focus on web accessibility. The nimbleness of the community of practice structure allowed the action-oriented group to plan and undertake a number of web accessibility initiatives, including the development of a centralized accessibility resource website for the university. The session will highlight the enablers and challenges in mobilizing web accessibility projects as a community of practice, and discuss how – in conjunction with official committees formed to address policy change at the institutional level – communities of practice can play a critical role in addressing attitudinal barriers and supporting a culture change as part of a broader web accessibility strategy.

Best Practices Session Proposal

When working in a multi-stakeholder environment like a university, community buy-in is critical to the success of any proposed project, initiative or program. In light of recent provincial legislation in Ontario – the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA) – the founding members of the Accessibility Community of Practice (CoP) recognized that, for a large institution like McMaster University, meeting both the spirit and the letter of the law would require a coordinated and streamlined approach. The Accessibility CoP brought together a broad range of stakeholders from across the institution, and its action-oriented focus captured the interest of the partners, leading to a commitment of resources in the form of time and skill sets.

The session will outline some of the lessons learned throughout the Accessibility CoP’s first major initiative: the development of a centralized accessibility resource website, set to have an institution-wide impact and benefit. In detailing both promising practices which emerged from the process, as well as pitfalls that affected the project, the session will highlight the advantages and limitations of approaching web accessibility using a community of practice structure. To conclude, the session will discuss future directions and projects for the Accessibility CoP, and explore the kind of work that can be done by a community of practice to promote a culture of accessible web design and development practices.