

Universal Design and Communication Access

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The concepts of Communication Access and Universal Design have gained momentum over the last few years. While both aim to improve environments to be more inclusive for people with disabilities, the link between the two concepts has yet to be defined. This study therefore aimed to ascertain the key elements of universal design to provide a basis for which communication access can be compared.

Background

Universal Design (UD) is a concept that has been applied to many areas of research and practice. A relatively newer concept is Communication Access (CA), which shares its intention with UD in enabling accessibility for people “regardless of age or ability” (Trachtman et al. 2000:2). However, the exact relationship between the two concepts remains unclear.

Communication is recognised as a basic human right, as per the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) and the Australian Disability Discrimination Act (1992). Some people experience communication disability, which “impacts upon [an individual’s] communication and participation in society” (Solarsh & Johnson, 2017:120), and therefore CA has emerged as a priority in society. Johnson et al. (2013:7) state that CA occurs when “people are respectful and responsive to individuals with communication disabilities, and strategies are used to support successful communication.”

There appears to be some common elements between the concepts of UD and CA. UD aims to ensure accessibility for all individuals, including, but not limited to people with disabilities (Pasquina et al. 2010). This ethos appears to be similar to what is proposed by the concept of CA. However, due to the vast range of areas in which UD has been applied, it is challenging to comprehensively capture the nuanced relevance of CA across the many domains of UD, and herein lies the intention of this paper.

Aim

The aim of the paper is to develop an understanding of UD and explore how it may interact with the concept of CA.

Method

A review of the numerous definitions of UD (and related terms) was undertaken in order to gain a clearer understanding of how it may apply to CA. Articles that included a definition of UD or reference to a specific UD framework were included in this study. The key identified areas included (a) the built environment, (b) learning, and, (c) technology/web accessibility. For the purpose of this study, these were the only areas analysed as they were the areas in which a significant amount of research existed.

Results

Definitions of UD that appeared frequently were gathered from articles in the three identified areas. From here, a total of seven key definitions were identified. For the areas of the built environment and learning, the most frequently appearing definitions were analysed. However, for technology and web accessibility, there was no consensus of definition, as demonstrated in the contrasting definitions chosen for analysis.

To begin considering a singular definition of UD that encompasses the three included key areas, we must examine the similarities and differences in the definitions. Other than the difference in subject matter, the two differences between UD definitions appear to lie within:

- a. the demographic for which universal design is created - universal design appears to either apply to all people, including those with disabilities, or specifically only to people with disabilities – and,
- b. the way in which universalisation is achieved – this appears to be either through
 - i. standardisation – creating a singular design that can be used by the most amount of people (including people with disabilities), or,
 - ii. specialisation – creating alternatives and providing accommodations for people who need them (e.g. people with disabilities).

Discussion

The concept of UD has been applied to many areas with the fundamental principle that UD must be created for all individuals – both with and without disabilities. However, definitions diverge on how universality should be achieved; whether it is through a single solution for all, a range of alternatives for diverse needs, or potentially a combination of the two. When considering how this understanding of UD applies to CA, we must answer these two questions about CA; ‘who does it affect?’ and ‘how is it achieved?’ As previously mentioned, CA is intended to enable accessible communication for people with disabilities. The current definition from Johnson et al. (2013:7) focuses specifically on CA being of benefit to people with “communication disabilities” and thus does not necessarily align with the concept of UD for *everyone*. However, a study from Bigby et al. (2019) suggests that CA is achieved by using a combination of set standards for all *and* the provision of specialised options for diverse needs. This is similar to the approach taken in web accessibility, suggesting that CA may be more closely aligned with UD in its execution. Moreover, CA certainly has the potential to be applied to all people, both with and without communication difficulties.

Conclusions

From this review of the literature on universal design, it can be concluded that there are two key elements of universal design. Firstly, the environment, product or experience must be created for all individuals – both with and without disabilities. Secondly, there are two ways to achieve this: universal design can either be achieved through creating a single solution, which intends to make the environment/product/experience accessible to everyone; or through a range of alternatives that can suit the needs of a diverse range of individuals. Of course, a combination of these two methods may also be used. Communication access does not appear to currently apply to a universal set of users, however, there is the scope for this to be the case. Future research should look into considering how the concept of CA can be

extended to a UD approach, rather than one specifically designed for individuals with communication disabilities.

References

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