# SST Podcast S2 - Episode 5 - Dorothy

[Eddie] Welcome to Going Online with Oregon State University Ecampus. I'm your host Eddie Rodriguez, Student Engagement Program Manager with Oregon State Ecampus. I'll be giving you the low down on resources and tools for online learners across the globe. Ecampus serves more than 13,000 online learners each year through over 100 online degrees in progress.

Let's get into it. Welcome to Going Online with Oregon State University Ecampus. I'm your host, Eddie Rodriguez, Student Engagement Program Manager here within the student success team at Ecampus. And today I'm bringing you an exciting guest, someone who I haven't had the privilege to work with but I'm really excited to learn a lot about what they do and their inside knowledge around accessibility which surprised us what we're talking about today.

And what kind of goes into the process of thinking about accessibility and integrated into when courses are being designed online. So, without further ado, I'd like to introduce Dorothy Loftin. Dorothy, can you begin by introducing yourself, your background, your current role, and some of your duties here at OSU Ecampus.

[Dorothy] Yeah, my name is Dorothy Loftin and I started off my career with a degree in education and I was teaching high school. From there, I explored other education-related positions and then settled into instructional design after getting my degree and joined Ecampus in 2013. Here at Ecampus, I'm an instructional designer and I work with faculty to develop courses for Oregon State.

We have the benefit of a large team of talented people in our unit, and I have the opportunity with each class development to innovate with faculty for components of their class. And to connect our faculty with a variety of media developers to create engaging content for their courses.

In addition to that, I manage the inspire blog, which is written by our team of instructional designers. And we have guest blog writers as well from our research team from our open education team too.

[Eddie] Wow, sounds You've done a lot and you're currently doing a lot, which is awesome.

Just out of curiosity because you mentioned it. You said you were a high school teacher.

[Dorothy] Yes.

[Eddie] Was there a specific subject or that you don't mind sharing?

[Dorothy] Yeah, I taught health and physical education and I was also involved in junior class advising. I was head track coach, all sorts of things that go along with high school teachers.

And that health class includes all different subjects and I'll let you mind go with that.

[Eddie] No, I bet. No, that's awesome. I didn't, well, I did not know that of course. So that's really cool. I'm curious, well, in my mind it seems quite the change from obviously being in that kind of high school dynamic working with that student population to then I'm working online.

And I'm In higher education, instructional designer, was there, I guess, something that kind of inspired you to kind of go into the work that you're doing now or what was that transition like for you?

[Dorothy] Yeah, so when you go through and you get your education degree to become a teacher, all of the pedagogy that goes along with the training there and that degree, every little bit of that really helps me in my work now.

So we talk with instructors and sometimes instructors who may not have had that same degree so we can bring all of that knowledge to them. So it was really an easy transition to come up to higher Ed as an instructional designer because I'm helping them learn what I already knew.

And so it was pretty easy, and I really did enjoy my higher ed experience not to say that I didn't enjoy my high school experience but I really did enjoy and I wanted to give back to this community as well.

[Eddie] Yeah and I'm sure it just also probably gave you Just a lot more knowledge and understanding of obviously, working with a high school student population.

I'm sure you develop a certain set of skills that I'm sure have translated into your work now. Our audience out there that might not be super familiar with instructional design, or what instructional designer does, or could you provide just a little bit more context? Again, I know you shared some of the duties that you're working on now, but what is that role in the kind of grand scheme of things?

Where does it fit in with, obviously, the online learning, world, and working with faculty and designing classes as the title seems to suggest so?

[Dorothy] Yeah, so we are that go to person, for the instructor when they get paired with us. We start talking about what their classes about, what they want to do with their class because some of these folks have never taught online before.

Some of them are redevelopments and we just work together to make sure that their content is going to be engaging. We've been other places in education where it was like a correspondence course. That's not it anymore. We are looking for that same connection that you get on campus, and we have to make that happen online.

