

First Meetings with Digital Systems in Higher Education

Marthe Nikoline Elsrud

My story for this workshop involves the experience of using an interface for the first time, and how to accommodate that experience in a positive way and universally designed.

As a new student you are introduced to numerous new experiences and impressions, where learning the university's digital systems will possibly be one of the many. How to use these for the first time could be difficult and baffling. But how does one define the concept of «first time»? According to Cambridge Dictionary (n.d.) they define «first time» as the following:

«doing or experiencing something for the first time.»

But this seems still very vague. For me it could mean numerous different things. It doesn't necessarily have to be the first time you use an interface, but it could also mean using something for the first time after the interface has been slightly changed. The menu structure could be different, the page could be divided differently, the brand could have had an entire rebranding so the vibe could be different. It would also be various kinds of first time. Like uploading a file format that you haven't uploaded before, or having a new kind of user access to the systems. These are just some elements that could make a user confused.

For me, experiencing something for the first time involves a lot of feelings. The feelings that I often get when I experience something for the first time could be some confusion, fascination, and possibly excitement. As you keep using the interface that first time the feeling could change, to contentment, frustration, or even hopelessness. These feelings could be heightened in stressed situations, which a student often is in. Not just with their commitments to their education, with assignments and deadlines, but for everything that happens outside of their studies and their current life situation. So how does this connect to universal design? What is of interest in this is what happens after that first time. Do you want to keep using it? Or are you even able to keep using it? Are you even able to actually use it that first time? Usually you have the possibility of not using an interface if you feel frustrated when using it, but as a student you often have certain interfaces and systems that you need to keep using to be able to follow your courses. You are in a way forced to use a system that you don't necessarily like or love, or even an interface that you can't even use at all, because of your user needs.

As a fresh student to new surroundings, using and experiencing something for the first time, the accessibility and understanding is of importance. I myself, who doesn't have any special user needs, have also been experiencing frustration when using digital systems at the University of Oslo (UiO) as a first timer. My first meeting with UiO's web publishing, Vortex, wasn't easy. It was my first time submitting an assignment as a student of UiO, which I personally found as a very stressful situation. In one of my courses we were intended to submit our assignments through Vortex, where we would upload it for everyone to see. As we did this, you would also see who had already submitted their assignment ahead of us. As I tried using Vortex, the first steps were easy. You first log in with your standard UiO login credentials, then choose which page you would like to upload your files to and select the right folder to upload. The issues began when you were supposed to actually choose a file to upload. I wasn't able to even choose a file to upload, because when it came to that step, nothing happened. I didn't get a positive nor a negative feedback. Because of this, I had no idea what I was doing wrong. During this I saw that several other students were able to do upload their assignments to the page, which I failed to do. After some troubleshooting around

the issue, it became clear that I didn't have the necessary user rights to upload files to the course page. This lack of feedback, the feedback that is supposed to tell you if you are doing something right or wrong, is crucial for first time experience with an interface. As I reflect on this I think about different user needs, myself as a user could see the screen just fine and could clearly see that something wasn't right. But what if you couldn't see the screen? What would happen in this situation if you were to use a screen reader?

As an educational institute you have several different user groups with an even larger variety of user needs. For example the University of Oslo (UiO), with a large diversity of 28 007 registered students in 2017 (University of Oslo, 2017) is Norway's second largest university (SSB, 2018¹). UiO needs to cover many different user needs through their digital systems. The issue with this is that in some cases it seems to be forgotten that accessibility is important in the possibility for everyone to be able to complete a degree in higher education. Equality is one of the core values of universal design (Lid, 2013, p. 17), where every student should have the same level of accessibility as the next student.

So based on equality, all the different types of students should have the same rights and possibilities, independent on which types of needs they have. If one of UiO's digital systems aren't accessible for a specific user group one could argue for a loss in equality. Lid (2013) brought up the problem that the learning platform Fronter wasn't possible to use by people who were visually impaired and had to use a screen reader (p. 139). In that context Lid discussed the question of lacking quality control around applications that are used in higher education. UiO formerly used Fronter, but during 2018 they have been busy transferring over to Canvas as a learning platform. One of the benefits of switching to Canvas is that can be used with a screen reader (Canvas, 2015). The obstacles mentioned above might be the reason why only 21 % of people with disabilities have at least one year higher education, compared to 45 % for the rest of the population. One of the reasons for this is that people with disabilities encounter physical obstacles during their study day (Molden et al., 2009, in Barne-, ungdoms- og familiedirektoratet, 2018). One of these physical obstacles can be a digital system, and when every fourth student in Norway has a form of disability (SSB, 2018²) it becomes even more important to ask questions about quality checks as Lid does. To me, universal design involves the feeling of security, that you feel taken care of, based on your user needs. So then, in a situation that is new, and possibly exciting, the importance of making accessible user interfaces is even higher.

References

Cambridge Dictionary (n.d.). From: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/first-time> (downloaded 11.06.2018)

Canvas (2015). From: <https://community.canvaslms.com/docs/DOC-2061-accessibility-within-canvas> (downloaded 11.06.2018)

Lid, I. M. (2013). Universell Utforming. Verdigrunnlag, kunnskap og praksis. Cappelen Damm.

Universitetet i Oslo (2017). UiO i tal. From: <https://www.uio.no/om/tall-og-fakta/uio-i-tall/> (downloaded 10.08.2018)

Barne-, ungdoms- og familiedirektoratet. (2018). Høyere utdanning. From: https://www.bufdir.no/Statistikk_og_analyse/Nedsatt_funksjonsevne/Oppvekst_og_utdanning/Hoyere_utdanning/ (downloaded 10.08.2018)

¹ SSB (2018) From: <https://www.ssb.no/utdanning/artikler-og-publikasjoner/her-er-de-storste-studiestedene-i-norge> (downloaded 08.06.2018)

² SSB (2018) From: <https://www.ssb.no/utdanning/artikler-og-publikasjoner/hver-fjerde-student-har-en-funksjonsnedsettelse> (downloaded 08.06.2018)