ELC 078: How to Get Feedback from Learners
to Improve Your Designs Part 2
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Connie: Hello, learning people, and welcome to episode 78 of The eLearning Coach podcast. This is part two of my conversation with Andrea Greg and Rhonda Reed. They published a paper explaining a usability project they implemented for a new learning management system at Penn State. We discussed the think-aloud method, how usability for learning design differs from traditional usability, and tasks to test when checking the usability of eLearning courses. If you haven't heard part one, which is episode 77, I suggest you start there. You can find the resources with links and a transcript at theelearningcoach.com/podcasts/78. Here's the rest of our conversation. For people who want to get started and they don't have much budget, what do you think is the most efficient and least expensive way to do a think-aloud test?

Andrea: Okay, so don't even say ask a colleague, ask your partner or your friend, just scoot over to your website, ask them how they would do X, Y, or Z, and observe what they do, and ask them to talk loudly while they're doing it. If you're not even comfortable asking a colleague, you can ask somebody that you know personally just do it as a favor. And you're getting feedback.

             In a slightly more, I guess, formal way, ask a colleague. If you're in an open space, ask them to scoot their chair over to yours, sit at your website, and do something while telling you why they're doing it that way or where they're confused. Some of us do that naturally because we try to get feedback a lot, but some people don't. And that is such a cheap, time efficient way to get real feedback on how your design is actually being experienced by a person who isn't you.

Connie: What about the next level up, Rhonda, where you really going to work with audience members?

Ronda: I think you can then take it and make it a little bit more complicated. I know in the testing that we conducted, we tried to get users that really map to the demographics of our actual students and solicited that. Instead of just

pulling a colleague or pulling a friend, really to get a represent audience of who our students were.

We incentivized our students to participate. We gave them a gift card to do. Really, the sky's the limit on what you could do and how complex that you can make it. But I think to Andrea's point, you really can just make it that simple and get a lot of great data. As we look at the origin of what we're talking about like learner design research and based on user experience research, even Jacob Nielsen, who is one of the grandfathers in this field, he says five people. You can learn so much from five people. I feel like not having it be high tech, not having it be complicated, not having a wide audience that you have to pull really makes this a low barrier to entry model that is worth the effort that you can put into it because it can yield a lot of good information that is going to help your learning outcomes.

Connie: Absolutely.

Andrea: The thing I would add to that is we knew we were facing pushback before we started because instructional designers were so married to their own design and that, like Rhonda said, she got pushback immediately of, "We're not McDonald's. We're not vending machines. The customer isn't always right." We had a burden of being super diligent, super methodical, super... We could cite why we did what we did. We recorded everything so that we could show it; it wasn't our interpretation. In all our meetings, we played the videos as much as we talked.

Depending on your context, if, for example, you're a brand-new online trainer, learner experience designer at a company and you have a suspicion that the way things are set up isn't ideal but you're going against years of wisdom or leadership, you need to be more diligent and more objective. If it's just you want to make your own course better, then, yeah, pull someone over. It's also who you need to convince that things need to change. If you're the only one you need to convince, you can do super low level and just make it better based on experiences. But if you need to convince people higher up or more people, then going the more structured, recorded, all that way, it may be necessary.

Connie: One of the least expensive ways I've done it, and in fact now that I think of it, I've only done it in inexpensive ways, is to use an app like Zoom, have the person share their screen, and I can watch where their mouse is

wandering all around and I can hear their internal dialogue. That is reasonably inexpensive, and almost everyone can pull that off. We've got the pull your colleague, the inexpensive way I just mentioned, and then going all the way up with higher budget where you're really recording it, multiple cameras. That's great to be able to see someone's face and their screen, yeah, that would... And I don't know what else you recorded, but that would be ideal.

Andrea: Yeah, and in some of the analysis... And that's the other side of it. And part of this is who do you need to convince or what are your goals in doing this? But some of the analysis, we were going through and counting steps to complete tasks and where they went. And in the learning management system used at Penn State, there are often multiple ways to achieve the exact same thing.

And it wasn't so much that the least number of tasks was correct because I know there are things online I do where I take more steps, but I don't want to be bothered to learn the shorter way, so it's the most efficient for me in the meantime. And for a learner, it may be that taking these four steps versus two is fine. It wasn't so much that we were trying to say there's a correct way to do this in an incorrect, it was more how they were evaluating difficulty where failure points where they couldn't complete the task. But the analysis, again, if you are trying to convince people that need to be persuaded, you probably have to do more objective analysis as well, whether it's time to complete tasks, number of steps, number of incorrect tries before they got to the correct place. That's another part that can add time is what do you do once you have the data or the observations?

Connie: That's a really good point. Do you recommend doing these think-aloud tests remotely or do you like to be right next to the person and doing it on site if that's possible?