And so we are that point of reference for them where we can have them talk to our media folks, create some engaging lectures, create some videos. Do some amazing things with media to help bring themselves into the students' lives and the students get that same kind of a connection.

And so our part is to really help make that happen and then to go through their content, look for ways to bring in open educational resources to lower the cost of education for students. And to really collaborate with them and innovate on maybe making some of their assignments, a little more fun and engaging and have some application to the real world which we all know is something that really drives that content home.

[Eddie] Yeah, well I really appreciate you walking me through that. I think that's really helpful to get, just a better understanding of your work, the role. In some ways, it really seems it's that starting off point of realizing the kind of vision of what the course is going to end up looking like and making it happen and working with the faculty.

So a really critical component to this whole if you're an online student you probably don't think about what is all going into your course, you just kind of log in into, for us over here at Ecampus, at Oregon State Canvas, and you're just here's my course. And it's really fun.

But there's a lot of that work that you're doing behind the scenes to really kind of you said, taking that real-world application and trying to make sure the course is really engaging with the students, so that's really awesome. Which kind of leads me a little bit to my next question.

I feel you maybe were starting kind of to address it, but as an instructional designer how do you approach designing a course? And at what stage do you begin thinking about accessibility?

[Dorothy] Yeah, for me, I look at each new course development as an open opportunity. Developing rapport from day one is essential when building trust and a safe space to innovate within.

If you're shy or you're unsure, that's safe space is essential. And I get to hear all about their classes, like I mentioned before, if it's been taught online, what successes and what challenges they encounter with the content, and then to just get to know the instructor because. It's easier if you can say, hey, I think maybe we can make this better, there's that connection already, so that it doesn't feel like I'm dogging on their class.

And then we think about accessibility before we even meet with an instructor, we have a skeleton template that we start our builds with that was developed with accessibility in mind. We looked at color contrast and the use of color, consistency, ease of navigation and functionality for someone who may be using the screen reader, and then design that template so that we get started off on the right foot.

We strive to meet the WCAG accessibility standards and all courses from the outset. And this allows us to do a deeper dive into infusing accessibility throughout the courses in meaningful and impactful ways, using the instructional design principles for learning. So designing for the whole student population, not just a specific type.

And then from there, it's everything we build or add them to the course. We look at that, make sure it's going to be accessible to the highest extent possible. And we want our students to be able to get into the classes and get their content and not have to worry about a barrier that they have to overcome.

[Eddie] Yeah, you kind of mentioned a really good point, at least as I'm kind of reflecting to what you mentioned. That one of the important aspects to that also to be able to kind of make sure that's all happening is also building that trust and relationship with the faculty members.

So in some ways they, when you come to them as you're reviewing their content and working with them to kind of design everything. Having that trust to be able to then suggest certain things that can kind of really maximize the experience is the right term here, but really making it accessible for all as you were kind of talking about.

So I just wanted to highlight that, that's probably a really critical component to all of this too. But with that also, I'm curious, you have this template that you're working off and you're really thinking about accessibility early on, which I think is awesome. But my next question, kind of thinking about some of that, what are some common challenges you've encountered related to accessibility and when working with faculty to design some of these online courses?

[Dorothy] Yeah, I think the biggest piece here is awareness and education about accessibility. Accessibility is ingrained in what instructional designers do day-to-day, day-in, day-out, but that's not the case for everyone. Our instructors come to us with a wide variety of knowledge about accessibility. They may come from an education background like us, they may come from the private sector, or they could be brand new instructors fresh out of their PhD programs and not have had that similar education.

Our job is to meet them where they are and help take them to the next step up in regards to accessibility. This results in a customized approach where each instructor gets training tailored to where they are by building that awareness and providing education and the opportunity to practice that.

Then taking the time to review the effectiveness of our efforts, it allows us to continuously improve. We're addressing these challenges head on and then celebrating our successes, or making changes if changes need to be made.

