

## **Limed: Teaching with a Twist**

Season 2, Episode 3 – Understanding and Evaluating Online Course Accessibility

Matt Wittstein (00:13):

You're listening to Limed: Teaching with a Twist, a podcast that plays with pedagogy. This month, producer Dhvani Toprani goes on a deep dive into accessibility with Rafael da Silva from Boise State University. Rafael teaches about accessibility in online asynchronous courses alongside other topics for students training to become instructional designers, online educators, and other technology-rich teaching practitioners. Specifically, Rafael centers his practices and teaching of accessibility around the web content accessibility guidelines and their four principles, perceivable, operable, understandable, and robust.

(01:00):

Our panel of Ann Gagné now at Brock University, Clare Mullaney from Clemson University, and Vanessa Truelove, Elon University Masters of Higher Education student, discuss some of the nuances of accessibility while sharing tips and tools that might help you make your courses, online or in-person, more inclusive and universally designed. Here's Dhvani Toprani. Enjoy the show.

Dhvani Toprani (01:30):

Hello, everyone and welcome to the show. We have Rafael da Silva today with us from Boise State University. Welcome, Rafael, to the show.

Rafael da Silva (01:38):

Hi. thanks for having me.

Dhvani Toprani (01:40):

So Rafael, tell us more about your learning context and what teaching and learning adventure brings you to the show.

Rafael da Silva (01:47):

So just for introductions, my name is Rafael da Silva. I am a clinical assistant professor of organizational performance and workplace Learning at Boise State University. Our program is primarily a master's program where we teach upon performance improvement, e-learning, and instructional design. In the program, I teach primarily the e-learning classes where students learn how to develop online learning materials for compliance training, for instance, cybersecurity training that you might be familiar with if you are a professional in a higher education context.

(02:23):

Our students go on to become instructional designers, performance improvement professionals in various workplaces from higher education contexts to corporate contexts. Our courses are primarily asynchronous courses, which means that all of the materials in our coursework are available from the get-go. Our students come from all corners of the country and we also have some students that are international students. So essentially, that content needs to be fully accessible to each and every possible learner since we have that wide variety of learning populations.

(03:05):

Recently, there have been lots of advancements in artificial intelligence that have made accessibility work a little bit easier. I'm here to talk about one of the approaches that I've adopted in my classes, which is using ChatGPT plugins and text-to-speech software such as The Script and WellSaid Labs for improving accessibility in my courses.

Dhvani Toprani (03:32):

Thanks, Rafael. That was really informative and it looks like you are trying to bring together some really complex challenges in teaching and learning in our current time. So for our listeners, can you define what the basic premise of accessibility is when they're working with asynchronous courses?

Rafael da Silva (03:49):

So we operate under the web content accessibility guidelines, also known as WCAG. Under WCAG, there are four core principles of accessibility, perceivable, operable, understandable, and robust. That means that every possible learner that comes into your course needs to be able to interact with every object on the screen from beginning to end. They need to be able to have a similar experience whether they have a disability or if they don't have a disability.

(04:25):

So for instance, for video content, you would provide closed captions for learners that are hearing impaired, you would provide an audio equivalent for learners that have some vision impairment. Those are just some examples of things that we can do to ensure accessibility in the course.

(04:45):

When using AI to improve accessibility in courses, I focus primarily on the perceivable and understandable principles. So for instance, using AI to get a YouTube video that we use in one of our classes and generating a transcript for that video that will accompany that video on the learning management system that we use, which is Canvas. We also use text-to-speech software to generate audio equivalence for large chunks of text that we have on Canvas generally to make learners experience a little bit easier using the tools that we have at our disposal.

Dhvani Toprani (05:24):

So Rafael, given the four core principles that you just spoke about, what do the learning objectives look like in your learning context and what are the challenges that you're facing in the process of accomplishing those learning objectives?

Rafael da Silva (05:39):

That is a great question. My understanding of accessibility is comprehensive due to my expertise of instructional design, the WCAG principles, the four principles. However, there are better ways to improve accessibility in courses. What I have described are just basic ways to improve learners' experiences. One of my challenges is to ensure full accessibility to all. My questions for the panelists would be, what can be done to ensure that everybody has a better experience in a course, and what are some other things that I might be thinking about as far as not just the perceivable component but also the robust and the operable component of accessibility that I might be implementing in the future for my courses.

Dhvani Toprani (06:29):

So what I hear you say, Rafael, is while you are teaching accessibility to your learners, you're also trying to think of accessibility as an instructor and elements of your course that are and are not accessible.

Rafael da Silva (06:43):

Yes. Due to the fact that I'm also teaching accessibility, I have in my mind that I have to practice what I preach. So in addition to incorporating accessibility throughout the courses that I teach, I also want to provide students the tools that they need to succeed and give them insight into the processes that I go through to ensure accessibility.

Dhvani Toprani (07:06):

Great. I think that's a really good approach towards teaching something when you actually model things to your learners. In doing this for as long as you've done this as an instructor, what has been the biggest challenge for you when you are designing a course or what are the questions that you think the most about?

Rafael da Silva (07:23):

This is a relatively new approach because there have been new tools that are assisting me to create these processes, establish accessibility compliance in the courses that have made workflows a lot easier. I have found that the more I implement options for accessibility, options for receivability and operability in the courses, that enhances the learning experience of basically every learner, as I mentioned, providing an audio equivalent for text content.

