The eLearning Coach Podcast

ELC 088: How to Begin Your Journey of Designing for All Learners

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Connie: Hey, Sarah, welcome to the eLearning Coach Podcast.

Sarah: Oh, thanks connie. I'm so excited to be here with you as always.

Connie: We're going to be talking about your new book, Design for All Learners, and the implications that that has in our work. The term *design for all* is more than just meeting compliance standards, though.

Can you give us an appropriate definition for it?

Sarah: Yes. I actually, I've been thinking a lot about this because when you think about trying to define design for all in a sentence, it feels very loaded because there's so much to it. There's so much to learn about it. But I think if I were to sum it up, I would say, *design for all* just means designing with an inclusive mindset.

And if you start there, if you think about it within that framing, then you can really pull everything else into it. And I think in the book, that's kind of how I kicked it off was, you know, when I talk about *design for all*, what I really mean is just inclusive design.

Like what, what does that mean? And there's a lot involved in that, that you can work on throughout your *design for all journey*.

Connie: Right. And I think it's important that you noted, “from the start.” Because we have to think about it from the start. It's not something you just tag on at the end.

Sarah: No. It would make your life very, very difficult if that's the approach that you take.

Connie: That's true. But when you were pulling the book together, talking to all these people, inviting people to write, what surprised you and what did you learn as it was all coming together?

Sarah: Oh my gosh, so much.

I worked on this book for years, probably everything combined, maybe almost five years. And I worked on it, in depth for about two, three years over the time period

when I finally committed to doing it. I wanted it to happen for a long time. I wanted someone else to write it because it was something that I cared so much about.

But it was also, in a lot of ways it's a very challenging thing to write about. And I think when I finally landed on bringing a lot of folks together to talk about it from different perspectives. I think that's where it really clicked for me, where this is the approach, this is the right approach to take.

And I think the thing that surprised me along the way was that people as they were sharing their stories. Every time I thought I had a handle on it and had a better understanding about how I might be able to design in a more inclusive way, in a more accessible way, someone would share a story with me that completely changed my thinking once again. And not changed it as far as being contradictory to what I thought, but more broadened and deepened my understanding and how I approached things.

And I think the other thing that surprised me in addition to what I learned from folk's stories was that there were a lot of people who had disabilities that I had known for a decade or more that I had no idea. But they chose to share it with me when we were working on the book and I was talking to different folks and I was sharing what I was learning with my friends and my colleagues, and they would share their stories with me, and I had no idea.

Because not everybody talks about this stuff and people often choose not to with all the repercussions that can happen when you share that type of information. And it was an honor to work on this book because of folks sharing their stories with me. But it also gave me the opportunity to think differently. And I was so grateful that the folks that were part of this book, that they chose to share these stories. That takes a lot of being very vulnerable to be willing to share that information. And not just folks that had disabilities, but also folks that made mistakes.

Lots of people in this book are not accessibility experts. They were not people with any kind of specific disability necessarily. They were sharing their stories about things they'd messed up and what they learned from it and how they do things differently now. And I think that the balance of those types of stories in the book was really interesting too.

So, I think there are a lot of things that surprised me, but those were probably the ones that stood out the most for me.

Connie: Mm-hmm. I think that same thing happens to me that every time I learn something new that I hadn't thought of it just expands your awareness and ability to meet a wider variety of audiences' needs.

It's almost limitless, it seems.

Sarah: Oh, I, I think so. That's why I think it makes a lot of sense to talk about this as a journey. You're never done, you know? And if people will say Sarah's an expert in accessibility. Yes, I have a lot of expertise, and I definitely know that I know a lot about designing for accessibility. I know I have a deep understanding of it, but I'm never done, like I'm still learning things all the time. I still make mistakes. We all do. And there are some really good examples in the book of that. Folks that work in accessibility, have disabilities have lived experiences and still make mistakes and share that in the book.

Right. I think it's a good point that it is a journey.

Connie: When you talk to people in learning and development, do you find that there are some myths about accessibility?

Sarah: Yes. And one that stood out for me more after I worked on the book than before. And I think the thing, the most common myth that I uncovered working on this book is that people default to a thinking that folks with disabilities are less capable than folks without disabilities.

That is the biggest thing and it's something that I definitely had this framing in my head without even realizing it. And when you get into researching this stuff and you get into learning from these folks and learning about these stories, people just because they have a disability are not by default, less capable than folks without a disability.

And I think this myth that someone with a disability is somehow less than is very destructive and it plays a role. It filters into a lot of other thinking about accessibility and inclusion everywhere, and it's not just disabilities, but folks that you know maybe from a different background or have a different education or be from a different part of the world.