Andrea: I feel like either way works. Steve Crew talks about having a two-way camera, having them be able to watch live. Put all your web designers in one room, and then have the actual user and whoever's helping with the test in another. And they're watching live where that person is confused. That can be really effective just to show people all at once. I've done a lot of user stuff through Zoom. And sometimes people are more comfortable that way just because now they have the protection of computer screen.

For me, I don't see a huge difference, but there may be different perspectives on that, for sure.

Ronda: I have a slight personal preference for doing in person, if possible, but I do think you can learn a lot of great information online too. I think part of the reason I like to do things in person is there are certain things that, say, a Zoom experience might not pick up that you could make a note of. Is your subject bouncing their foot as they're testing as a sign of frustration? I think an in-person experience provides an opportunity to possibly pick up more subtle data points that an online testing scenario might provide. But either way, I think has a lot of merit.

Connie: It makes sense that there may be some nuances caught in person, but we can't always do that. If some of the listeners want to get started in this, do you have a few tips? What are the biggest gotchas that mess people up and they go, "Oh, why did I do that?" That kind of thing. Anything come to mind?

Andrea: Yeah, I think, like we talked about, pilot test your questions, your tasks. Make sure what the task means and make sure the task is obvious so that they're not trying to do a different task than you intended with your question. Practice yourself demonstrating thinking aloud because it's not something that's natural to most people so you have to often demonstrate it to them. I think spending extra time reassuring them that they're not being tested, that you're testing your website design, because humans feel like, especially if they're being recorded, "Oh, I'm not very good at the web, I'm going to mess up. I don't know how to get around." And that's not what the test is about.

And then the last thing I would say is practice not intervening. It's very easy when you see someone struggling to want to help them. And you may decide, okay, if they can't figure it out after 60 seconds, we'll intervene so they can move on. But make it intentional versus giving them the answer and not interfering with what you're trying to learn. Those would be the big things that I feel like we learned in our process.

Ronda: I would just add too, don't be afraid to get started. To Andrea's point earlier, pull a colleague out. Start in a minor way and just see. And I'm sure you would prove to yourself how beneficial asking somebody else to walk through, talk about and sign. See what you gather from that. It

doesn't have to be an insurmountable task. Just give it a try and see what you can learn and see how it has an immediate impact on your designing your learning experience.

Connie: Yeah, thanks for that. We want to take the drama out of this. It can't be something just really simple. And I think that it's instinctive for a lot of people, especially if you're on site in an office with other people, "What do you think of these instructions?" But you have to put out a little bit more effort if everyone's working remotely, so I think it's good to keep that in mind. I can spend 30 minutes writing drag and drop instructions and show them to a peer who will say, "I have no idea what that means," so you just get used to it, right?

Andrea: Mm-hmm. I think that for a long time we, within online learning or online training, haven't used these methods. And so, I think I know looking at what other things that are delivered through the web, the methods they use and doing usability testing like we did, user experience, think-aloud is really important, and to think of ourselves not just as instructional or learning designers, but also user experience designers.

One interesting thing is that in the broad field of learning design and technology, which is where a lot of instructional designers are educated, is that in recent years there is an emerging focus, we'll call it, of learner experience design. It is adopting from user experience, adopting from human/computer interaction, but also including the learning outcome side of it, the pedagogical intent. And so, it's not just could they get around, though that is hugely important and that should be done, but also how are the way I've written the instructions or the way I've written the prompt, how is that impacting the learner's experience?

One resource I would point people to, if you're interested in learner experience design, is a 2000, I think it's '22 book, A Learner and User Experience Research. And the whole book is about how the field of learning design and technology is adopting and adapting methods from user experience, human/computer interaction, and also the ways in which it is similar but distinct.

Some useful, I guess, quotes or... This is one from that book, "LX learner experience represents a confluence in many fields including HCI, information technology, education, learning and instructional design,

educational technology psychology," and talks about usability testing and how it's widely used in learner experience, but how it's applied into what ends is distinct. It's not just the technological usability but the influence of pedagogical and social factors.

I'm on a project right now, it's a design-based research project looking at a course over multiple semesters. And in looking at student data and how they've responded to the instructor's prompt, which she thought was obvious and neutral, for lack of a better word, realized a completely shaped in undesirable ways how students were responding. But if you look from the student's perspective, they responded to exactly what she asked them to do, but her intention was much broader. There are user experience elements of that, but there are also learner experience elements that go beyond just did they know where to submit? Or where were they confused with labeling kind of things? I would say that learner experience design is somewhat unique. It involves not just looking at interface, but also looking at the wording of assignments, the weighting of assignments.

