

Accessible Icebreakers: Designing a Requirement-based Taxonomy

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

An icebreaker is an interactive experience used to ‘build relationships and set a positive tone’ in a group interaction (Doctoroff Landay 2011). For these activities to be successful in collaborative learning environments, they need to be made accessible for all participants. Inclusive icebreakers require facilitators to consider and respect the physical and neurological needs of individuals, and an taxonomy for classifying icebreaker activities based on accessibility can assist with this task.

Approaches to accessibility can be classified as being from one of three schools of thought: person-based, environment-based, and requirement-based. Person-based classifications make the assumption that every individual with the same disability¹ has the same needs, and therefore requires the same adaptations to be made to an activity to allow them access. This reverts back to a medical model for disability, and requires individuals to self-identify with a particular diagnoses to be given assistance. Further, person-based models focus on diagnosable disabilities and therefore do not allow for new or changing diagnoses, and also do not allow for the exploration of access needs that are not diagnosable, such as introversion.

Environment-based approaches to accessibility focus on the physical environment in which an activity will be conducted. This approach is restrictive, and cannot be used to appropriately classify situations that do not have a ‘standard interface’, such as a boardgame or icebreaker (Meeple Like Us 2018). Icebreakers are not always conducted in the same space, so their accessibility cannot be assessed based on that space.

As an alternative to person-based and environment-based approaches, requirement-based accessibility classifications focus on the physical and neurological requirements of an activity rather than the limitations of an individual or the restrictions of a physical space. Requirement-based classifications give agency to individuals, allowing them to determine whether or not they are able to access an activity based on what it asks them to do. Meeple Like Us (2018) uses a requirement-based system for categorising boardgames, which focuses on symptoms and requirements rather than ‘making prescriptions based on diagnoses or conditions’. The organisation specifies that they are ‘perfectly qualified to talk about what a game asks people to do but not at all qualified to say what conditions would prevent people from doing it’, with this responsibility being placed on the

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individual who has access needs or whomever is facilitating the activity for that individual (Meeple Like Us 2018).

This responsibility means facilitators need to understand the access needs of a group they are working with to appropriately select an activity that has been classified using a requirement-based system. It is also important that facilitators are prepared to employ intersectional approaches to accessibility and to foster an inclusive environment for activities to be performed in. Although research regarding the responsibility of individuals facilitating icebreaker activities is limited, relevant research has been conducted into facilitators of theatre games, which negotiate similar issues around physicality, emotional vulnerability, touch, and consent.

This research inspired the creation of a requirement-based taxonomy for icebreaker games, as well as the writing of a general guide that emphasises the importance of consent, respect, universal design, purpose, clear communication of boundaries, emotional support, sociocultural understanding, and opt-out options.

The taxonomy consists of 19 classifications that can be used to label icebreaker activities based on their requirements, therefore allowing facilitators to select activities to suit the group they are working with or for individual participants to opt-out of activities that do not meet their needs. These 19 classifications are: verbal communication; interacting with one person; interacting with a group of people; speaking / performing a task in front of the whole group; abstract thinking; logical reasoning and deduction; following complex instructions; remembering many things; physical contact; physical movement through a space; changing physical position frequently; handwriting / drawing; timed responses; differentiating colour; reading; reading aloud; sight; hearing; and hand / arm movement.

Each of these classifications is denoted by a symbol, with as many as necessary being applied to each icebreaker. In addition, the taxonomy includes ‘levels’ that can be applied to each symbol, indicating whether this requirement is necessary for the core experience of the icebreaker, whether it can be modified, or whether teamwork might allow an individual to avoid a particular aspect of the icebreaker activity. For example, if an icebreaker requires handwriting, but only one member of a team needs to complete this part of the activity, the activity may still be accessible to an individual who has difficulties writing, and the relevant symbol from the taxonomy can be modified to indicate this.

This research will present our foundational guidelines for creating inclusive environments for icebreaker activities, will demonstrate the 19 symbols comprising our requirement-based taxonomy, and will suggest examples for how this model can be applied to other practices of accessibility in the games industry.

ENDNOTES

¹ Disability is an umbrella term for any impairment, activity limitations, or participation restrictions. According to the World Health Organisation (2018), ‘an impairment is a problem in body function or structure; an activity limitation is a difficulty encountered by an individual in executing a task or action; while a participation restriction is a problem experienced by an individual in involvement in life situations’.

BIO

Jess has supported people with disabilities in supported accommodation and community settings, and facilitated camps and activity programs for young people and families experiencing disadvantage as a volunteer. She has an undergraduate degree in Disability and Developmental Education, and is now studying game design and making games about ethical and social issues. She enjoys enabling creators of things and spaces to actively and intentionally include all kinds of people, and learning from those she encounters about how this can be done better.

Dr Alayna Cole is a sessional course coordinator and lecturer in Serious Games at the University of the Sunshine Coast. She holds a doctorate in Creative Arts (Creative Writing) and has broad research interests, but is primarily focused on creating and analysing narratives that improve diverse representation, particularly of gender and sexuality. She is currently researching the representation of queer identities in games from the mid-1980s to present.

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