

## In the Classroom 113

# Reduce Course Accommodations Through Better Course Design

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**Stan Skrabut:** Welcome back. Thanks everyone so much for taking time to listen to this podcast. It certainly means a lot. I know you could be doing other things, perhaps you are doing other things, but you're still hanging out with me. A little weather report for Rhode Island, beautiful day. Got a chance to go out in the yard, and basically, try to clean up all these trees. We got a huge yard and we got broken branches and trees everywhere, and that's how I spent my morning. Good day.

Today, I want to talk a little bit about accommodations. How we can reduce the number of accommodations? If you have to provide an accommodation in your course, it typically means there was a design flaw. It's not something to feel bad about, but it's something that you need to fix. Your choices are you can wait for every time somebody needs an accommodation to come fix your course or you can get ahead of it. Oftentimes, these design flaws can be fixed ahead of time to prevent the need for you to retrofit your course due to some formal request for an accommodation.

I believe, as instructors, we need to go further than just providing a disability statement in our syllabus. We need to make our courses as accessible as possible so that the greatest majority of students can use them without accommodation. When we talk about accessibility, this means everyone can use the content. When we talk about accommodation, this means we need to make some change in order to support some users who cannot access the content. If you are providing content in your class, don't you want everyone to get to it? Just a question.

Why do we need to do this? Why do we need to think about accessibility rather than wait for accommodation? According to the CDC, one out of four US adults lives with a disability, and only 5% of undergraduate students register a disability with the school's disability office. As a result, you have many more students in your classrooms trying to navigate through your course and consume your content that have not reported the disability and requested an accommodation. This doesn't mean they don't need the accommodation. This means they just did not report the need to have an accommodation.

According to the article, college students access to academic accommodations varies as a function of school types, selectivity, and cost. Students with physical disabilities may have problems seeing instructional material, hearing lectures, or managing chronic pain during the course or the semester. Students with learning disabilities may have difficulty with reading comprehension, math problem-solving, or test-taking speed due to problems with cognitive processing.

In other words, they're really not getting your content, and honestly, that can be a waste of your time because you were trying to get your students to understand and be able to consume successfully the content and demonstrate their mastery of knowledge. The disabilities that come into your class may be permanent, temporary, or situational. Some may not even believe they have a disability, only that they're having trouble in your class. For example, as I have gotten older, I have become more hard of hearing and seeing, but I'm probably not going to ask for an accommodation unless the situation is problematic.

I may bring it up to you directly but if you don't fix it, then I have to go through the disability services office, or I may just not talk to you at all about it and juggle through the content. Sometimes the situation creates a disability when a previous disability did not exist. For example, you may have a student in your class who needs to watch a video, maybe you recorded your lecture. They need to watch that video for your class but may not be able to listen to the sound because they don't want to wake their sleeping child. That's a situational disability.

If you think about it, if you drive your car at night and it starts raining, it's harder to see. It was already harder to see because it got dark and you're relying on your lights, and you got lights coming in your eyes but now you add rain or snow, that totally degrades your ability to see. It's only situational. It's not that you can't see, it's only situational. Each one of us has a disability depending upon the circumstance at the time, and so institutions, to include your class, need to take a proactive approach. This takes the form of universal design for learning and accessibility.

I talked about universal design for learning back in Episodes 8, 9, and 10, and accessibility in Episode 67. I specifically talked about the Faculty Four, which requires that you make alternative texts for things such as images and charts, that you provide captions, transcriptions, and audio descriptions for videos and audio files, that your documents are accessible. You're using headers, you're using bullets, you're using white space, and that your documents can be resized and reformatted and consumed by a screen reader. That any third-party tool that you use also has to be accessible.

A lot of instructors don't fix accessibility issues in their courses until they receive a formal accommodation request. Based on my experience working with faculty over all these years, these requests never come at the right time. They typically come when the instructor is really busy, and, to be honest, I don't know of a time when an instructor is not busy, but this is just suddenly an added mandate that they need to fix our course when they could be doing other things. The idea of weaving in accessible content while you're developing it, while you're creating is being proactive and inclusive.

Now there are certainly some concerns. I've heard concerns from faculty that they think they are watering down their course. This is not the case. It's simply a way to increase access to your content. For example, PDF documents. There's two ways to scan a PDF document. One is to scan it as an image. It basically takes a picture of the document. The other is with OCR capabilities. A lot of the printers and scanners have those two capabilities and you can turn one on, so the document is captured in

OCR, optical character reading, which then means that the text can be viewed by a screen reader, which is important if you happen to be blind, or have a visual impairment, then it becomes important.