This thinking that those folks are less capable than someone who is, I'm just going to say it, a white male. If I start by thinking that someone that has a disability is less capable, then it becomes a chore or something that's hard for me to do to then say, well, I need to hire someone with a disability so that I'm more inclusive. Well, you need to show me the data that says that someone with a disability is more productive than the people that I'm hiring now so that I can make a business case.

Nobody else is having to prove that they're more productive or make more money for a company. Why is that a default? Why do these folks have to prove that they can

make you more money just to even have an opportunity to work there? Nobody else has to do that.

And I think that that default thinking is challenging. And the second thing that I'll say with this is that a lot of people think that making accommodations for folks with disabilities is expensive and time-consuming, and that is not true. If you think about it from the beginning, going back to the beginning of our conversation, if you start with an inclusive mindset, then you design for that, then it doesn't cost extra money.

Curb cuts and automatic opening doors are used as examples all the time, right? But if you cut that curb after you pour the concrete, it's very expensive. If you cut that curb while you're pouring the concrete, it's probably less expensive because you're using less materials and you just designed it that way.

So, you have to start to think about it from the beginning. And then when you design that way, it's more inclusive and more accessible to everyone. So, everyone gets to benefit from it.

Haben Girma has a fantastic, recorded session. She is blind and deaf. She is a lawyer, and she talks a lot about her experience of going to Harvard Law, and one of the things that she talks about in one of her presentations is accommodations. And she said we talk about accommodations as if they're only for people with disabilities.

But if I go into a room and the lights are on, I am blind. I don't need lights. You would save a lot of money in electricity if you shut the lights off, right? If you're using a wheelchair, you come with your own chair. So, we don't need to spend all this money on chairs for everybody that doesn't have a wheelchair.

Why are you making accommodations for all these people to have a place to sit? So, it starts to get your brain thinking about this stuff differently. We make accommodations for people all the time. Why is it that your accommodations are more important than mine? Right. And so, it's getting into that mindset of there are a lot of myths about accessibility, but I think once you start to get into talking to people who have these stories and who have disabilities, you start to see how ridiculous it is, and the way that we've been accustomed to thinking about it culturally.

Connie: Yes, yes. I remember when I was in graduate school, I had a little baby in a stroller, and I would be walking along campus strolling him. And I remember that there were a few places where there were large sets of steps. And I had to carry him and the stroller on the steps, and then everywhere where there were wheelchair accommodations it was wonderful. And I went, oh, but did they know that it would be good for strollers too?

Sarah: Exactly. I talked to my architect friend about that a lot. I'm like, why do we even need stairs? Like everybody can use a ramp. Why are you even making stairs at all? You know? So, if you've thought about designing environments that were accessible to begin with, if people had thought about that ahead of time, our entire environment would be very different.

Connie: That's true. Hadn't thought about that. Well, so for people in learning and development who want to kind of ease into it, they haven't done anything yet. They haven't really had an inclusive mindset. They're just starting to become aware and think about it. How can they ease into this?

Sarah: I talk to folks about this a lot because when you notice it, when you realize it and you start to learn about this stuff, it can feel overwhelming.

I mean, and this is for everybody and the secret that people don't talk about is all of these folks that we admire in our field, with these amazing designers and developers, a lot of these folks are also just now learning about accessibility and accessible design. Like, this is not something that everybody knows, and you're just left out on.

I think it's a thing that a lot of people are just now learning, and again, even the people who. Have known about this for a long time, have been trying to design more accessible content, more inclusive content. They're still on a journey too, and they're still learning about ways to do this and working within tools and structures that make it difficult, frankly.

So, I think one of the things when you're first getting into it is to pick one thing that you can start doing. And there are some common ones that people always talk about because they're the easier ones to start with. So, learn what alt-text is and start adding it to all your images. Get comfortable with that, get comfortable with writing it, and then add the next thing.

Once you're in the habit of doing that, it's starting to incorporate some of these things into your design process and it'll become second nature, and then you can add more to it. So, I think the number one recommendation I have is don't try to do everything at the same time. Do the things that you are learning and practice them and make them part of your process.

If you're learning about alt-text, put a field for alt-text in your storyboard. Put it in processes for your design team, for your development team. Start to incorporate it into your processes. So now you're doing that. And now we can add the next thing, which is from now on, all of our videos will have closed captions.