(07:58):

In a scenario where a learner is busy, is attending to something else in their personal life, they can go into our learning management system app and basically just play the audio from their phone. If for some reason their video needs to be silent, they can still watch that video with closed captions turned on. So in addition to ensuring accessibility compliance, I've noticed that students are having a better experience overall in the course because accessibility does really benefit everybody in the long run.

(08:33):

A personal note, I am Brazilian. I was born and raised in Brazil, and up to a time in my life, I watched basically all English language content with subtitles, and after reaching a level of language expertise, I switched to closed captions. To this day, I still prefer to watch videos or any media for that matter with closed captions turned on. So we're just providing that extra options so learners can navigate content however they like.

Dhvani Toprani (09:04):

Going back to your four principles of accessibility that you shared with us, what do you think your courses are really strong on and why, and where do you think there is room for improvement and you would like our panelists to dive deeper into?

Rafael da Silva (09:19):

I think my courses excel on providing options for learners to perceive content, to watch a video with closed captions, to listen to an audio equivalent of content, but I would be really interested in new ways to improve accessibility of asynchronous courses from other best practices that exist out there.

Dhvani Toprani (09:43):

From your experience of instructing this course so far, what feedback have your learners given you for the course's accessibility?

Rafael da Silva (09:51):

The feedback that I got from learners speaks to something that I have mentioned previously, and it has to do also with our learner population, some insight into our student population. Most of our students are working professionals. They are students in their late 20s, into their 40s and 50s. So those students really appreciate the options to watch content, to listen to content even if they are in their mobile phones, even if they are traveling, if they are taking care of their children and attending to something else. The general feedback that I've gotten from students is that they appreciate those options.

(10:32):

So I started with this approach in one of my courses, the E-Learning, Authoring, and Development course, which is our main e-learning course in our program. I have started to adopt this perspective for all of my courses, ensuring accessibility in the other courses just because of the positive reception that I've gotten in addition to, obviously, the accessibility component that strongly benefits from that approach.

Dhvani Toprani (11:00):

Can you tell us more about the nature of content that your students are interacting with in your course or what is the media of the content? Are they essentially reading articles? Are they looking at videos or they're doing some other group work?

Rafael da Silva (11:14):

So in the courses that I teach, most of the content is delivered through videos or text, videos that are instructional videos that I created. There are e-learning materials that I create that are self-paced and fully accessible as well, videos that cover content that have been created by other professionals, that are publicly available in video hosting websites such as YouTube. We cover e-learning principles, so there are theories and principles that have to be read from the course textbook, which students read on a weekly basis. So that is the nature of content in our course. For heavy text on the Canvas platform, the learning management system that we use, students have the option for audio as well.

Dhvani Toprani (12:08):

Are there any tools you use to determine the accessibility of the course?

Rafael da Silva (12:08):

That's a great question. So our learning management system has built-in features of accessibility. So if we have, for instance, an image that is not accessible that I did not provide alternative text or all text for, the platform will tell me that I have to provide all text for that image. If a PDF file, for instance, is not accessible, it will also tell me that. Essentially, there are builtin features to let you know if content is accessible or not. For other matters such as ensuring that content is fully perceivable, then I will rely on my own judgment on where I need to provide, for instance, a text equivalent for a video that is embedded on the learning management system or a text-to-speech or narrated video for any chunks of text that are included in the learning management system.

Dhvani Toprani (13:04):

Listening to you, I almost feel, Rafael, that you already do so much to ensure that your course is accessible. You have a good conceptual understanding of what this is and then you're trying to bring this in practice as much as possible. I also know that there's always so much more to do with accessibility and design, right? So there isn't a definite end to this. So my question to you is, how do you then evaluate the accessibility of your own course and material?

Rafael da Silva (13:32):

My approach for evaluating the accessibility of my courses has been student feedback. Usually if I don't hear anything that is disrupting the student experience, that is a good sign, and also receiving positive feedback is another good sign on course evaluations or informal student communications. That is how I have evaluated the accessibility in my courses. I do have to say, though, that we have ways in our institution to ensure accessibility to a higher level, especially when we develop courses from scratch. We work with teams of instructional designers that help us ensure full accessibility in the courses that we design, and that is a huge help as well, but that is another great point that you raised that I would be interested in hearing from the panel, ways to not just ensure accessibility, but also evaluate it in a regular basis so that I know that I'm meeting the needs of all students.

Dhvani Toprani (14:36):

Great. So that sounds like a lot of exciting discussions and conversations to have with our panelists, and what I'm taking away from this is you are interested in exploring innovative ways of ensuring accessibility for your asynchronous courses and also exploring how we can evaluate accessibility in a way so that there is that cycle of feedback that you are getting from your students and then making design related changes for your courses. Thank you so much, Rafael, for being on this show and I can't wait to hear what your panelists have to say.

Rafael da Silva (15:09):

Great. Thank you for the conversation.

Dhvani Toprani (15:27):

Welcome, everyone. We are here today with our panel, and I'm excited to dive deeper into Rafael's learning context with all of you. To get us started, panelists, do you mind introducing yourself and sharing an example of how you have seen accessible course content improve online learning experiences for students?

Vanessa Truelove (15:46):

Hi. My name is Vanessa Truelove. I utilize they/them pronouns. I'm currently at Elon University and I'm getting my master's degree in higher education. So the hope is that eventually I will work at a college one day. As far as an example of course content that's improved student learning, I personally am someone who utilizes an iPad to take notes for readings and things. So it's been really helpful when some of my professors link to their PDFs directly on Moodle so that I can download that on my iPad, so that I can then take notes because if I am not able to use my iPad, then it disrupts my whole system and it loses my ability to be a student for a hot second.