There's other reasons for it. That you can get the document using different tools to have it read out loud to you, which can be useful if you happen to be traveling and your hands need to be busy or your eyes need to be on the road. You can have the capability of having a document read to you. If it's an image, a screen reader cannot read it, and therefore, only 75% roughly of your class can consume that document; 25% are out if they have a visual disability, they can't use the document at all.

Creating accessible documents or accessible courses does not compromise rigor. It just means that everybody has the chance to consume the content that you're providing in your course, and there's definitely benefits to this.

I found a interesting article from the Web Accessibility Initiative, and it really talked to the business case of why you want to include accessibility. The first is innovation. They have found out with the Forbes 100, businesses that take accessibility seriously, as all parts of their endeavors, they tend to be higher-performing organizations and more innovative. They recognize that they can reach more customers and improve the customer experience. That's in terms of innovation.

How well does your content work? How well can students access your content if, for example, they can't use a mouse? Maybe they are paralyzed. They have difficulty using a mouse. They have to access it in a different way. What if they have to use voice controls? Can they work through your content? Just something to think about.

The other business case is it enhances the brand. Exceptional businesses are moving beyond meeting the minimum requirements that are required by law and are becoming known as businesses that cater to everyone. They're able to reach everyone with their content, with their product, and who would you want to do business with? Some companies don't care about this idea of accessibility so they have immediately cut off a quarter of their potential customers.

Which brings us to the third benefit for including accessibility, and that is market reach. With one person in four being disabled, what could changes in making content more accessible have on this reach? More importantly, what happens if you don't make the changes? Are you turning away customers? You are losing money from your bottom line.

Thinking about higher education as a business, and I know, I know, people don't want to think higher ed as a business, but money is exchanging hands for something that happen. That sounds business-like to me. If you have students that recognize that the institution doesn't care about their disabilities, they'll go somewhere else. Who wants to lose potential students because of something that we can control?

Then finally on the business side is it minimizes legal risk. Frankly, there's laws on the books, the ADA, the American Disabilities Act, that's basically saying that you have to make content available. Now for public businesses, this is a little tricky but

the judges are kind of ruling in favor of accessibility. Basically, businesses cannot discriminate against individuals with a disability. Those are some of the business reasons why you want to make your content accessible.

Now on the academic side, the question is, is the additional time and energy needed for creating accessible courses worth it? I'm going to say absolutely. If you curated content for your course, and only 75% of your students can use it, was it worth your time when you were aiming for 100%? If you spend just a little extra time to create content that all your students can use, it's worth it. I'm going to be honest with you. Fortunately, when you learn and start using key principles for creating accessible courses, you're just going to use them naturally. It's not like something additional that's a heavy burden on how to do it, you just change how you create for example documents.

You just become more aware, "Oh, I need to make sure that this is happening," where before maybe you were like bullets, that you were typing one dot and what the bullet was, and two-dot, and then what the bullet was. There's a tool for creating bullets, and that is the proper way of doing it. You actually save time if you activate that setting because you don't have to type the one dot space or the two-dot space. It does it automatically. It's just a matter of learning those particular principles.

Another benefit in the academic side of the house is it improves learning. This is probably the most important benefit at the end of the day is accessible courses help improve student learning, and first of all, every student can access the content in your course. It also reduces accommodations. If you have an accessible course, you're going to reduce the time and effort addressing those accommodation needs. They're already taken care of upfront.

We're talking the greatest majority of them, not all of them, you're going to have some accommodations you have to deal with but you're going to reduce the amount of accommodations you have to deal with. The students can focus on the content. They don't have to divert energy to requesting an accommodation. Basically, accommodations are a time suck for a lot of people. They are a time suck for you as the instructor. They are a time suck for your students. They are a time suck for disability services. They are a time suck for a lot of other people.

Another benefit, increased engagement. Because students can focus on the content and get the message out of the content, they're going to be more engaged with your course. The more that students are involved in the course material, the less frustrated they're going to be, and that leads to increase retention that they're going to stay with your course. Also, students are not feeling singled out.