Are you going to have the time and budget to go back and add closed captions to every video you've ever created? Maybe not. But going forward, can you start doing that? Can you start using more inclusive language? Can you start checking your contrast? It's just having something like this book gives you at the end of every chapter, there's one thing you can do right now.

Pick that one thing, read one chapter. The book is 600 pages, but the beauty of it is that it's, it's 600 pages of mini stories. So, you can pick up the book right now with five minutes, read a whole chapter, which is just a mini story, and then take action. Then start doing the thing at the end of the chapter, and then just get in a routine of doing that for a while.

So, there are a lot of things you can do to get started, but the most important thing is to get started.

Connie: Those are great suggestions, and I love that mindset of rather than feeling defeated at the start, realize that everyone is still learning about it and just dive in with one thing. Love that.

Sarah: Yeah, I mean, I just spent years of my life writing a book on this. I am very good at this stuff, but I've been working with videos in LinkedIn live and I can't figure out how to get the closed captions to work in LinkedIn live. So right now, I have five videos on LinkedIn live on my LinkedIn that closed captions aren't working.

Now they're recorded and they're on our YouTube channel with captions and edited and so that gets there and available, but somebody's going to have to go down a rabbit hole to get to them, right? Which is not great. So even people who are aware and have the skillset to do things are still trying to work within different tools.

So, it's not always easy either. So, you do have to give yourself a little bit of grace and just do the best you can with what you have.

Connie: In terms of digital products, especially eLearning, what are some of the most important ways to accommodate the widest audience of learners?

You did mention the alt-text. Anything else come to mind? Essentially, I'm thinking about the most bang for your buck.

Sarah: We actually have a primer for eLearning because that's the area of expertise that I've been in for a very long time, which, you know, so I think that there's your top five.

So, alt-text close captions and transcripts, making sure your videos always have closed captions and transcripts, making sure you're checking your contrast so that you have sufficient contrast for readability, making sure that you check for color blindness, color combinations. Okay? And the most common is red-green, but also yellow-blue.

And there are all sorts of color checkers, but the easiest way is just add a second indicator. Don't use color as your only indicator, and then you're fine with colorblindness. And then checking things with a screen reader, which is also good for testing. One thing that a lot of folks don't know is that most of you, if not everyone already has a screen reader on your device.

You have narrator on Microsoft operating system that you can just turn it on. In, Mac, you have voiceover. You can just turn it on, but you can also download NVDA, you can download Jaws. There are plenty of screen readers that you can use to test your content, to start to get an idea of what that experience is like, which can help you at least be more mindful of it.

It's not going to make you a natural screen reader user. It's not going to help you understand what it is to have a disability necessarily, but it's going to help you get a better understanding of what that environment is like and how it's a little different than what you might use to experience content.

Connie: Right. One of the main things I learned from using a screen reader is that I often did not need alt-text, and I put in the null value two quotes because it turned out that it was just repeating what I had in text. Yes. I'll make something a little bit, I'll make a fancy title in graphic text, but I also have it in text.

Well, I don't need the screen reader to read that graphic text again.

Sarah: Yes. And sometimes it's also considering. Did I even need that graphic? Like if I'm having a hard time describing why a graphic is there, can I even describe why it's there for the person who sees it?

And so sometimes it helps me question my design decisions too.

You do need visual structure for your content. Because people who are processing it visually benefit from visual design. But people who aren't processing it that way, they're processing it differently. And we have to also think about how are they processing that information and how can we best meet those needs?

And you can do both. You have to practice it. Right? Yeah. And to your point, trying to use a screen reader and see what that might be like and experience what that might be like. It gives you a little different context and helps you think about it differently.

Connie: It really does. And just an FYI, for anyone who's listening, I always have a transcript for every podcast.

All 80 something podcasts have transcripts along with them. And it all started because someone who was deaf said, do you have transcripts?

Sarah: One thing that AI tools are very, very good at is helping you write alt-text and helping you transcribe your videos.

Helping you create your close captioning. It can help you do that work a lot faster. I mean, we're talking like 30 seconds and just editing things depending on how much content it is.

Connie: Yeah. It really can. But you really do have to get in there and edit it.

Sarah: Yes, yes you do. And there are some tools that are better than others.

Like Zoom for example. Their transcription for their transcripts and their closed captioning is terrible. But I have an integration to a tool called Descript. Which you might be familiar with, Connie and that is so much better at transcribing. It has almost no errors, and so that process tends to go faster when you have better tools.

Connie: That's amazing. I found good results also with Rev. For people who don't know, they have one level where they have a human get in there and go through it, and one that's just automated.

Sarah: Yes, and that's actually in the book.