Clare Mullaney (16:30):

Hi, everyone. I'm Clare Mullaney, and I use she/her pronouns. I'm assistant professor of English at Clemson University in South Carolina where I teach both undergraduate and graduate courses on American literature, disability studies, and also book history, so thinking about books as objects and specifically thinking about histories of editing and editorship. In terms of online learning and accessibility, I think one of the things I like to say about online learning is that accessibility is inherently built into it. The one example that I think about is that very strange semester for those of us who are teaching or were students then of 2020 where everything suddenly went online due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

(17:10):

One of the things that was remarkable about that semester is we could see the same group of students in two very, very different classroom settings, one being in-person, I was teaching a poetry class, and the other being an online format, and I had taken my class on Twitter, so we communicated on Twitter because not everyone had access to video, cameras or microphones, and there were a handful of students that had never spoken in the first class. So I had very little sense of who they were. Maybe there were wonderful writers, but they never spoke aloud. There was something really remarkable that happened once we were in an online environment that wasn't determined by speech. So we communicated through liking, through sharing images, through writing. I just like to think about all the things that online learning has opened up for disabled students in particular that we haven't yet seen by focusing so intently on the in-person classroom experience.

Ann Gagné (17:59):

Hi, everyone. My name is Ann Gagné. I use she/her pronouns. I'm an educational developer focusing on universal design for learning and accessible pedagogies at the University of Toronto Mississauga, which is in Toronto, Canada. Similar to what Clare was saying about some accessibility options in online courses that I've seen is really the focus on multimodality. So having conversations and opening up space for learners to really show their learning, again, in a real UDL way in a multimodal fashion, whether that be with podcasts or infographics, but also the opportunities that those assessments give for the students to actually learn about the accessibility affordances of those multimodality type assessments. So what needs to be in place for a podcast to be accessible? What needs to be in place for an infographic to be accessible? I think that that really opens up a meta discourse around accessibility, but also allows students to really engage in ways that are meaningful to them.

Dhvani Toprani (19:00):

Wow. Those were so many flavors of accessibility right at the beginning of the episode. Thank you for sharing that. I want to share more about Rafael's learning context over here. Rafael da Silva is clinical assistant professor of organizational performance and workplace learning at Boise State University. He teaches online asynchronous master's courses in e-learning and other instructional design related topics. So his students go out to become educators for online courses and instructional designers both in academic and corporate settings.

(19:32):

In his interview, he's asking how he can improve accessibility, especially in this unique setting where he's creating learning content for his students who are global citizens. His view of accessibility is mostly informed by the WCAG 2.0 principles. That is web content accessibility guidelines of perceivable, operable, understandable, and robust.

(19:56):

Now, while Rafael is doing a lot to support student learning in the realm of perceivable by using closed captions and all text for the multimedia content and evaluating his course's accessibility using online checkers, he really wants to explore opportunities of doing more within accessibility to make his content more in line with the last three principles of operable, understandable, and robust.

(20:22):

A unique aspect about his learning context is that the entire course should be ready and available from day one because it's online and asynchronous. So let's start by asking this question. What are some of the accessibility principles that an online instructor like Rafael can incorporate in their course design?

Clare Mullaney (20:42):

I think that it can be hard to have the class set from day one. I've struggled with that, and I should say I don't primarily teach online and asynchronous. I've done it during the 2020-2021 school year and I do an online summer course that's asynchronous, but one thing that I have found helpful to get over that challenge, the facelessness of online learning or the distance or understand instructors' personalities or students' personalities is to distribute a course survey before the class starts. I guess in the case of this particular course that we're thinking about, if students are willing to fill it out, I don't know, even a month in advance to give enough time to prepare the content of the course, I usually have two questions that I ask, and I think many instructors end up doing this. So this is drawn from years of sitting in on teaching workshops and whatnot, one being, in what ways do you learn best? Then the second one being, in what ways is learning made difficult for you?

(21:39):

So that question is helpful for a number of reasons. One, I think if we're thinking about disabled students in particular, the questions are outside of a diagnostic framework. So often, disabled students, the only way they feel summoned to share information about the way they learn is if they're registered with a student disability office. So this is a question that can appeal to both able-bodied and disabled students without using the language of pathology.

(22:04):

I'll give you one example of a student response that I got, which I found to be really revealing. So this was a trans student, and one of the things they put in the response was, "I learn best by talking," so they prefer to speak aloud. This was in a class that was half asynchronous and half on Zoom, so we're dealing with a dual synchronous, asynchronous environment, but they talked about how depression, dysphoria, and anxiety often makes them disassociate and then not want to talk. So they asked if they could email me after class to share some of their thoughts on the material.

(22:37):

This was really helpful for me to see, one, how a model of universal design ends up helping not just who we think about as disabled students, but other marginalized students, non-binary students, trans students, often students of color. So I think that's one way to gauge what student body am I working with. Not all classes are going to look the same from term to term. Then if you decide or see that a number of students really like to talk through speaking like this one student, even though they might struggle with it, maybe you have a video option available for how they post or if other people don't like to talk and they prefer writing, then you have more written discussion posts. So that's one way to customize the online course based on the students that will be entering that space with you.

