Understanding Accessibility

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Joshua   Welcome to the inaugural episode of EdgeCast. My name is Joshua Gaul. I am the Associate Vice President and Chief Digital Learning Officer here at Edge.

Laura   And I'm Dr. Laura Romeo, and I'm an Instructional Designer at Edge.

Joshua   This first series of episodes of EdgeCast is all about accessibility, and we're going to dive into it.

The definitions, the risks, the benefits, and the questions that institutions should be asking themselves when addressing accessibility, usability and providing support for differently abled students. It's important stuff. And as Laura will tell you, it's not just about checking a box.

Laura   That's right.

So it's more than just legal compliance. Right? With accessibility, we really need to make sure that all individuals, regardless of their ability or disability, can fully participate and succeed in digital learning. Accessible design can promote equity by taking away the barriers that might hinder certain individuals from Really fully benefiting from digital resources that are available to them. It kind of future-proofs companies' content, you know, courses.

When we can anticipate and implement accessibility measures, it allows our content to become more adaptable to emerging technologies and standards that are kind of, you know, coming down the pipeline.

In the world of digital learning, accessibility is all about crafting and introducing different learning environments and materials. It's about making sure that every student, regardless of their abilities or disabilities, can fully engage in the educational experience.

Joshua   A lot of times that falls on the instructional design team and a lot of times the faculty, because some schools just don't have the staffing to do otherwise. So they expect faculty members and instructional designers to understand that. But a lot of times there's not a clear understanding of what exactly that means. For example, a video with captions is only accessible if the captions aren't accurate.

Laura   Absolutely, Josh. So, as a designer, I try to approach content and course design with the goal of creating a welcoming and inclusive learning environment. I'm always asking myself, "How can each student access this in their own way? How do we meet their needs and accommodate whatever comes their way?" Of course It's not just about meeting needs but also deeply understanding and accommodating the diverse requirements that come our way. We have to be proactive and weave these considerations into the very fabric of how we design and roll out our content. That way, we can make sure the learning experience is seamless and equitable for everyone.

Joshua   So often people look at it as a hassle, but in truth, a lot of the design processes we put in place because of accessibility requirements help other students too. English Second language students, older students. I watch everything with captions on now, so it's good for me too.

Laura   Personally, I find it particularly beneficial when I find I'm pressed for time to pull up the transcript when I'm watching a video. This lets me scan through and pull out the key points quickly. To me, this practice exemplifies accessibility — offering different ways to engage with and participate in content that's tailored to our individual needs.

Joshua   Yeah, you could be sitting in the doctor's office and need to watch a video for class. Put it on mute, put the captions on. I watched the entire first season of Game of Thrones on my phone on mute, with captions on sitting in the rocking chair in my son's room when he was 2 years old because he needed me in the room to fall asleep. It helps everyone.

Laura   Accessibility sets the stage for a more flexible learning experience, allowing us to adapt and engage with content in a way that suits our needs. It's like creating a space where we can navigate learning with greater ease and versatility.

Joshua   A lot of people are unfamiliar with the broad spectrum of accessibility. They just assume accessibility means making sure students who are blind or deaf or in a wheelchair can access things on the same level as students who aren't. But it's much broader than that.

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Laura   When we're talking about accessibility, we're diving into a whole range of considerations. Take, for instance, motor disabilities. It's not just about visuals and sounds; it goes beyond. Think about conditions like paralysis, muscular dystrophy, or cerebral palsy—each bringing its unique set of challenges. For example, some students might rely on innovative tools like sip-and-puff systems, where they control devices with their breath. Being knowledgeable about these disabilities enables us to proactively plan and create learning environments that seamlessly integrate with the tools and strategies students require for success. As designers and instructors, our approach should revolve around thoughtfulness, careful planning, and creating implementable strategies to accommodate these diverse needs.

Joshua   Not everybody can use a mouse, so pages and sites need to have keyboard control. And there's varying levels of accessibility. Not every student who's visually impaired is completely blind, so a lot of those students want to take ownership and say I can still see; it's just not as well. So they don't want to use screen readers; they want to use other tools like zoom text to make sure that they can hold on to the last bit of sight they have. None of these people feel disabled. They're part of a community of people that need accessibility and they support each other. They deserve the same access that every one of us has. Why should we be ignoring them?

Laura   You're right - emphasizing abilities and addressing disabilities is essential. As designers, our goal is to create an equal environment for everybody, providing strategies that help foster inclusivity and accessibility.