There are several tools that Alan shares that he uses for different captioning and Rev is one of those.

Connie: One thing you know I have focused on a lot in my own work, is accessibility for eLearning. One person in the book mentions that a blind person came to her class, and she was not prepared for a blind person to come to the class.

Sarah: Yeah. I think that was actually Jean and that story is excellent because sometimes you don't know what you don't know until it happens to you. And one of

the things that I love about the book is that it's kind of like getting in on these stories ahead of time, so you don't have to wait until it happens to you.

You can read how it happened to somebody else and learn from somebody else's experience. Yes, she talks about that and how to set up the classroom ahead of time. Same thing goes for virtual learning. There are a lot of really good tips and checklists in this book about how you can be more proactive about setting things up ahead of time, asking for things, telling people what will be available, and giving them the ability to tell you if there's something else that would be helpful for them. And notice I didn't say, tell me what disability you have so I know what to do. It's more, these are the things that will be available and is there anything that would be useful for you that is not on this list that would help you participate in this? We would do that for anybody. Right. And it doesn't, just like your stroller example, it doesn't necessarily mean that it's a disability, although folks who have disabilities might be prevented from being involved at all.

But there was a person yesterday that came to a webinar that I had and was trying to participate and was at an appointment and needed the closed captions and it wasn't working on LinkedIn live. And I gave that person a Zoom link so that they could actually go in and participate in see the caption.

It is trying to be more proactive about communicating to people, here's how I'm going to set this up. Here are the materials we'll be using. And you do as much as you can, but the important thing is, is that you will not know everything. And the more you can paint the environment; these are the types of activities we're going to be doing; this is the type of class structure it is. We're going to have large group discussion. We're going to have this, that, and the other. Being able to give people an idea of what that's going to be like, giving people an agenda ahead of time, notes, presentations, workbooks, so that folks can be more prepared and let you know ahead of time instead of just showing up.

I give an example in the book my mom has multiple sclerosis and when we try to go sign up to go to a concert or an event or whatever, I have to call that venue ahead of time to say, how far is the parking lot? Is there a ramp? Will there be a place to sit?

Can she bring her rollator to see if we can even go? And sometimes that's really easy. If somebody has a phone number that I can call or an email that is monitored, then that can be very easy. Sometimes it's impossible. People just don't even answer a phone. It's a broken link on the website.

I can't get the information I need so we don't go. Which means they lose revenue, which is not a good business decision, by the way. But, thinking about when we're creating these classroom environments, how can we make sure that people have at

least two different ways to contact us and that we're communicating with them in advance about what to expect?

Connie: What do you tell people who are designing a webinar, they're virtual facilitators. What advice do you give them?

Sarah: In my opinion, I think that virtual facilitation is the hardest because you're dealing with digital content and it's a synchronous situation, and so you have to be ready to kind of shift. But you're doing that using digital tools, which may or may not be all that accessible on their own. I think for folks who are virtual facilitators, probably my biggest advice is if you can work with a producer to be your backup that's ideal. That's not always possible. It doesn't have to be an actual producer, if it is great. But just having a second person to back you up, that can be there to help people with technical issues and get them the information they need and create an environment that allows people to communicate with you when there's a problem.

And the biggest piece, I think, especially if you're just getting started, you don't know everything yet, so you can get this book and you can read and prepare and learn from the stories and use the checklists that are in here and that'll help you get prepped. But I think the most important thing is communication and having a way to do that.

Connie: I think there's more that we can learn and do for neurodivergent learners. What should we take into consideration and how can we accommodate them?

Sarah: I think the conversation around neurodivergence is a really interesting one because you'll hear people use the word neurodiversity. Well, neurodiversity is a state of being. All of us are on a spectrum and the spectrum goes every which way.

And there's intersectionality and all sorts of things. But when we talk about neurodiversity, it's really a catchall term for a lot of different types of things. It could be dyslexia, it could be ADHD, it could be autism. There are a lot of things that kind of get wrangled up into Neurodivergence.

Now, when we think about designing for neurodivergent learners, it's a little different in a way than what you think about designing for someone who is blind or who is deaf or, someone who has colorblindness or whatever. It's a little different in that neurodivergent learners benefit from good design.

And I think the thing, and for a podcast, which is a very short period of time, I think the thing that you can do best is whenever we are lazy with our design and we don't give people options, or we don't check contrast, or we don't check the answers on the quiz to make sure that we give correct and incorrect and right feedback, that can

be frustrating to someone who is like, oh, this is not a great designed class or whatever. But for someone who is autistic, it can be debilitating, and it feels more extreme is my understanding. And having had these conversations with these folks and research that we I've done is that being able to design better learning experiences will help neurodivergent learners because going out and saying are you ADHD, I can design something for you is no better than saying, are you blind so I can design something for you? That's not the way to approach it.