Ann Gagné (23:23):



So Clare, I really like that pre-course survey. I'm also someone who does a mid-course survey where we do a stop, start, continue. So this will specifically speak to one of the things that was going on in the course in terms of how do we create a course that talks about the other, not just the perceivable, but maybe the operable or the usable. It goes to the learning management system itself, so where is the course being housed? So when you do those, stop, start, continues, one of the things that I like to ask is, "What supports do you need?" Maybe those supports can be provided by the learning management system itself, but it also brings up the possibilities of the limits of the LMS, the limits of the learning management system. So maybe student requires a certain thing that the learning management system that they're using can't do it or it can't afford to do those kinds of things.

(24:20):

So I think that having a stop, start, continue also allows folk to put things, pedagogically put things in place. Even though the course has to be ready to go, there still needs to be that framework for that iterative nature of feedback you're getting from students and saying, "Hey, maybe this resource might be useful," or, "This would be something that would help support me as I try to complete this course."

(24:44):

So pre-surveys are great. Mid surveys, stop, start, continues like, "What would you like me to stop doing? What would you like me to start doing? What would you like me to continue doing?" can really bring in that more holistic framework that you're talking about, Clare, in terms of we're not just thinking about students just in terms of the disabilities that they may have, but also thinking of them as whole humans, whether they be BIPOC, indigenous, queer, bringing their whole selves to the course, and that may be disability or access needs are just part of their needs for this course.

Vanessa Truelove (25:19):

So because I'm just a master student currently, unfortunately, I don't have this whole wealth of knowledge and education to pull from Clare and Ann, but I can speak from my experience as a student. So one of the things that I would recommend any professor to do is much like Clare and Ann are saying is doing some survey. Even if it's not a survey, doing some check-in with the students that you are teaching is really helpful. So I'm in a course right now that's asynchronous for our internship and something that our professor is doing, and I think part of it is because the professor's new to Elon University, and so I think that part of it is she wants to get to know us as students because she's going to be teaching up in the fall, et cetera, et cetera, but she set up check-ins with us at various points throughout the summer, which has been really helpful to help her get eyes on us, as well as us to be able to become comfortable with her considering it's an asynchronous course.

(26:19):

Because we don't have the in-class feedback from her as a professor, having some, even though it's not in-person, but having some virtual check-in helps me to understand a little bit more about who she is as a person and what kinds of things she's looking for from me as a student, which helps me to feel able to participate more fully in class when I know what the expectations are beyond what's in the syllabus.

(26:44):

Then I think also, as I mentioned before in my opening, I am someone who really, really, really values and appreciates and have come to value and appreciate when professors direct link on Moodle pages or whatever your course site is a few direct links to your resources for your students because even though I might be a resourceful student and might know how to get to whatever our reading might be for that week, there are some students who are not as resourceful or who just haven't had the same education



and so can't be expected to be able to find those resources if they're not PDF-linked or however you wanted to link them in your learning site.

(27:26):

Then I guess the other thing I would think about is working with your disabilities resources, people on your campus to talk through what resources, disabilities resources has for their students. So for example, Elon is piloting a note-taking website resource that students with disabilities can utilize if it's going to help better their educational experience. So even just a quick 30-minute conversation with your disabilities resources, people staff would help you as a professor understand what resources does the campus have for your students, and how can you as a professor make sure that the resources that you're giving for the education of your students, those educational resources, how do they play nicely with or don't play nicely with the resources that your disabilities resources office has.

Clare Mullaney (28:20):

Vanessa, just as a quick followup, are the check-ins, which I love, I love that you brought that up, are those communal with multiple people in the course or is it just one-on-one with you and the instructor?

Vanessa Truelove (28:31):

Our check-ins are one-on-ones. So I could potentially see a benefit to doing a group check-in, but the way that we've done this class and because it is an asynchronous course, I think that she's prioritized the one-on-one versus group check-ins because it's a little bit harder to manage schedules with.

Ann Gagné (28:49):

To add to that too, I can see where, especially in Rafael's case, there may be some opportunity to, again, use that multimodality to do those check-ins, especially from an asynchronous point of view. So if folk can't meet on Zoom at a certain time because they're in a different time zone, leaving the space with those check-ins open for maybe a two-minute video that someone records even on whatever device that they may have that's available that they upload or if they don't feel comfortable having their face recorded, that they could just do a voice memo, for example, as a check-in. So that goes back to his ask about trying to make the course more personable, like how to do an outreach for students who happen to be maybe all across the world in different time zones and still being able to have those connection pieces that are so important so that the course feels real to them, the instructor is a real person to them, and even maybe their fellow classmates become real people to them.

Dhvani Toprani (29:46):

Another nuance question that Rafael was really interested in exploring was, how can an instructor make accessibility practices visible in their learning environment to their students mainly from the perspective of modeling accessibility best practices? He's thinking about these things because his students go out to become instructional designers. So while they're learning about the content, he also wants to teach them about accessibility while he is using accessibility to develop his course content. So how can he make this happen?

Vanessa Truelove (30:15):

As a student, I have seen professors do this really successfully, and this has happened a lot in this past year in my master's courses in particular, but we'll be talking about something that students experience in the college environment. Then at the same time a couple of weeks later, I'll recognize that we're

doing that in our courses and that our professors are including the things that we're going to be doing as professionals in the way in which we're learning. I have been able to make those connections, and it's been really fun to see those connections in class, but I've also, in conversation, recognize that my peers aren't making those connections.

(30:53):

So I think however you do it, being willing to call it out in a class conversation and just being like, "Hey, did anyone notice that I utilized X, Y, Z this week? What did you think about that? How did that impact your learning experience? How do you think this might impact other people's learning experience and why is this important to have?" helps people connect the dots between their education and helps them become better practitioners down the road if they can intentionally see that you were doing this thing and they can point it out and be able to speak personally to how it affected their educational experience.

