The eLearning Coach Podcast #44
ELC 044: Behind The Scenes With Three Voice Actors/Artists

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Connie: Hello learning people. Welcome to episode 44. In this episode we go behind the scenes to reveal the dark secrets and the lavish lifestyle of voice actors. Oh, wait, that's the wrong script. We're going behind the scenes with three voice actors/artists to find out what's involved with doing voice acting, and what you can do to improve your scripts so that they can give their best performance. You can find the show notes with resources and a transcript at the theelearningcoach.com/podcasts/44.

This first interview is with Kim Handysides who has years of experience doing voice over for TV and radio commercials, eLearning programs, audiobooks and trailers, documentaries, webinars and dubbing. Kim has a background in theater and film.

Connie: Hi Kim. Welcome to the e-Learning Coach Podcast.

Kim: Thank you. I'm so happy to be here.

Connie: Kim, what term do you like to use for your profession? There are so many, it gets a little confusing.

Kim: I guess I say *voice artist*. Apparently *narrator* is searched for more often.

Connie: That's interesting, because up until a few years ago I too used the word narrator, but I began to think that it minimizes all the talent and hard work that you bring into your performance. But perhaps it depends on what you're being called to do.

Kim: Right, exactly. There are differences. I'm doing an audio book narration right now this week, and that's a narrator, but within that narration I'm doing 70 characters over the course of a trilogy.

Connie: That's unbelievable.

Kim: How does a person get trained to become a voice artist?

Connie: I started with a BFA program, Bachelor of Fine Arts in Acting. And then about halfway through, I switched to communication studies. I also learned about radio production, television production, and multimedia. It's interesting, because eLearning, training, it's always been a very strong interest of mine, even though that's not what I ended up going into. I ended up going into performance and worked in radio and television for a while and worked in theater and on films and things like that.

And then in terms of how long does it take a person to get trained to become a voice artist, it really depends on what kind of voice artist you want to be. If you want to be doing cartoons, commercials, gaming, that takes acting lessons, that takes practice, time to get to know your instrument, your voice, and then also time to be able to learn how to anchor and lock in certain characters and things like. If you only want to focus on education and training as a voice artist, that takes less time, because it's less of a performance per se. However, there's still a lot of practice that goes into becoming proficient at it. I spent years reading out loud daily and working on making that written word sound as fresh as the words that are coming out of my mouth right now.

Connie: Yes, and you do achieve that. Now let's turn to scripting. When you look at scripts that you get from instructional designers and writers, what are the most important things that you like to see in how a script is written?

Kim: Definitely the flow. It's like how the whole thing comes together. You can tell when a script writer has taken time to read it out loud to help make it sound conversational. I spent a short period of time being a journalist and I remember there was a book that I just loved and it was called *If You Can Talk, You Can Write*. And that was so true of writing for radio at that point when I was a radio journalist. I think the same thing happens in terms of writing for narration, for eLearning or any kind of training. If somebody has taken the time to read it out loud, then it's definitely going to sound conversational. I have admiration for script writers for eLearning, because you're taking very dense material and you're making it palatable for the layperson. That's a challenge.

Another thing is when characters are portrayed, that conversational element is even more important. I remember a year ago I did a job where basically they wanted me to read an unedited product monograph for a drug, with all kinds of clinical trials and scientific notation, and they wanted it to be conversational, which was really tough. It's funny they say content is king of the internet, but in terms of voice artistry, especially right now, conversation is king. In the old days it was, "Welcome to the training module," and this is very top-down. Now it's more like, "Welcome to the training. Grab a cup of coffee, and let's learn something together." So scripts that reflect that make it easier for me, and probably easier for the learner too.

Connie: Great insight. And as far as our material being dense, we wouldn't know what to do with ourselves if the content wasn't very boring [chuckles]. So we can put certain conventions in our scripts, I'm even just putting in page numbers that can make it easier for you. What are some things you like to see?

