

# PROGRESS OVER PERFECTION

Sitting down with Susi Miller to talk about Designing Accessible Learning Content

## What is your background and how have you built up your expertise on this subject?

I started my L&D background 30 years ago as a classroom teacher. In my class at the beginning of my career, I had an experience with one of my students who was blind. This was my first introduction to working with a student that had a disability. And it made me interested in accessibility. But it took a few more years for me to grow from classroom training to systems training to an instructional designer for the digital side of training and really get involved in designing accessible learning content. There I was lucky enough to have someone asking me questions about a training I put together and who was using a screen reader. And again, it pushed me into realising I knew very little about accessibility for digital training.

After deciding I wanted to know more about this subject, I needed to find information. Like many, I started by attending many webinars and events about accessibility and doing as many courses I could find. They were few and far between. So, I realised there was little information out there about how to make learning content accessible and there must be others who struggled in doing the same thing. This is one of the main reasons I wrote the book, so people are not discouraged when wanting to learn more about how to make content accessible and I can help other people make it easier.

## Which impact does spending time on the subject have for creators and participants?

As a content creator it has an impact on your development time. And if you do not believe in what you are doing is worthwhile, you do not understand how many people you are benefiting and what a huge impact it has on people's independence and their ability to learn and to succeed in our society, it is easy to give up and to think it is too difficult or too much work. But it does make an impact and it is worth the extra development time.

## Part one of your book is explaining a lot of fundamentals, is this also your general feeling when talking to people about accessibility that this is all too often very necessary?

In the training I developed and in working with clients I cannot stress enough how important it is to make sure that everybody is on the same page, understands the benefits of accessibility and the reasons for it before you begin any training about accessibility. Getting the hearts and minds ready for the subject is important.

But on the other hand, it is also about not assuming everyone has the same level of prior knowledge about the subject. Making sure missing pieces of the puzzle are addressed is important. Making sure everyone is up to speed on different assistive technologies and different access needs. A lot of the guidelines you are trying to implement are because of assistive technologies. If you are missing this background, you will struggle to understand why certain guidelines are written in a certain way.

It is also a common misconception that accessibility is primarily about people who have visual access needs. But of course, that is not the case. But that is what is on most people's mind and so they focus on 1 access need. That is what people need to know before they start



developing for accessibility. They should understand there are lots of different types of disability: the vision, the hearing, the motor, and the cognitive access needs are equally important. And every department in an organisation should take into consideration all the accessibility needs. But we are not there yet...

## What is the current state of accessibility in learning content from your experiences?

Legislation plays a huge part in this. In the UK, the EU regulations on accessibility have had a profound impact on the UK's Universities. And the UK's equality act is underpinned by the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG), so it became clear how to make reasonable adjustments for people with disabilities. Most Universities were on board and that has also made a change in the private sector. A lot of private sector companies supply to the public sector and so there is a strong movement from public to private sector. Even outside of the legislative frameworks, there are visionaries in the private sector that are seeing this coming and realising the benefits and how it is a unique selling point and all other advantages to learning and learning experiences. But there is still a split between the 2 sectors. But the gap is slowly getting smaller.

Another observation I have, is that people on grassroots level (bottom-up) tend to be very passionate about accessibility. Maybe because they have access needs themselves or they are in close contact with someone who does. That is quite often the spark. As a content creator myself, instructional designer, it felt wrong not to create content that was not accessible. My whole purpose is to give everyone an opportunity to learn. To exclude between 12% - 26% of the population by not making it accessible I felt I was not doing my job properly. However, more and more organisations also understand it is part of diversity, equity, inclusion, and it has business benefit. Organisations are understanding that you are also accessing a wider pool of potential employees, especially with the great resignation that is going on. So, on leadership

level they are beginning to be more aware of it. For me it is a test how committed an organisation is. But we are not there yet, from a survey conducted, 90% of organisations said they prioritise diversity, equity, and inclusion but only 4% consider disability in this ([World Economic forum – Accessibility and Inclusion for all](#)).



**For someone researching the subject, there is quickly a big forest of terminology to plough through: 508, WCAG, eLa, level AAA conformance. Can you help in chopping a road through the rain forest so that those interested can advance much quicker?**

The best one to take into consideration as a content creator for digital learning content is the 'Web Content Accessibility Guidelines' (WCAG version 2.1). In these guidelines there are 'A', 'AA' and 'AAA' levels to achieve. Level 'A' and 'AA' are achievable and are best practices (generally they are the standards needed for most international legal conformance). They are not perfect, but if you follow them, you know you are doing your best to meet more than one type of access needs. And that means already a lot, for many people.

This also brings us back to the reason why I wrote my book. These guidelines deal with universal things like colour contrast. But the guidelines refer to commercial or informational websites and are not written for digital learning experiences. So as a digital content creator, we need to start interpreting the guidelines.

For example: there is a requirement in the WCAG guidelines stating that people need multiple ways to navigate content and should directly be able to access content. There is however a WCAG exception if content is part of a process with a linear structure. So, you could argue that in compliance training this is part of a learning journey we want participants to follow whereby they build up knowledge piece by piece. The guidelines are not explicitly written for what we do, but they fit for what we do. The only thing we can do here is make a judgement call and think about what is best for the learner. So, in this case a good practice could be to open the content afterwards, once the initial training has been completed.

I wanted to get by book out there and if people disagree with some of my interpretations, I want them to disagree. As an industry we should come together and say what we believe as an industry.

**Is creating an accessible course just a matter of selecting the best authoring technology for it?**

It is a myth that by just having a good tool, you can create accessible content. Think about the issue of accessibility checkers that check if your website is accessible or not. Some people rely on these automated checkers, but if they are only about 30% accurate you need to have a human interaction to test accessibility. And it is the same when designing learning content. The authoring tool can be helpful and support you in the creation. Maybe by automatically letting you know to add alternative text for images or checking colour contrasts pro-actively, but an authoring tool will not magically make your content accessible. When looking at template-driven authoring tools you are far more constrained by the tool, and you need to rely on the in-built possibilities of the tool to be accessible. You often cannot do anything about it and

need to rely on the code of the authoring tool creator. So, the author is about? 40% responsible and the tool carries the other 60%. When using an open book tool, you must have the expertise yourself to make it accessible. The author is about? 60% responsible and the tool carries the other 40%.

For example: the reading order (the order in which something is read out by a screen reader) is often fixed in template-driven tools depending on the order that blocks are added to content, whereby in open book tools the author needs to define this themselves. This creates more room for human errors in the creation process.

**Can you share stories of when accessibility has been done incorrect and had a negative impact?**

As an industry we have created a huge myth that accessible content leads to a worse learning experience. So many times, I have seen an all-out engaging and interactive digital training module with an alternative PDF version for the people that have a disability. The idea that accessibility leads to limitations and is detrimental to the learning experience is a mistake we still see it having an impact today.

**What advice can you give to organisations that have no internal expertise on the subject and want to focus on designing accessible learning content?**

The first piece of the puzzle is to break everything down into the 4 different access needs. That gives a framework to build on from there. Here is also a link with tips to the 20 ways to include different access needs in your learning content handout:

[Why design accessible learning content?](#)

And if you do nothing else, that is 'progress over perfection' and starts to help think differently over things. The reason accessibility often falls down is because it is overwhelming and by making it as straightforward as possible is an approach that works best.

Another advice is having 'micro commitments. Do something tiny. For example: have alternative texts for images on your social media, make sure in your emails you got a good colour contrast. It is something we all can do, and it shows your digital respect. You never know who is accessing your digital content and who has an access need. ■



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