Clare Mullaney (31:29):

Just to follow up, Vanessa, I think that's a great point about transparency. I actually think transparency is the key to any form of successful teaching and also successful learning. We're often taught not to be transparent about those things because it's meant to show some weakness to say, "I learn in this way, but not that way," and we're just all supposed to assume we know how the system of the classroom functions. Vanessa, I'm sure that as someone who studies education that you think about this a lot.

(31:55):

One of the things that I try to do is to spend quite a bit of time with the access statement in course syllabi. So most of us at universities are familiar with the access statement as something that comes from the top down. The administration tells us to include a particular statement in our syllabus to direct students to student accessibility services if they think they might be disabled, and then if they are disabled and have accommodations to then bring those to the instructor.

(32:20):

I think sometimes this can be somewhat of a limiting model about what disability is doing in the classroom. So disability studies scholars have written really beautifully about this. Margaret Price is one person who thinks about mental disability in higher education, and there's also, this is a source that for the sake of the podcast I can look up the exact people, but I think, and Ann, you might know this, Tanya Titchkofsky, they have an amazing handout on accessible syllabus statements, which I'm happy to share.

(32:47):

So I draft a statement that has the information that the university asked me to include, but then also has a more personalized statement at the top to explain why access is important to me and to say that all of us have different learning means throughout the term that will work together collectively throughout the semester to honor.

(33:04):

Then one of the things I try to do, and this might depend on whether or not you're teaching in-person or online, I'm trying to think about Rafael's situation, but perhaps in that early course semester survey questions could be asked about, how do you define access, what does an accessible online space look like to you, and you could give some examples as an instructor, saying multiple ways to contribute, an understanding of material, a multimodal to go back, to Ann's language way of contributing.

(33:30):

I also asked students too, and I've done this primarily in the in-person context, what does a syllabus assume that you can do? Often it assumes you can see or what does a chair assume about your body that we sit in, all the chairs are the same in a classroom, that a body's a particular shape or a particular size. So starting to have this suspicion towards what we take to not be transparent for us, it's just assumed and given. Then this goes back to Ann's comment about, which I love, the stop, start, and continue, to do a check-in every few weeks to say, "How do we want to revise this access statement? What is working in terms of access? What do we need to make this space more accessible?" then continue to revise that document to see it as a document that evolves alongside the people in this space and the conversations that we're sharing together is shaping that document. It's not static in the way that I think often universities want to think that it is.

Ann Gagné (34:25):

Clare, bringing in both the things that, Vanessa, you were saying and, Clare, you were saying, the word that I had written down was the same word that you both brought up, which is transparency. I think that we really need to be transparent in terms of why is this designed the way that it's designed, why did I put this in the course the way that I put this in the course, and being very intentional with that. Universal design for learning is really premised on this intentionality, which really works well with making sure that you have transparency in your courses.

(34:56):

Then there's these other pieces that, Clare, you're talking about there in terms of the assumptions that were made in terms of the courses that we teach and that we design, the large amount of visual bias that happens in higher education spaces, the assumptions that are made that someone would know how a thing works or why a choice was made, which simply doesn't work for a first generation student, for example, who doesn't have that background in terms of understanding why those choices were made.

(35:26):

So this goes back to what Rafael was saying about designing the course in terms of WCAG standards, the web content accessibility guidelines, is that a lot of the WCAG standards are actually really not written in a way that's plain language. If you pulled up the WCAG standards now and you started going through one 2.3 or whatever, you would have to take a while to parse what that necessarily meant.

(35:52):

So I think hand-in-hand with this idea of making something more transparent and more intentional is that we need to write it in a way that's more plain language. We have to actually speak about these things in an accessible way. So we can't just throw a WCAG number and assume that someone will actually know what that means. It's that we need to really relay the intentional, pedagogical, and design choices that are made in this accessible course in a way that they can then in turn, if those students are going to go on to be instructional designers or do train the trainer programs or those kinds of things, that they need to be able to share those ideas with other people in a way that they will also get so that we're not replacing lingo and verbiage with more lingo and verbiage. We tend to do this a lot in academia. We like to use big words when something more plain will do. There are some plain language guidelines that we really should incorporate or think about as educators. I think that's another piece that's important in that transparency.

Vanessa Truelove (36:53):

Jumping off of your comment about plain language, Ann, I think also it's really important to create explanations for everything in your course. This goes along with transparency, but if you're asking your students to utilize a specific tool, for example, their very first discussion board post, then you need to make a video or have a PDF document or something that explains to those students how you do the thing because if you don't create the explanation, then you're assuming that every student has made a discussion post on this platform before, which is just not a reality. Also, when you create those explanations, those explanations should be available in various different forms.

Clare Mullaney (37:37):

I'll just jump in to say I love that. Just writing it down, I think that's a great point.

Dhvani Toprani (37:41):

Since we heard about so many different ways of incorporating accessibility in course content, I do feel a little overwhelmed as a new instructor. I want to do it all. I'm passionate about it, but then how do I go about prioritizing these things? So is there a strategy or a way that you would recommend new instructors using so that they don't feel overwhelmed in this situation of how to prioritize different things?