Kim: A hundred percent page numbers. Also naming your files, like telling me how you want to label them right there. If you want 3.1.5, if you want like, "How to open a cracker package", that's the title you want, then putting that naming convention there for me to label it is good. Also having a list of how you want certain things read, whether you want abbreviations, write as acronyms are spelled out, phonetics for more difficult vocabulary, always separate, not in the body of the script. Because if it's in the body of the script, then it interrupts my flow. Or a preferred authority that you want me to refer

to, like use Miriam Webster, or things like writing out scientific notations. I don't know if that's really a scripting convention but I am fortunate I have a fairly good scientific vocabulary now having done eLearning for 20 years. But for a lot of people in this industry, they don't. And so if they see a MIU at the end of it or something having to do with a clinical trial reference, they aren't going to know how to read out, and they go, "Ah, what do I do?"

Connie: So you prefer to have those things explained in a list ahead of time?

Kim: Exactly. It makes it so much easier. Then I can actually just put it on a little clipboard, and as I'm going through the script, I can refer to it or I can highlight it. If I want I can drop things in. Just let me know that it's coming up. In terms of other things, font size. I'll change it if I don't get it that way, but I prefer 14. I prefer not seeing columns or a company and graphics of what you'll be displaying. I don't need to know that. I just need to know what you want me to say.

Connie: Right. You don't need this storyboard. A related question is what are some common mistakes that people in our field make when writing or formatting scripts that you see in your experience?

Kim: Leaving in references. That slows me down, it interrupts my flow. Changing your style mid-script, I've seen that sometimes. I'm fortunate enough to work with some really good instructional designers and script writers, and so that doesn't happen very often, but occasionally it'll start off and I feel like very comfortable as the narrator and then all of a sudden the narrator changes her voice midway, when I'm saying the narrative voice. So then it's like someone just came in and said "Ding, you're another person", and it's like no I'm not. So changing your style mid-script, it makes it more difficult.

Here's a little thing. The placement of the script from one page to another, it's a technical thing, it's weird. It doesn't really affect me that much anymore because so much of my work is done electronically, as all of us, but when scripts are printed out and it continues from one page to the other, then you get page noise. I think that's about it.

Connie: Okay, those are great. Thank you so much.

Kim: And there's one other thing I wanted to say too, if that's okay. Voice actors that specialize in eLearning tend to be fairly bright. They are very interested in the subject matter, but especially now that there's so much more eLearning and more opportunities for training, we take a very active interest in the way you put it together, and also our role too. I mean, we are very cognizant that there's the IT, the instructional design, the graphics, the content, all of that. Putting your wonderful package together, it's separate from the actual learner.

So unless you're using video, generally the most human element is going to be your narrator. So we're very aware of the powerful position that the narrator has in being able to connect with the learners and really try—I'm talking about good narrators here—our

best to try and help you get that message to the learner. We're all connected, we're all interested in, Have you heard the latest, what's happening in the eLearning world?

Connie: Good to know.

Kim: Yeah, I mean we're wanting to actively communicate and see how can we be helpful to you too, because we're all in this together, right?

Connie: Right. I'm so glad you put that out there. Thank you so much, Kim.

Kim: My pleasure. Thank you, Connie.

This next interview was with George Washington III. Since 2003 he's been providing voice over services for virtually every aspect of the industry, including eLearning, documentaries, video games, radio and television commercials, in-store announcements, marketing on hold, websites and web ads. Here's the interview.

Connie: Welcome to the eLearning Coach Podcast, George.

George: Thank you. Thank you for having me.

Connie: I'm asking everyone in this series of interviews: what title do you prefer for your profession, voice actor, voice artist, narrator, or some other term?

George: Personally I like to be called a *voice actor*, because they often tell us we don't want you to sound so 'actor-y', don't sound so formal, and that sort of thing, but the reality is, because it's not actually us we are being in any of this work, we're always acting. So we have to act as though we are this doctor, we're this narrator, we're this patient, we're this person. So we're always acting. So the best way to go about it is to just call us voice actors.

