Chauvin, A. (2012). A Stich in Time Saves Nine: The Importance of Offering Alternative-Format Textbooks in a Timely Fashion. Hermès (AQEIPS Newsletter), vol. 15, 15-17.

Screen-reading programs (such as JAWS) and off-the-shelf accessible computers with voice-output (such as Apple products) provide students with a wide variety of options, but these options can work in conjunction with Braille. Audio formats alone are a poor substitute for learning how to spell and communicate in writing – skills that can only be learned through Braille or print. And while accessible technology is a great equalizer, what can truly replace the timeless satisfaction of being able to turn the pages of a book, or being able to read a menu on your own without a second thought, just like everyone else?

More than 200 years since the 13-year old Louis Braille invented the Braille code, Braille still continues to be relevant, and I write today to affirm that it is, by no means, replaceable.

Technology

A Stich in Time Saves Nine: The Importance of Offering Alternative-Format Textbooks in a Timely Fashion

By Alexandre Chauvin,
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For many years now, accessible education has been a major concern for Canadian postsecondary institutions. With the steady stream of students with varied interests and needs entering postsecondary institutions, service providers all across the country have been faced with the challenge of providing these students with diverse accommodations.
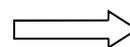
As an employee of Dawson College's Student AccessAbility Centre, I provide students with alternative formats (e.g. enlarged texts, electronic versions of print texts, audio support) for their exams, course notes and textbooks. This is usually a fairly straightforward operation. However, in some cases – and especially when it comes to textbooks –it is impractical to prepare the alternative format in-house. Doing so would most likely result in a high turnover time and a poor quality product as the demand far exceeds the resources available to most service providers. Therefore, the production of alternative formats for textbooks is often put into the hands of the textbook publishers.

At a first glance this seems to be a most logical and reasonable procedure: the student purchases a book, brings the book to the service provider who, in turn, contacts the publisher to order an alternative version of the book. If all goes well, the student will get the alternative textbook in "just a few weeks" which is problematic. In a thirteen to fifteen-week semester, "a few weeks" puts you right in the middle of midterms with no textbook to help you prepare. In fact, I have heard many stories of courses abandoned and semesters lost because of delays in obtaining the necessary alternative formats. This is one of the reasons why our past research (I am also a student research assistant at the Adaptech Research Network) has focused on   obstacles and facilitators of academic success.

 Despite the rather grim picture I have drawn so far, I believe it is good that publishers are involved in the creation and distribution of accessible versions of the textbooks they sell. The real problem is the delay between when students buy textbooks and when they receive the alternative formats. The solution to the above-mentioned problem is not unidimensional. While it is important that publishers reduce the delivery time for the accessible versions of their products, there are most certainly ways to improve the procedure on the postsecondary institution's side. For example, after a students registers for their courses, the   service provider could get in touch with the teachers to see if textbooks have already been chosen.

If so, it is thenpossible to order the alternative formats before the semester even starts, therefore ensuring that the students have access to them right at the beginning of the term. Accessibility, while an important factor, is only part of the equation. It does not suffice to simply make accommodations available. It is just as important that these accommodations be delivered in a timely manner so as to promote equal access to school materials for all students.
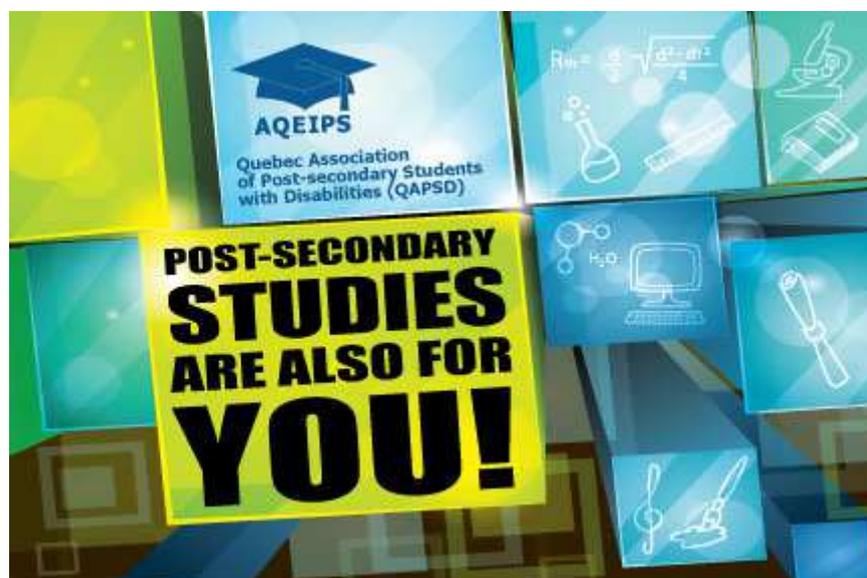
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