Clare Mullaney (38:06):

I think that's a great question and something I still ... I'm a fairly new instructor and I struggle with it every semester. I think to just go back to Vanessa's example and to connect the last question with this one, I love all these ideas of making different versions of explanations for an assignment, but I also recognize and hearing them go through what each document looks like. That's an incredible amount of labor. That would take four times the amount of time that it takes to just write, say, a standard explanation on Canvas or Moodle or whatnot.

(38:38):

So that's what I always rub up against. My ambitions for access are often huge. I'm like, "Let's radically transform the university," but then we run into this question of labor and also compensation. There are only so many people to be able to do all these things. So I think this goes back to this conversation about transparency. I'm often very transparent with students about the way that access is an ambitious project, but it's also a failed project. You talked about this before, that we could have all the hopes in the world of making a class perfectly accessible to everyone in the room or in the online space, and that just simply won't happen.

(39:19):

So one of the things I try to do is prioritize what I want for a given class, but then also say, "That conversation didn't go well," or, "I had this idea to do different colors to denote something on the syllabus," and then I had a student who was colorblind and said, "But now I can't read the syllabus." So it's helping one student in terms of comprehension and then disabling another student more fully because of the colors. So just I find that that conversation actually helps when I teach a class, and it sounds like this might apply to Rafael if they're teaching a class about teaching, but then also modeling teaching. This is what I do sometimes in disability studies courses where I'm teaching content about disability, disability theory, but also representations of disability and literature, for instance. I noticed sometimes students are very quiet in those courses because they're always afraid to say the wrong thing. They don't want to say something offensive or that would hurt someone. And I usually say, I'm like, we're doing it all wrong. We already started failing here. We are talking about disability in a space

of higher education, which is a space that above all else privileges ability, we're in this site of resistance. And so how do we just work from this space of failure? Rather than saying, let me do everything. It's like, what can I do with very limited resources? And I'm still struggling. I mean, I'd be curious, Ann, to hear if you have thoughts, what do you end up prioritizing and why? But those are just some thoughts.

Ann Gagné (00:40:46):

Yeah, for sure. Claire, thank you for that because this is why we checklists in higher education checklists tend to be the thing where if I do these checklists, if I do these things and everything is going to be okay, but Claire, as accessibility work, just like a lot of the EDI work, well, we call it EDI here or DEI work that y'all call it there, there is no end, right? There's not an end to accessibility. There's not an end to equity work. And that's why checklist way of looking at things doesn't really work because there's no end to this work. It's always going to be there. And in some ways that scares folk because you're just like, what do you mean? I always have to work on this forever? Yes, yes. You actually always have to work on this forever. So my suggestion for this, informed by Tobin and Bell's work reach everyone, teach everyone in Tobin and Bell's work, which is on universal design for learning, they support what's called a plus one model.

(00:41:44):

So this plus one model states that you basically change one thing in your course every semester. So Devan, as you're saying, not feeling overwhelmed, but this is the one thing that I'm going to work on, or these are the small group of things that I'm going to work on, and then next semester I'm going to work on a different thing. And so how do I prioritize that? I prioritize that through the feedback that I receive from the end of semester feedback and find out what the pressure points were for the instructor, but also the pressure points for the students. So what didn't seem to work for the students? Also, what didn't seem to work for you? Because when we have these conversations, we also tend to sometimes forget that there's such a thing as a disabled instructor. So we talk about disabled students a lot, but we also have disabled instructors who also have their own pressure points.

(00:42:35):

And so when I advocate for things like that, one of the things that I think is really great is that it gets them to think, okay, well this didn't work for the students. This didn't work for me, is the instructor. I can then use this to kind of work through things and change things next semester. And then that also becomes something that they can use to start reflecting on their teaching philosophy and also put into their teaching dossier. So this is a thing that we did. I started off with this course being designed in this way based on the feedback and based on the pressure points that the students were feeling and that I as an instructor were feeling, I modified this in this way, this was the outcome. So that it's not only happening again, meta transparency. So it's not only just happening in the course, but it's happening as part of pedagogical progression for the instructor as well.

Vanessa Truelove (00:43:24):

Really love this idea of plus one because what I was going to say is that there's no need to reinvent the wheel is something that one of my previous coworkers used to say. So if you've already created a piece of accessibility content, so for example, if you are teaching an online course or have some sort of online component to your course and you've created all of the documents needed to describe how to make your first discussion post, make sure that you save all of those documents so that you can continue utilizing them in the future. And so then it makes the plus one a lot easier when you're saving all of the

work that you're doing in prior semesters and then just adding another element or a new element or a new thing to work on for the future semester.

Dhvani Toprani (00:44:09):

So given how layered and complex accessibility is, what are some of the ways in which online instructors can evaluate accessibility? Of course, content, especially now that we know accessibility can mean so many different things depending on our learner's background, their experiences and their instructor's experiences.

Ann Gagné (00:44:26):

I think there's a couple of things, right? There's layers to this. So we already know that Raphael using checkers and so on from a tech point of view to make sure that things are accessible, which is great. That's one piece. But we have to think about how this accessibility work is also a conversation. And so opening up conversations with disability services or accessibility services, whatever they're called there at your institution, to have a conversation about gaps, needs and wants of the students, right? Because it's going to be demographic specific. The way that your institution is, whether you're at a community college at an R one or so on, each demographic is going to have different needs and each student is going to have different needs. And so being in conversation with your accessibility services folk will also allow you to really evaluate the accessibility of your work.