Connie: Right. When they don't want you to act a lot, that's another form of acting.

George: Exactly right. I mean I'm acting like I'm not acting. I'm the guy next door. I'm your friend.

Connie: What do you like about being a voice actor?

George: One of the things you have to like about being a voice actor is the opportunity to do so many different kinds of things when you're working. You can be a guy who just does the phone messaging, or you can be the guy on the street, the guy next door in a television commercial, or you can be a superhero, or a space captain, I've been both of those. I've been a detective, I've been a wizard, and there's so many different things that you get to do and do differently one day to the next, one week to the next. So those

are the challenges that come from having to do that kind of different thing every time. You go through a session and someone says, "That was great, that's exactly what we wanted," and you get a good jolt of energy for that, because you actually were able to meet the need in something that seems nebulous, and you are able to translate that into exactly what they wanted, that's a victory every time.

Connie: Nice. I can imagine. What is the most difficult part of your job?

George: The work itself is never really that hard. I mean you're going to have times where it's hard to meet somebody's request, they want you to sound a way that you aren't used to sounding, so most times it's not all that difficult. A lot of the things where you would say the hardest thing about being a voice actor is being out there and making sure that the people you work for remember you and come back to you, and the search to find more clients. Because we're always looking for more.

But in the actual performance space, never really that hard, except for some individual things that may come up, like in video games there's a thing called exertion sounds, and exertion sounds are like the sound of getting hit, being punched, being shot, and I've had to do those when I did a video game. I got to play a superhero. I was in DC Universe Online, and in that I got to play a character that I love myself, I got to play Green Lantern. So power ring, green costume, and all those sorts of things. But you have to do exertion sounds that come with that, and for me it wasn't terrible because I wasn't in that session that long, but it can be a thing that can wear you out, because you've got to sound like someone actually hit you or you're getting shot or you're dying.

Connie: I have to admit I never thought of the effort it takes to make exertion sounds, but I guess there are a lot of them in video games.

George: Absolutely, If you are familiar with or heard of any of the games like Call of Duty, any of those war games, there are tons of exertion sounds in those. And both the primary actors, the leads in those games, and anybody who's providing additional voices, they have to be able to do this, and sometimes they have to do it for long periods of time. It can be grueling, it can wear you out. That actually was a thing for SAG-AFTRA, they've recently resolved their strike against video game makers, and part of the resolution had to do with the time that voice actors were in doing exertion sounds, because they were going too long. Man, if you lose your voice as a voice actor, you're not working, so there you go.

Connie: Can you do a dying sound for us, or should I not be asking that?

George: Dying sounds, they are often sound like you're just fading away, so you've often been hit and then you're going down. So it ends up being [makes dying sound], that sort of thing.

Connie: That's great.

George: And with Green Lantern, the idea is that happens when you lose power in your ring and you can't continue to keep your force field up, and there's like "Ring out of power [makes dying sound]," so there you go.

Connie: Oh, I love it. You are good at it. Great. Thank you.

George: Thank you. Like I said, there's not a lot of really hard things in the performance aspect of it, I look at it and say I'm not digging a ditch, I'm making sounds and laughing and making things that people will enjoy.

Connie: So you're doing exertion sounds without digging the ditch.

George: Exactly. I just have to sound like I'm digging a ditch. I can do that.

Connie: Let's move on to scripting now. What can instructional designers and script writers do to make your job easier?

George: There are a few things that will help us out. Primarily, making sure that when you use jargon, we know what that definition is and how it's pronounced. There is times when you'll get a script and it has something in it that your people, the people who you're writing it for, or the designer themselves, know exactly what we mean, and we're getting it and we're still having to interpret that into something, and we don't know what it is. So every time if we can get a description of what it actually is and a pronunciation key to tell us exactly what it's supposed to sound like when we say it, that makes a tremendous difference. It'll help our delivery and keep the corrections down.