If you are trying to design something and you want to make sure that it's more inclusive to more folks, it's checking things like what font are you using? Are you using a more inclusive font? Light mode versus dark mode. For neurodivergent learners, it's giving folks options because what works best for one person doesn't work well for someone else and vice versa.

I think one of the things that is important to note is that it is really difficult to talk about neurodivergence because you're bucketing up a whole bunch of different people into one term and that you can't think about it like that.

You really have to think about it more as what are the types of things that make it difficult for somebody to participate in something, and if I'm dyslexic using certain types of fonts make it difficult for me to read it. If I have ADHD, then being able to self-pace with content, not putting timers on things.

There are certain things that make it very difficult for me to engage in that content when I have certain disabilities. But the reason I think a lot of people struggle with talking about neurodivergence is because we're bucketing up a whole bunch of things into one. Probably the easiest way to talk about it is to think about good design. When people read about what's good for someone who is autistic?

Well, the things that people will tell you about it. You'll look at it and say, oh, well that's just good design. Exactly. That's right. And what happens is when you don't have good design and you're like, eh, it's good enough. Well, it might not be good enough for some folks, and it may result in folks checking out and actually not engaging in it at all because they can't bring themselves into that content. And so, it's a challenging thing to talk about because there are a lot of things that are going on that can't be neatly bucketed into vision. I can't see this content; I need something for a screen reader. You can't neatly bucket in any kind of neurodivergent type of learning disability into that bucket and just say, oh, we'll just do this. What I've found is most helpful is giving people options.

Connie: I think that makes a lot of sense and it is good advice because I wasn't quite sure how to deal with it either.

I know when I'm facilitating an in-person class, I'll try to be sensitive to people who are at least very introverted and don't want to really interact much with a group. I can relate to that, but I just wasn't quite sure how to deal with it. And what you're saying makes a lot of sense.

To wrap things up and thank you so much for your time, Sarah. How can accessibility advocates persuade leaders to infuse a design for all mindset into the organizational culture?

Sarah: You know, my answer to this question was different three months ago.

I will say that it can be more challenging when there are organizational initiatives that are happening, that conflict with being able to advocate for these types of things. No matter what the climate is in your organization, you do have to think about what's important to your business leaders, right?

To the folks that you have to make a case for. And typically, the things that are important to your leaders is being able to get work done. Being efficient, meeting business goals, that kind of thing. And I think when we're trying to advocate for these things, the reality is it's not expensive to do this.

It does require thinking about it in advance. It does require having a skilled workforce. It does require more than one person in your organization do it. Everybody in the organization has to understand how to make sure that whatever work they produce is more accessible to other people. It can't just be the designer.

It has to also be marketing and communications and your visual design team and your website and all of the folks that are involved, hiring HR, just going through an application process. All of those things have to be more accessible in order to have a more accessible and inclusive work environment.

When we think about advocating for this with leaders, think about what are the things that would be beneficial to everyone. And I think that there are some really good websites. And Connie, I'll share one with you. W3C has a series of videos that talk about how accessibility is critical for some folks, but it benefits everybody.

If you think about the benefits to it, I gave an example not too long ago with websites. And our website, in my organization would often hit really, really high in search results. And I was always curious why, because we're just a small consulting organization.

And it's because websites that are built to be accessible have higher SEO rankings. They have higher search engine optimization. And so, if you think about adding alt-text and making sure that your stuff has closed captions and that your site structure is correct and you're using headings that are tagged appropriately and all that, things that are accessible to humans, more accessible to humans are also more accessible to robots.

When you build things that are more accessible, it's beneficial to the business in lots of different ways that you might not expect, but you have to think about what's important to your leaders in order to come up with a way to advocate for it. And I think the last part of the book does a really good job of giving some different examples, like when do you hire out, when you get a consultant, how do you advocate for this in different environments?

How do you create a role for it and collaborate with other parts of the organization. So, I think that part of it is research, but it really starts with understanding what's important to your organization.

Connie: That's a really good point. If you can find what's important to the organization and focus on how designing for all will boost the mission, I think that might be a good way to go. Well, Sarah, we've run out time. Thank you so much. This was a great conversation, and I think a lot of people will learn something.

Sarah: Thanks, Connie. Thanks for having me.

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