(00:45:15):

This means that to evaluate the accessibility of a course, you can't take a siloed approach. It's not just about what's happening with the students. It's not just about what's happening with the instructor, but it's about recognizing the resources that are around you. So accessibility services, it's recognizing if you're lucky to have faculty developers or a center for teaching and learning at your institution, having conversations with them because they've had experience with other instructors over the years, maybe using the same tools, maybe certainly using the same learning management systems and knowing what has worked and what maybe has not worked well for certain demographics, for certain disciplines, for certain types of courses, for example. And then finally, I think another piece that's important to evaluating the accessibility of this is actually sort of being open to critique of the actual course itself. So opening the critique up to the students that are there.

(00:46:11):

I know I do this in the course that I teach, where I was like, okay, so what excessively, what worked well? I really like that you have the audio files available so that I can listen to them on the learning management system, and I like that they're captioned so I can use that. So there are some things that I already have in place that don't work well, but then there'll be other needs that maybe I don't have in place that I need to make sure that I do for the next semesters. And so the way that we evaluate things is often based on personas, right? Microsoft has made a whole thing on certain personas for accessibility, and I think we need to get beyond the persona of the persona way of looking at how we evaluate the accessibility of something and really look at the individual lived experience of the instructors of the students and of the community that you're a part of. So have conversations with your centers for teaching and learning and your fact devs have conversations with your accessibility services people because they'll be able to help evaluate those pieces for you as well.

Clare Mullaney (00:47:10):

Yeah, I don't have much to add beyond what Anne said, which I think is wonderful. I mean, the question I had in response to that question is success on whose terms? Is it the student? Is it the instructor, is it the institution? And I think like Anne, it's always been those one-on-one conversations that have been most beneficial to me. So I was lucky enough this past semester to work closely with two disabled students who were in one of my courses, and then we also did an independent study on pedagogy design and access. So they would tell me we would meet and they'd be like, we have some commentary on what took place in class or whatever. They're like, I know you like to have the original PDFs of publications from the 19th century because I think, oh, it's amazing to read this short story as it was published in 1887, and they're like, the one student has chronic migraines.

(00:47:54):

I can't read it, right? And I was like, oh, right. So I'm trying to give one group of students access to this specific historical document, and then somebody else is like, I just need this in plain text in APDF, right? And I think about access all the time, but that's just not something that occurred to me. It was an OCR, searchable PDF, and I assumed that it would play through her reader and it did not. So just having those one-on-one conversations and getting insight often explicitly from disabled students if they're willing to talk about those things for you, I think often we do not privilege disabled students' expertise in the way that we should. One of the flaws of something like the term universal design, which I love and endorse in many ways, is that it makes access important because it says it's going to be good for everyone, non-disabled and disabled people. And sometimes they wonder, well, what does it mean to actually put the disabled person first when they're never put first, right? And that student is usually always left behind. So centering the expertise of disabled members of the community in particular in the design is one way to think about what makes for the most successful forms of access.

Vanessa Truelove (00:49:00):

I think the other thing to think about too is that your assessment of accessibility of your course goes beyond what you use to teach and is also talking about how you teach as well. And so how is the way that you present your course content accessible to students? How is the way that you talk, whether fast or slow, when you're presenting a particular piece of content, how is that accessible for your students? And how do students feel able to interact? How is your demeanor? How is the way that you show up to your job every day, how is that accessible for your students and how does that help them feel able and willing to interact in your course?

Clare Mullaney (00:49:43):

I love that. I have a follow-up question for both Anna and Vanessa. Why do you think we privilege the what of the course and not the how in terms of an instructor? I love that

Ann Gagné (00:49:52):

It's called curriculum mapping. No, but honestly, that's everyone who works in the teaching and learning center is now laughing, but it's true, right? The reason why we privilege the what is because that's how we get accreditation. It's all accreditation based. So if you have state or provincial or whatever, learning outcomes, vocational learning outcomes, it's all based on the what and not necessarily on the how sadly. And so that's why we tend to privilege that. And so if we could flip that conversation, I'm all for it. Let's do it.

Vanessa Truelove (00:50:25):



I think also on a personal level, it's easier to get critiques on systems that you utilize to get your information across the students than critiques on how you as a person are inhibiting someone's ability to learn. And so if someone comes and says, you just come off really mean, and I feel really afraid to speak up in class, that's going to hurt a lot more than, oh, this Moodle site that you use, this one particular aspect of this is not accessible to me for X, Y, and Z reason.

Dhvani Toprani (00:50:57):

That was a really wonderful conversation and it made me laugh at so many different points. Yeah, we are in it. Sometimes we critique what's outside of us, but we all are a part of that larger system. So I love how we took a moment to reflect on that. I've learned a lot about incorporating accessibility as an instructor, and I feel a little less nervous about integrating it in my own teaching and learning as well. Thank you, and I'm excited to share this knowledge with Rafael, so thank you for sharing your wisdom with all of us. Hi, Rafael. It's great to see you again, and welcome to the show.

Rafael da Silva (00:51:44):

Hi, good to see you. Thanks for having me back.

Dhvani Toprani (00:51:47):

I want to start by saying that the panel shared their excitement for your work and thoughtfulness around accessibility. And as you may have guessed, they all emphasized that there is no end to improving our work and accessibility. And so it's okay to wrestle with what small thing you work on now. And then another piece the following semester, our panel included Ann Gagne from University of Toronto, Mississauga, Clare Mullaney from Clemson University and Masters of Higher Education student from Elon University, Vanessa Trulove. Their conversation really focused on three main points, relationships, transparency, and tapping into existing resources. So from the start, Ann, Claire and Vanessa described examples of connecting with students, even an online asynchronous settings that helps trends and relationships and build trust. Claire talked about pre-semester surveys to understand what helps students learn and what hinders their learning to allow her to adapt lessons for activities prior to a course officially starting and uses a similar strategy, but she shared the importance of getting some mid-semester feedback and really allowing students to bring their whole self to the course.