Connie: Do you like to get your pronunciations on the first page of the script, or do you prefer them in-line?

George: Personally I prefer an in-line, just because I don't have to flip back and forth between the paragraph that I'm supposed to be reading and then the prokey up at the front. Especially now that I'm more paperless in the way I work, it's just easier if the pronunciation is in-line at least once, then I know I can look back to it and do it again in short eye movements instead of having to turn pages.

Connie: One thing I'm learning from all of these interviews is that although 90% of what voice actors are looking for is the same, there's enough difference in that it's important to discuss with the voice actor what he or she prefers before assembling the script.

George: Absolutely. One of the things that we absolutely have to have that discussion about, talk about what you want in the script, how you want the script delivered, things that'll say how do you want your files, do you want raw files, is someone going to edit them and clean them up for you, do you want them separated, or one file, how do you want them named, how do you want me to give them to you, do you want to use

Dropbox, or my way of doing it, or anything like that. The more of that conversation you have beforehand, the better your experience will be.

Connie: In addition to what you've told me, what are some scripting conventions, more like the formatting, that make it easier for voice actors to read a script?

George: On top of everything, if you can just get the voiceover script by itself, that is ideal. We often will get storyboards, and storyboards are nice to convey what is in the script itself so we can get an idea of what the visuals are, but storyboards are hard to read. For instance, even if there are four on a page, you'll have four boxes on the page and a little tiny area that has the script, and you're moving back and forth among those. Or, in the worst case, one board per page. And so you have one line and you've got to go to the next one and read the next line, and go to the next one. So storyboards are great, but if you had a straight voiceover script that is just what we have to do, even better.

Connie: We had a discussion about this in my podcast Episode 35 on storyboarding, and I do pull out the narration from a storyboard and create a double-spaced script, because I can imagine that trying to read a storyboard would be quite confusing, there's so much extra information in a storyboard that the voice actor does not need.

George: Greatly appreciated.

Connie: And for my last question, what advice would you give an instructional designer and script writer to get better at their craft?

George: I would say one of the best things to do is make sure you read this out loud, make sure that you know what it sounds like when it's read out loud. Many times you can get a script that someone has never actually read and you'll have words that come together that look fine when they're looked at, but if they're not said they don't flow well together. Certainly helps if it's been read through at least once by someone where they can get to something and say, well, that word doesn't go well with the other, or that acronym or those long words aren't going to work together.

Connie: I completely agree with you, because one is writing for the eye and the other is writing for the ear. I learned this the hard way because when I first got into the field I would put words next to each other that ended up creating tongue twisters for the voice actors. So I quickly learned, out of embarrassment, that I better read the script aloud first and see if I can pronounce it.

George: Could I add one more thing. Use professionals. not just because we like to get paid, but your end result will be better when you use people who are trained and know how to do this. We've been through it, we've seen a lot of scripts, we know how to do that thing. There is always the temptation to use Bob in the next cubicle, but we do this every day. World-Voices, or VoWo as we call it, is a place where a lot of us are there,

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we're vetted, we know how to do this work, we're certainly available, any number of us, from all areas, to do this kind of work.

Connie: Professionals are always going to make the end product better. George, thank you so much for all your tips and advice and insights into what you need from instructional designers.

George: Thank you.

My final interview is with Rebecca Haugh, who has a background in acting. She has been working as a voice actor since 2001. Rebecca's voice can be heard on national and regional commercials, narration, eLearning, radio promos, and character voices in apps.

Connie: Hi, Rebecca. Welcome to the podcast.

Rebecca: Hey, Connie, it's great to be here. Thank you.

Connie: What do you prefer to be called? In our field we call you narrators, voice actors, voice talent, voice artist.