Joshua   One of the biggest, I won't say new categories, but more prevalent is cognitive disabilities. That students have anxiety, PTSD, things like that, that you don't think about. They're real disabilities that need to be considered. Making sure all courses have standards and templates. Making sure one unit doesn't look completely different than the next unit. Making sure students know what to expect when they go into a course. Not being surprised by a 100 question quiz they don't understand the purpose of because it wasn't spelled out in the syllabus anywhere.

Laura   Expanding on the significance of addressing cognitive disabilities, it's crucial to acknowledge conditions like dyslexia, ADHD, memory disorders, processing speed deficits, executive functioning issues, autism spectrum disorders (ASD), and intellectual disabilities. These challenges encompass a broad range of impacts on learning and information processing. You gave some great examples of how we can incorporate inclusive practices in online learning environments by not only standardizing formats but also anticipating and accommodating these specific cognitive challenges.

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Joshua   There are different levels of accessibility. For example, vision, there are people who are completely blind, and there are people with very low vision. There are people who are colorblind. There are people who, depending on the contrast of the text versus the background on the page, can't see it. My oldest son is color blind. So blue text on a black background or yellow text on a white background can be a problem. Those types of accessibility requirements aren't reported to your office of disability services because they don't view it as an accessibility requirement. So, like Laura, you mentioned earlier, be proactive and prevent those requests from needing to come in at all.

Laura   Your insights into the different levels of vision impairment, color blindness, and the contrast challenges are also critical considerations. For instance, in online learning environments, a visually impaired student may face obstacles when content relies heavily on visual elements without alternative text or audio descriptions. Similarly, a deaf or hard of hearing student might find it challenging when the learning materials heavily depend on spoken content without captions or transcripts. So, we have to ask ourselves,"what tools and strategies can we implement to make content more accessible?"

Joshua   It's true. Not every student that has an auditory disability is deaf or hard of hearing. Sometimes it's a processing problem, almost like how dyslexic people can read, it's more difficult for them to process words. So it's the same idea - not the same disability, but a similar disability to others. So you have to account for all of them.

In my previous work with Empire, Empire was focused on adult learning, so a lot of my accessibility experience comes from working with adults who have accessibility needs and and the faculty members that teach them. I mentioned earlier about the whole idea of different levels of accessibility. I had an instructor I worked with at Empire who used to tell me all the time that she's not blind. She has vision impairment. So the text on her desktop was really zoomed in and it always had a high contrast setting. So her needs are different from a fully blind student or a fully blind instructor, which are different from a regular, non differently-abled student or faculty member. It was an eye-opening experience for me, watching how she worked and watching how her experience was so different from what we dealt with.

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Laura For me, reflecting on my experiences, accessibility has played a crucial role throughout my teaching career and into my instructional design era. In the early stages, I encountered diverse student needs, including those on 504 plans and IEPs. This taught me to rethink my teaching methods, understanding that a "one-size-fits-all" approach wasn't conducive to their learning. I had to begin considering various ways I presented information, how students engaged with content and what choices they had to demonstrate what they learned. Fast forward to a few years ago, the pandemic brought an unexpected transition of my face-to-face content into an online format. Adapting my in-person content to meet the needs of students logging into virtual platforms became quite a challenge. I had to figure out how to keep everyone engaged and flexible, catering not just to those who needed extra support, but to everyone logging in. Interestingly, integrating tools like transcripts for videos, closed captions for live recordings, backchannel chat groups, and choice boards for project products brought unexpected positive feedback. Students found new ways of learning that suited their preferences and allowed me to reevaluate my own teaching practices.

Joshua The High Flex model that has become more popular since the pandemic, though it's been around for 20 years, has actually encouraged accessibility and the idea of creating different modalities for the same course. Students who can't make it to class in person need to watch online after the fact, so you record the lectures and caption them. Students can also join live via video conference platforms like Webex or Zoom. It gives instructors and instructional designers a way to look at their course differently and say "OK. If I wasn't just an in person student, how could I succeed in this course and be given the same support and the same access. Or, at least, as close to the same access as possible." That's what we've been doing with accessibility for years. Trying to create a different way to access instructional material and activities without taking out the learning part.

Laura My primary takeaway in advocating for accessibility is making sure that what we offer benefits not just students with disabilities but all learners. It involves thinking about the content and considering how students will navigate a course, how they will engage with and process information, and how they will be most successful in presenting their understanding.

Joshua Well, I think that'll bring us to a close this week. Thanks for watching. Join us next time. Until then, this is EdgeCast signing off.

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