(00:53:01):

And Vanessa described their experience in an online course of still having a one-on-one check-ins with the instructor, even if they were only a few minutes or done via email or a quick video. I might add that thinking about ways to build relationships between students is just as important in your context as you getting to know your students individually. The second piece in our conversation talked about how to demonstrate expertise as both a professor and a practitioner, and this is where the transparency piece really came into play. Planning your design choices, asking your students to challenge and evaluate your choices, inviting them to be a part of your process really, and making sure that you are using language that your students understand is really important and gave a great example over here that I personally resonated a lot with. That was about the WC AG standards that you and I discussed on our previous call.

(00:54:01):

Those standards themselves are not written in a simple plain language, and therefore they aren't accessible. They also discussed about many technological tools like learning management systems, hindering transparency, and as an instructor, it is key to identify those shortcomings and work on them. Throughout the conversation, our panelists referred to the work of campus partners like teaching and

learning centers, accessibility offices, technology offices, disability services, as well as individuals or group so that they can aid in providing outside perspective or different expertise to the conversation. Overall, it is important that you should not feel that you got to do all of this on your own and all at once. So the idea of this being a continual work means that this is not a checklist, but a conversation. For example, asking technology services, how to integrate a new language into the automated closed captioning, or working with accessibility offices to really assess how a specific student might find something difficult to use. What was the foundation of every conversation throughout your panel's discussion was exploration. So as an instructor, you need to keep exploring the needs of your students and not assume things about them. One, change one semester is a winward celebrating, and on that not file, what is maybe one thing you will try to change or update before your next semester begins?

Rafael da Silva (00:55:31):

Yeah. First of all, I just want to say that was a fantastic discussion. It seems that there were lots of interesting takeaways and interesting discussions in the conversation with the panel, not only related to accessibility, but also in building relationships in asynchronous courses, which is our main method of instruction. I will say, first of all, one of the main things that I take away from that incredible list of topics is that expertise is a journey, and sometimes it's hard for us to understand that there's always aspects in our courses that can be improved and that this process doesn't have to be a one semester one and done. It is a continuous process of improvement. Either it be for accessibility, building relationships, and for recognizing that you're not alone in this. There's other resources and other people that are around you on campus that can help you with that.

(00:56:35):

On that note, I will say that the first item and the agenda for me will be to learn more about the resources that are available on campus for accessibility, not only to improve course design within the courses that we teach themselves, but also to find ways around campus or around our online ecosystem to better serve the students that we have. And that also taps into the relational piece, knowing what our students want from classes and what they need to succeed in an online environment. I think that referring to those resources is just going to expand the possibility that I'm being effective in my communication, and in doing so, improving learning effectiveness as well.

Dhvani Toprani (00:57:30):

Thank you, Rafael. I do resonate with a lot of things that you said, and one of the things that was a key takeaway for me was the shared responsibility of this huge undertaking as an instructor, it made me feel less overwhelmed when I know that I can share this load with my learners, with other centers, so that definitely made things easier and more doable for me and made them also more exciting.

Rafael da Silva (00:57:55):

A hundred percent. It's natural for me personally to want to be in control of every single aspect of instruction from the get go, from course design to precise wording on Canvas. I think that the fact that everything is right there, and I am the creator of content and the deliverer of content, there is a natural inclination on my part to think that I have to do everything by myself, but inviting students and inviting other resource centers on campus to participate in that process as well only adds to the conversation. Again, recognizing iterative and procedural aspect of expertise and also recognizing that other perspectives only add to the richness of a course design. Bringing resources to offer different solutions for problems that exist in terms of interaction and relationships and courses, accessibility, and also tapping into what students need, what students want, and how it can better serve them, not only from a

content perspective, but from a flexibility perspective, from a process perspective, especially considering that they're doing projects in our classes and on top of the projects that they're doing for classes. They have their personal lives, so how can I better help them considering everything else that is going on.

Dhvani Toprani (00:59:30):

You're so right in thinking about those things, and the panel also brought this point up that as much as you want to care for your students, you also need to care for yourself. So there we are, all of us on the same page. Thank you so much, Rafael. I hope that this conversation helped you validate and challenge some of the ideas that you already had because you started off with so many great things and insights about this topic, so I'm so glad that you were with us, and thank you for being on the show.

Rafael da Silva (00:59:58):

Thank you. Thank you for all of the amazing takeaways and for this great conversation.

Matt Wittstein (01:00:12):

Limed Teaching with a Twist was created and developed by Matt Wittstein, associate professor of Exercise Science at Elon University. Dhvani Toprani is Elon University's assistant director of learning, design and support, and serves as a producer for the show. Jeremiah Timberlake is a class of 2024, computer science and music in the liberal arts double major at Elon University and Summer 2023. Intern for Lyme Music for the show was composed and recorded by Kai Mitchell, a class of 2024 music production and recording arts student at Elon University. Limed Teaching with a Twist is published by and produced in collaboration with the Center for Engaged Learning at Elon University. For more information, including show notes and additional engaged learning resources, visit [www.centerforengagedlearning.org](http://www.centerforengagedlearning.org). Thank you for listening, and please subscribe, rate, review, and share our show to help us keep it zesty.

Nolan Schultheis (01:01:08):

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