Rebecca: I prefer to be called a *voice actor*, because I'm an actor, I've been trained professionally as an actor, and I like that title. I don't mind being called a voice talent, and I prefer either of those. Voice artist I feel is for those who have achieved a lot more. So I look at voice artist as it's a nice, nice label and I see somebody like June Foray or somebody who's done really good animation as an artist. So I'm still looking at myself much more humbly than that.

Connie: Great. Thank you. How much of your voice work is for education and training purposes?

Rebecca: I was not going to count explainer videos, because sometimes those crossover. A lot of time explainer videos, and I do a lot of them, and I do a lot of eLearning, and I do commercials for radio and TV, and corporate video. I would say eLearning in the more traditional sense that instructional designers are creating it, it's about half of my work.

Connie: Rebecca, we are always looking for ways to improve. How do you think we can make our scripts less boring and more interesting?

Rebecca: That's a great question. There are certain people I love working with because they make it fun and conversational, or they really get into what it's about and give me a background on who I am as a speaker and who I'm talking to, who the audience is that's listening. And, man, when they do that, I get into the role. I'm like an actor just waiting to step into those shoes. And I guess from a training perspective or

from somebody who's anticipating it, really think about engaging the people that are going to be there, who's listening, and how are they going to listen. Some of the courses I do are part of a mix of training, so they'll do part of the course on eLearning and then they go to a classroom group environment, or maybe it's virtual, and it's this step by step and mix of that type of training, I don't know how you describe that.

Connie: We call it blended learning.

Rebecca: Blended learning, yeah. It just depends whether it's blended learning, whether it's a short course or a long course. Some things that are just done in those nuggets, those really fast nuggets, those can be really powerful and very exciting and short and easy for both the designer, I suppose, the person who's taking it. And I could imagine, having been in corporate America in the 90s myself, I could imagine it being very, very successful for the corporate environment too. And scheduling, trying to get people to take it, because I know that's a big issue.

But for me I always love being able to jump into the shoes of whoever it is that's supposed to be speaking, like as if I'm a subject matter expert or some authority on the subject, or somebody who's experienced and offering my wisdom, that's the best place to jump in. And then, gee, if I know who I'm talking to and who it is, like if I'm an HR manager it'll be different if I'm speaking to new employees and taking them through the onboarding process, versus if I'm talking to a group of old-timer engineers who have to go through a new legal process for their job and safety training and I'm introducing the safety training, for example, it's a different attitude. And that's helpful for me to know so that I can deliver something that's more interesting for the end-user and feels like it's really for them. So whatever they can do to help me be that for them is better.

Connie: So really what you're saying is that instructional designers, scriptwriters need to give you sufficient background, so that you can understand the purpose, the audience, the context. You need context.

Rebecca: I would say that I'll do a much better job for you if you do give me context.

Connie: As far as how a script is written, what are some things that you like to see in the actual script?

Rebecca: One of the primary things is knowing the word count. That's really important, because when we're talking initially with people, often we have to discuss rates and that sort of thing, and if you have an idea of the quantity, that's really important. So I would say for you, for the future, for anytime you're dealing with any voice talent, knowing your word count easily and having a tool to do that really fast, whether you're in Word documents, Microsoft Word, or whether in Microsoft Excel, you can do both, and that's really helpful, clear file names.

When people want to have their eLearning created and voiced and recorded and turned around, often that means it's maybe an hour long course and there are multiple files of

audio that I'm delivering. And I want to make sure that I label those files so that they can work as fast on their end as they want to, because at that point there's usually a delivery time schedule, milestones for them to hit, and I want to be in that flow with them. I've been doing this since the early 2000s. I don't remember when my first eLearning assignment was, but I started by going to studios. And then I didn't have my own home studio then, so I couldn't have done it at home, but I got a home studio in 2009 and I started doing eLearning much more prolifically at that time.

And I noticed that in the beginning, seven years ago or so, it was much less well done, but nowadays I do notice that people have a very articulated file name process. So that seems to be something that's gone away. But I just thought I'd mention it because it can be difficult in the way that they format the script when they send it to me.