[Eddie] Yeah, I can totally see where the probably high school teacher experience is coming into play right now.

Sitting out with the faculty and probably yeah, meeting them where they're at, especially if they are just fresh out of their doctoral program, and yeah, probably put in your skills to get used there.

[Dorothy] Absolutely.

[Eddie] So, transitioning a little bit to thinking about so okay, you've obviously sat down with the faculty.

You've built that rapport, you've kind of identified some areas, maybe where some changes could be made. And the courses, now let's say it's ready to go it's live, students are in there. So that's all-in place so now I'm thinking, are there as the students Kind of going through all this.

Are there any also, in addition to all that work that you've done to make the course as accessible as possible. Are there any free technology resources that students could also access that have proven effective in enhancing the learning experience for students who, either have or suspect they might have a disability?

[Dorothy] Absolutely, just doing this search for free assistive technology, go to Google, it provides many options out there that anybody can access. For students, for example, students who are blind or low vision or just need a screen reader for whatever reason. NVDA is a free screen reader program and it's widely used out there.

Students don't have to pay for it, anybody does not have to pay for it. So it's great, assistive technology doesn't have to be something super hard to use either. Not to say that everything is, but there's always a learning curve. But many of us are walking around with assistive technology, right?

In our phones or in our homes, for example, speech to text, right? You don't want to text while you're driving, you push a little button, and you talk and it texts for you. Of course it's not always accurate, but it's there, we're using it even though you may not need it.

Or think about the classic case series, do a Google search for me, or Alexa, turn on my lights, right? That's all assistive technology used by a variety of people and sometimes it's for convenience and sometimes it's for a need. It's all assistive technology, the same goes the other way around.

I was just talking about speech-to-text, text-to-speech is also available, and often it's right there on your computer as well, you just need to know how to turn it on.

[Eddie] Dorothy, you were just explaining some great resources that students can share or access for free, things like all the assistive technology.

Even things, like using your phone and asking things, hey Siri, which I think is awesome and slightly funny at the same time. Because we just don't realize that we have a lot of this at our fingertips perhaps. But that's all technology that can potentially support us and I'm sure some students out there are maybe using it or haven't thought about using it in that way, for their kind of learning experience.

The other question that I was wondering is what are some things that are built into Canvas itself that students could access or use? Especially because most of the time here, again, at OSU Ecampus, all of our online students are using Canvas for their courses or they're in there often.

So is there anything built in there that students can access?

[Dorothy] Yeah, OSU has something called Blackboard Ally. It's installed and it provides information to the students in a variety of formats, and they get to pick which way they want to get it. It really does help the students get material in the way that you know works best for them.

And one of those things is Immersive Reader, it's a learning tool that uses proven techniques to improve reading for people regardless of their age, regardless of their ability. Some of the things that Immersive Reader does for you is it can read the text out loud. They can break it down into syllables if you're really needing to break it down further.

Sometimes that's very helpful when you're looking at some scientific words, how to say this, right? And then if they want to read their text with some extra space in between lines or extra space in between letters. So especially for somebody who might be dyslexic, and they need to have that kind of broken apart so they can focus on one line or one word at a time that's in there.

The other thing that it can do is you can choose between a couple of different fonts so that if you don't read one very well, the other one's easier to look at, you can change those things. And then you can also, I think this is really cool for focused work is highlighting sets of one, two, three or four or five lines so that really this is what I'm focusing on and then you can move to the next section.

I really liked that feature, especially when there's something a little more technical.

[Eddie] Wow, this just has to be thinking, I wish I was more aware of this when I was an undergrad. Because I don't know, I mean it was probably an existence, maybe some of this, but this is all like pretty new to me, so I'm curious, is this something, I mean, I don't know if you can answer this question, but is this something students are able to learn about as soon as they log into that first class?

Is there a section on there where it talks about accessibility and some of these tools they can use?

[Dorothy] Yeah, I am not quite sure if it was around during your undergrad. I don't know if you want to date yourself or anything-

[Eddie] Maybe we'll cut that one out.