I always encourage people, if you're willing to put threaded discussions in anything, give it some value. If they don't see you value it, they won't value it. And the currency in, at least, higher ed is grades. And the way grades break down is percentages. If you give something you think is important 0% points, from a learner experience perspective, it's not valuable and they're not going to do it except for your two or three who are going to do all the extra credit anyway. That analysis goes beyond or is distinct from what we've been talking about, which is just more straight usability. And the straight usability is super important, and we need to be doing that, but it's not the same as when I go to buy something on Amazon or even just check my medical records. Even that, my goal is to get information, so it's easy to design for that. Not easy, it's straightforward.

But in a course, a lot of the goals aren't determined by you, the user, they're determined by the professor or the trainer. We even call them learning goals. But it's not my goal, it's the goal that the trainer, the instructor set. That's just a whole other element that comes into play that isn't present in Nielsen or Krug or that perspective. I would just offer that as a "yes and," in terms of the way I think. Fortunately, our field, of

learning design and technology is learning from HCI and UX, but also not forgetting what we're all about.

Connie: Let me just say quickly, for people who don't know that HCI is human/computer interaction. Some people aren't familiar with that term. Such great points. Well, I know we're running out of time, but there is one thing I wanted to ask, and that is that it's more difficult to find tasks for someone to do when you're testing pure. I'm talking about asynchronous, self-paced learning. Often sometimes in higher ed, often in workplace training, it's made with Storyline, a captivator or an authoring tool. Oftentimes, the tasks are rather simple unless we manipulate the user interface and create our own, which people definitely do. What are some examples of good tasks that we can ask learners to do and that we can watch to test the usability?

Andrea: I think there is definitely a benefit to really structured eLearning modules, like you're talking about. Storyline, Captivate, all of those already have a lot of the user experience stuff built into the design of the product; and that is often missing from higher ed. I think that in the settings using those, there's a lot built in.

But tasks could be where do you start? What's important? How do you know what's important? Now, usually these systems remember where you were, but not all of them, so how do you keep track of where you were? How do you start when you haven't done this for two days? How do you know you're done?

And to your point, even in Storyline, Captivate, et cetera, with the neat left-hand menu or the linear thing, people can still, within the content, have created a video that itself has spots for the learner to click on. The moment you're adding something else, the moment they click on something, it takes them to another page. How do you get back to where you were? How do you get back to the main menu? I think those things are there as well.

But the advantage of using those tools that already has user experience design built in is that you can go deeper. If you've got eight eLearning modules and they're all structured pretty much identically, now it's a chance for you to actually go more into the learner experience domain of what are you learning here? When you read this, what are you thinking?

And then you get more into the analysis of how much text is on the page? Is everything bolded? When everything's important, nothing is important. Is nothing bolded? Are you drawing your learner's attention? Are you using scaffolding? Are you advanced organizing what they should be picking up on?

Actually, it's more fun in context where you already have good UX built into those existing platforms because you get to get a little deeper into the learning design itself of how you've structured the curriculum. Is the breakdown of topics, is that the best way to break it down? And I think you can start to have your tasks be a little more learning focused and not just do you know how to get from point A to point B? Which is a lot of what we ended up having to do, if you really boil it down.

Connie: It's interesting that you say that because as someone who uses the authoring tools a lot, I do find that their user experience design is failing a little bit. For example, their standard template, and you can change it, but the standard template for a multiple-choice question, the feedback box covers up the answers. Or another thing is the more modern navigation approach, there's no place to add text. And there's been research that shows don't just use the icon alone, add text too. As someone who's into UX design, I'm always going, "It's good, but it's not great."

Andrea: And we ran into this in our testing, what can you change and what can't you change? We had a lot of instructional designers... I don't want to say fighting with, but circumnavigating built in logic of the system. Unless you're working for that company or have an avenue to give the company feedback and say, "Here's a problem, and we've proven it," I would look at the things you can actually influence. If it's covering it up, is there a different or additional way to make sure you're providing that feedback? And that is what we get into.

Connie: I think there is.

Andrea: Yeah.

Connie: And there is. But most people are going to default to-

Andrea: Absolutely. Yeah. And I will say the LMS company we used, they were interested in our study. Sometimes for companies, you're doing free work

for them if they get this input, and they haven't had to pay people to do the research. Companies will sometimes want that user experience research.

Connie: Good point. Well, I just wanted to say thank you so much. I just really had fun talking to you both.

Andrea: I love this topic. And both the practical but also the more theoretical side of it are really important.

Ronda: Thank you. It was a real pleasure talking to you both. I really enjoyed it and appreciate the opportunity to join you today.

Connie: If you're not implementing usability testing in your work, I hope you now see its value and start even at the simplest level. Next on The eLearning Coach podcast, I've got a conversation with Cammy Bean who talks about the new edition of her book, The Accidental Instructional Designer. Again, you can find the resources with links in a transcript at theelearningcoach.com/podcasts/78. Take care, and I'll talk to you next time.