Accommodation is to fix an issue with your course for a specific student. The psychology is in there. You're going to have feelings, it's like, "Crap, I got to fix this. I have to fix this because of Bob." You're professional enough that you're not really going to do it but someone in the back of your head you're thinking about Bob and their request for an accommodation, and what kind of burden is on this. If your course is well put together, Bob doesn't have to request an accommodation,

therefore you're not thinking about Bob in a bad light so you don't want to make students feel like they're being singled out.

By improving your course design, it improves your overall instruction. By going through your course to improve course content, you'll be thinking about each item and how it fits into your course, this, in turn, is going to lead to improved instruction. You're then going to be able to reach more students, and more students are going to be able to demonstrate mastery of your content.

A lot of good things happening here. Also accessible content is searchable so we go back to those PDFs. If it was just an image, your PDF was just a scan of a document, but it came out as an image, you can't search through that. If it comes out properly as an optical character read document, then individuals can search through that document, and it's just a useful tool. Those are some of the reasons why you really need to do this. Some of the benefits you're going to get out of it.

Here's some things that you can do to put you moving in the right direction to make more accessible courses to reduce accommodations. Here's a few strategies that you can put into practice that it's just going to make your courses more accessible, more inclusive.

The first one, request the course review. Get with your instructional technologist, ask them to do a review of your content. Why? Frankly, you may not necessarily have the knowledge or experience to review your course to identify issues that are impeding your students, and you're just too close to your content. It's like reviewing journal articles or your dissertation, or if you give it to other people, they're going to see things that you're not going to be able to see.

Giving it to an instructional technologist to review, they're going to probably use a tool like a quality review checklist, like OSCQR or Quality Matters. They're going to find areas where you can improve your course, and that's really what you want them to be able to do. I talked about this OSCQR Quality Review Rubric, Episodes ITC 19 through 24. Go check those out; a lot of ways that you can enhance your courses pretty easy.

Another thing that you want to do is become more informed about your diverse set of students. We have a lot of post-traditional students in the classroom, adult learners that have different instructional need. How you would approach them? They're not necessarily the same as traditional students but more importantly, understanding this idea of this diverse set. When we're talking about diversity and equity and inclusion, you can throw in accessibility. The more you understand this, the more that every once in a while you go read about it and get better insight, then you can weave this back in your course. You get more awareness and empathy. You're going to consider ways that you can just keep improving your courses, so I encourage you to go do that.

The first opportunity you can, go take a course on accessibility. One of the easiest things you can do is take a course on how to create accessible content. Once you

learn these techniques, you're going to use them all the time. Your courses will benefit because you automatically build accessible content.

Another strategy is go back and review the faculty four for accessibility; alternative text for images, charts, graphs, things like that. Captions, transcripts, audio descriptions for media content making your documents accessible, and making sure that third-party resources are also accessible. A lot of tools like Microsoft Word, PowerPoint, they have accessibility reviews in those tools. Some learning management systems also alert you when your content is not meeting accessibility.

I know there's a tool out there called Ally, that you can weave into a learning management system, that will alert you when your content is not accessible. I just encourage you to go out and use these tools to just look at your content. Pull up a document, and look at the usability or accessibility of that document with that tool's checklist, and it'll alert you areas where you can make improvement.

Also, develop courses with Universal Design for Learning in mind. This is a wonderful tool for developing courses that focuses on the curriculum rather than the student. Universal Design for Learning helps to ensure that learners have choices and are supported. You are then designing a curriculum that attends to all the learners in the classroom. You're providing options for how a student consumes the lecture. It could be text-based, an audio file, or a video. If you use these principles, you're going to reduce the number of accommodations.

Another strategy is when you are rolling over your courses to a new semester, or you're doing a migration from one LMS to another. This is a great time to review the content in your course and make those enhancements. Things you want to check, make sure that you have closed captioning or transcripts for your media files. You can ensure your documents meet accessibility guidelines, ensure your PDFs are scanned properly, those are all things that you can work on. Then finally, ensure your course is mobile-ready. If you create course content that is mobile-friendly, you will also create content that can reach more people. Mobile content is just more flexible, and it will just make a world of difference in getting more people to be able to see your content.

Those are some strategies that you can put into place. There's lots of reasons why this is a good idea and it ends up being a time saver. If you started using the principles and putting them into place as you're building new content, you are going to save yourself time in the long run because you don't have to go retrofit your content due to an accommodation need. I encourage you to go check that out, go learn more.

Speaking of learning more, I have a book out there, and I want to tell you about it. Here's a quick plug for my book.