[Dorothy] But certainly when I took a couple of online classes in my graduate program, this was not really out there and widely available. So I won't date myself much further than that either, but in every single Canvas page at the top, you've got a title of what that page is about.

And there's a little symbol for Blackboard Ally. Now I don't know about you, but if there's something that I'm, ooh, what's that symbol about? I'm going to hover over it to see what it's about. A simple click on it brings up some of those options. And then in our modules for every single course, there's an accessibility page that talks about the accessibility of any materials, the accessibility of any outside tools that they're going to use, accessibility for Canvas.

And so definitely you can add in some knowledge about Blackboard Ally or other accessibility tools or whatnot. And that can be specific for every class.

[Eddie] Okay yeah, you're probably right. I don't think that might have been around. Yeah, but that's great that there's a lot of sort of intention in that there are places in Canvas where students can be seeing that help around accessibility, which is awesome.

Now [LAUGH since you mentioned that it was likely maybe not around for either of us, This kind of either technology or just even awareness, it seems like things are changing pretty quickly, often in terms of technology and everything like that. So I'm curious, how does your team stay updated on the latest advancements and accessibility technology and how do you incorporate them into a lot of your systems and your work?

[Dorothy] Yeah, so there's a lot of ways to keep up, and I don't think anybody can keep up on everything, right? So one of the best ways to keep up with what's going on is to get involved with a variety of organizations, right? Like the Online Learning Consortium, Quality Matters, instructional design communities.

They can all provide ample opportunities for discussion about what's new, troubleshooting with one another if you've got a problem that came up, and learning from one another, because you may see something that somebody else doesn't, and vice versa. So something like joining a listserv about accessibility, right? Your inbox may be flooded from time to time when something new comes out like ChatGPT.

And then find a blog or find a book and join accessibility communities, just talk to one another. That's where that information transfer comes into play. We don't always have that time to go searching. But being engaged in those communities can help us direct our attention to what's being looked at and what's coming up.

[Eddie] Yeah, that's great. I mean, it definitely sounds like it's obviously work on yourself and like that willingness to take action to go out there and learn about what's going on. And that's awesome that at least I'm getting the sense that that's likely something that's part of the culture within maybe the ID team of making sure everyone's learning and asking those questions, and just being mindful and trying to stay on top of things as best they can.

So that's awesome that that's happening. One of the things that just popped into my head as you were talking about how you're all staying informed, one of the, at least to me, seems to be a big topic right now is AI. I'm curious, do you see a place for that in some of this work that you're doing?

[Dorothy] Absolutely. You have to be cautious with how you use it. You have to be knowledgeable that your students are going to use it. But there is a place where I was just talking to an instructor yesterday about how to bring that into the class and make it okay to use, but then also have a genuine response from a student as well.

So in that case, we're looking at something like put this example into ChatGPT, ask them to solve this problem for you or to give you a suggestion, and then turn around and your job is to debunk it, right? Tell them why that won't work. And so bringing it in and then turning it right around allows the students to use the AI and then give their customized response.

The other part of that is if we're going to be using it as instructors, as instructional designers and allowing our students to use it or not, we want to make sure that it's very well known what the parameters are, right? How can it be used and how can it not be used?

So yeah, I think there's definitely room for it. And I think that sometimes you may get into some content that you really don't know about as an instructional designer, right? We're not the subject matter experts on everything. I mean, can't possibly be. And so maybe you run across something that's unfamiliar.

You can run that through ChatGPT and say, hey, can you give me a summary of this, maybe in some layman's terms? So that you can hopefully understand a little bit better and be able to maybe ask a more intelligent question or a clarifying question to make sure you understand what the instructor is trying to have the students learn.

[Eddie] Yeah, now because I agree with everything that you're saying, and I appreciate the examples. Because I definitely don't see it going anywhere, and if we can find ways to make it be helpful and assistive both for the faculty and to the students, I think it'll definitely can go a long way.