Excel files are great, they use that a lot in video games, so voice talent, voice artists, voice actors, whatever you want to call us, we're real familiar with using Excel files, it's not very standard out there in eLearning that I've seen, usually people use Word documents, but the nice thing with Excel is it's very clean and line by line, row by row, you have each audio file, so it's clean from a technical standpoint.

Definitely using a table format or something so that the file names are separated from the text itself, and any particular pronunciation or direction of context or tone or special things you want the voice actor to know are even in a separate place. So I would say two or three columns. I don't know if that's something you typically hear, so I just wanted to throw that out there.

Connie: That's great. I can understand how working in Excel from your perspective would be good. It's just a little bit difficult when you're scripting to put it in Excel, but I can see how you could just copy it and drop it in.

Rebecca: And, last but not least, pronunciation of anything that's unique, that people won't get right away. Anything atypical. Just provide it upfront, it's just way faster.

Connie: And that's one thing that I used to love about being in the studio back in the day, because you would be able to have a conversation about it, you could look up the pronunciation of a medical term. If the intonation was not what you had in your head, you could say I was actually thinking that the person would do this then. I did prefer that, but it sure is fast and efficient to just have somebody email you all the files.

Rebecca: And certainly if you give us context and tone at the front end, then they're more likely to hit that in the phrases that you're looking for, more than likely. And certainly it's possible still to work with talent online, live, in a session. So even though you don't go to a studio, you can still be there with us … and I do that with some of my eLearning. In fact I have a session tomorrow for that very thing.

Connie: I do that on occasion with clients, and I do like being right there but--

Rebecca: It's harder to schedule.

Connie: Yeah. One last question, Rebecca, what are a few common mistakes that writers and instructional designers make when providing you with scripts?

Rebecca: One of the things that is a big factor, it's at the beginning of the discussion when you're discussing rates with people. This is a little bit before receiving the script, because discussing rate and time lines and expected deliverables is really important, and so many people assume that, and I don't know how most voice talent work, but what I try to do is really say, okay, so we're going to work at this rate on this timeline, and I'm going to deliver to you X,Y and Z, and if it's broken over a period of time, whatever those milestones are, there's a minimum amount of work that people like me, voice talent, have to do to deliver something, anything, even a small job.

We need to set up the studio, we need to be in there and get familiar with the tone and the pacing, and maybe even more creative stuff if you've got it. And then we have to read it in that tone, and that's reading time, let's say, just reading it once through, and probably we're going to make a couple of errors, so there's going to be a little bit of a buffer on that. Then there's the time to re-listen and edit and create those individual files that people need. So consider the reading time plus three times that in terms of the average time to create an eLearning project. So if you think it's an hour course, it would be a four-hour time for the voice talent to be working.

Connie: That's such good feedback.

Rebecca: I think that that helps people understand there's a certain minimum of work. A lot of people can do things really fast, and there might be people who can do it a little faster than that, they might have their own average, but it's a nice conversation to have.

Connie: Exactly. And that's pretty close to what a studio will tell you too.

Rebecca: Right. Because you've got the reading time, let's just say the literal time of them voicing the project while it's being recorded, and then there are errors so that you'll either go back right then and fix the error and rerecord it, or you find it later because you missed it when it was being recorded. And then there's the editing, time taking out breathy, pauses in between, the cutting of the file, the naming of the file, all of that does take time. And the editing almost takes more time than the actual recording.

Connie: Rebecca, thank you so much for your time. I am sure people will benefit a lot from hearing what goes on behind the scenes.

Rebecca: I hope so.

Connie: This wraps up another episode. I hope you found it valuable to see things from the perspective of a voice actor. They do have a lot of insights from reading so many

scripts, and I really enjoyed listening to their beautiful voices. You can get the show notes at the eLearningcoach.com/podcasts/44. Take care, and I'll talk to you next time.