Kind of changing gears just a little bit you've kind of walked through a lot of different things from those free educational resources students have to working with faculty to incorporate accessibility changes, AI. So there's a lot that's kind of, I feel being done to make courses accessible and engaging, and I understand from what you were saying earlier that you have this template where you're thinking about accessibility from the start, right?

And your accessibility for all. Now with that all in mind, it has me thinking about also, how can educators and instructional designers create inclusive content that accommodates for neurodiversity and various learning preferences?

[Dorothy] Yeah, I think the biggest thing here is to do anything you can, right? Meet your students where they are, and present information in a variety of ways.

Universal design for learning as a driving force. You're not just designing and creating for one student, you're trying to make sure that all students have an equitable opportunity to engage with course content, the instructor, and their fellow students in ways that work for them. A student who prefers to gain information through video might lament having to read for the class.

But they can enjoy a video to help reinforce the content that they were asked to read, right? So giving them a couple different ways to get that content can help folks who learn in different ways, they really prefer to do those other ways. Likewise, a student might enjoy being able to discuss and debate course content and would thrive in the application of the knowledge in a creative discussion board.

We really just have to look for those opportunities to serve all of our students in the best way possible and to create those opportunities for instructors to do the same thing.

[Eddie] Yeah, well said. Another thing that was coming to mind as you were talking also, you have a lot of wealth of knowledge, again, a lot of this is new to me and it clearly displays sort of the passion that you have for just being mindful of our accessibility standards.

Building those relationships with the faculty, and really just designing the sort of best course experience that you can for our online students. However, I imagine maybe not everyone's in that similar position, so I'm curious from your perspective and in your area of expertise. In what ways do you think we can raise awareness and understanding accessibility?

And how can it be increased among educators, administrators, and fellow students in online learning environment?

[Dorothy] Yeah, so for educators and administrators, if you have one, ask your instructional designer, right, we're sitting there with all that knowledge. And even if you do have an instructional designer, take a look at your place of work accessibility policies.

There's often resources there that not only give suggestions, but provide some information on how disability services work, right, that's a great place to start. For example, OSU, I think you mentioned earlier, has a disability accessibility services website with a plethora of resources for not only instructors, but for students as well.

There's a wealth of knowledge just waiting for consumption. Another way to increase your awareness is to join those learning communities that I was talking about earlier. They search the knowledge base repositories and participate in interactive workshops. Something like we put on some workshops here for new instructors developing an online course workshop, right, there's accessibility built right into there.

Like I mentioned before, even just a moment ago, get involved, right? There's several experiences that have made a very large impact on my thoughts of why we design with accessibility in mind. For example, I was at a small accessibility conference where many of the people there had a variety of disabilities, right?

I was able to watch one presenter showcase how they navigated doing a presentation using a screen reader. This helps drive home why the appropriate use of headings and information on the slide was key, right? They were presenting, but their screen reader was reading like the first five or six words, so they knew they were on the right slide, and it was so fast.

I was trying to listen to those five or six words, and it was not normal for me, very hard for me, but man, it helped them so much and they were used to it. So hearing all that so fast, it just drove home why these things are so important.

The second is something that happens to also be related to low sighted or blind folks. There's an app out there called Be My Eyes, where sighted people can sign up to assist a blind or low sighted person who we crossed help. They just put a little request out there, kind of a text message.

And if you're active on your phone right there, it'll pop up a notification and say, hey, somebody's requesting help. So I've been on four different calls and been able to release system three of them. One of them had to do about setting up electronics and I'm just not good enough to be able to walk somebody through that over a video chat, I really want the manual.

The most recent one, though, was just two days ago, and it was helping somebody pick up something from the floor. That had fallen and just really reinforces the fact that we need accessibility for our online courses to remove the barriers for everybody. And then one more, just think, everybody's pretty familiar with captions on videos.

Think what they can do, they open up, what's on screen to deaf or hard of hearing people and for low sighted people, right? Those captions can be read, they can be listened to, and it's not the only group that benefits from captions, right? Students who are maybe English language learners or students who are holding a sleeping baby, and they need to be able to read instead of listen to the lecture.

One accommodation that was initially done to benefit somebody who may be deaf or hard of hearing. But if it's so many other people who may not have had an accommodation in place or may not have needed one.

[Eddie] Wow, definitely has me thinking that I need to get more involved, definitely making some notes of some of the resources that you were sharing.

And again, I really appreciate all the stories because there's a lot of good work that's being done out there, there's a lot of folks that are putting a lot of this into practice already. And so really, again, it's kind of the onus on us to take that step forward to get involved, learn more.

Because I, at the end of the day too, I feel like anybody and everybody can benefit from these kinds of tools just because as you've been kind of talking throughout today's episode. I mean, there's a lot of things in my mind that I struggle with that I feel, wow, I could use some of these tools or I can gain some more knowledge of just how to make things maybe a little easier for me on my end.

Now I feel like You were already kind of sharing a lot of these stories or sharing stories of how folks have been utilizing some of this tools and resources. But I'm curious, from the instructional design space, do you have any success stories or examples of initiatives that have significantly improved the online learning experience for students with disabilities?

[Dorothy] Yeah, I kind of want to go back to that course template that we created that has accessibility baked into the framework. This way all the courses meet the minimum accessibility requirements from the get-go. This offloads the work from the faculty developer, and quite frankly allows us to start having that already done and not have to do it every single time.

Let's not reinvent the wheel, and it shows access for all the students. We also have that dark workshop I talked about and it helps train new developers on accessibility and it gauge them in some situated learning. They build accessible content in the MLS and in the redeveloping an online course, they engage in course analysis which include a review of the course accessibility, right?

Participants have the opportunity to identify how they can make the course more accessible. And this also serves as an important baseline for instructional designers to assess the course, right? Those folks have already said, hey, I already know these things are issues, so we can work on those, and while we're working on those, start to look for other things that we can also improve on.

[Eddie] Wonderful, again, really, really appreciate you sharing all of these wonderful resources, stories, and just the different really kind of strategies, too, that folks can implement too. Either for their own personal kind of learning experience, learning journey, or just anybody in general. Coming to a close here, the only remaining question I have is, is there anything else you'd like our audience to know about how instructional designers promote accessibility.

[Dorothy] Yeah, so let's start with just l one on one with instructors, modeling, right, we need to be able to show them what needs to be done. So a strategy we commonly use is to keep the original content and then to generate an accessible version and then to take that and highlight the changes that were made.

Why they were made, how we helped it makes some standards, and then how it fosters that increased learning and access for students. The instructors have the opportunity to learn and then be able to put that into practice too. And then additionally, we speak from the student perspective in terms of impact on their experience, right?

So, if you've got a personal story or if a student has said, my goodness, thank you so much for putting this this way. Especially sometimes we hear that from our disability access services. They get into a class and they don't have to ask for any barriers to be removed, our modeling to our instructors helps that lack of barriers happen.

And then external promotion, right, using social platforms to share resources, tips, learning opportunities, and contributing to the learning communities, right? We also like to present at conferences and contribute to the literature in the field. And then of course, gather some student feedback, right, panels, things like that. instructional designers don't always get to talk to students or hear from them.

And so when we have the opportunity, it is gold and we can take that and help our instructors create that accessible content.

[Eddie] Wow, thank you so much, Dorothy, really appreciate your knowledge and your expertise and your willingness to come on and share about all the incredible work that you're doing.

And also, just again, some really good takeaways for folks that hopefully that are listening to this are, taking it all and finding ways that they can also apply it in that the work that they're doing or again in their educational journey. So thanks again, and I really appreciate your time.

[Dorothy] Thank you for having me.