

# Good Practice in Teaching Podcast

## Episode 11, Wendell Kimper – Embedding Accessibility

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**Becki Bennett: Welcome to this latest podcast in our series Good Practice in Teaching. I'll be talking to Wendell Kimper, lecturer in linguistics in the School of Arts Languages and Cultures. Wendell talks about the project he's working on that's looking at the embedding of accessibility into our teaching and learning practice.**

**Hi Wendell, thanks for talking to me today. So, can you tell me a bit more about this project you're doing. Is it with the Institute of Teaching & Learning?**

Wendell Kimper: Yes, it's Fellowship through the Institute, and the focus is on Universal Design for Learning. So looking at how we can embed accessibility for disabled students in our teaching and learning practice itself, rather than just thinking of it as kind of an add-on or something that we have to sort-of accommodate after the fact.

And I'm particularly looking at this in terms of what we've learned over the past year and a half of the pandemic. So the achievement gap for disabled students has pretty much disappeared during that time. And it's really interesting to sort of see, like, as we go back to normal - quote unquote, normal - what practices should we be carrying forward to make sure that we are maintaining that and maintaining that accessibility?

I'm trying to focus specifically on the pedagogy aspect of it because accessibility is just such a huge issue and there are so many ways to come at it. So I'm starting off with looking at what specifically students want. So looking at the Students Union accessibility report and then going to do some Surveys and focus groups with students to see which aspects of their experience, are the places that we can make the most effective change.

And I'm also going to be surveying staff members to see what we could be doing as an institution that would encourage the uptake of more accessible practices. Because I think one of the big obstacles in the way is just that everyone is so incredibly busy, especially over the past year and a half. We've all just been run ragged and making things accessible as yet another thing that we have on our to-do list, for a lot of people that means that it doesn't happen. So thinking about what are the things that are standing in the way of staff taking on this and what are the things that we can be doing to sort of encourage that - rather than just having it be yet another mandatory thing that comes down and that everyone feels resentful about, which then has a knock on effect on the students' experience. How can we actually be supporting this? And as part of that, I'm going to be searching for and identifying examples of best practice, putting together some training materials to use for things like the New Academics Programmes and workshops and things like that. And trying to develop a resource base where people can go and look at different techniques or tools that they could be implementing in their teaching design.

**BB: You talked about good practice. So, what sort of things have you come across so far from maybe different institutions or within the University.**

WK: Coming through the pedagogical literature on this, and there's a lot of really interesting adaptations. So basically, the Universal Design principles are all around having options and flexibility and multiple means of students engaging. So there's multiple means of representation, which is about sort of the accessibility of the materials. There's multiple means of Engagement. So that's getting students to engage in different ways and offering different ways for students to engage with the activities. And then there's the component that is more centered around assessment, so giving students multiple ways of demonstrating that they've learned what you want them to be learning.

I think the big points that has in part explains some of this reduction in the achievement gap, over the past year and a half, is this assessments component. Because we realized that we don't actually need to have a 2 hours sat exam, we can do it in a slightly different way; and it's one of these instances where we designed the course unit for a particular kind of student and then everyone just sort of assumes - well, the students who need extra time, will just get extra time. The students that that format doesn't work for will get, you know, the accommodations for them as an individual. When I think a lot of the time it's not actually even the best way to assess what we're trying to assess with the two hours sat exam, it's just the way that everyone's always done it.

There are a lot of different factors that go into it. I mean, so one of the things is that for a lot of the exams it was instead of having a, you know, two hour exams it was you had a week to do it. You can do it at any point within that week. So for example, if a student, if you have a student who has chronic pain, then they can choose within that week to do the exam on a day when they're in less pain. As opposed to just, this is the scheduled day; and if you're having a bad flare-up, even if you have extra time that's still not going to reflect that you've learned it. It's going to reflect how much pain you were in. So, I think that there's some of it is about sort of the environment and the materials being able to take a little bit of extra time. Being able to have a little bit more flexibility and when exactly you end up doing it. So I think that yeah, there are a lot of things and I think also, I don't know how much this is true. But my impression is, I think a lot of us, you know, rethought how we were giving our assessments, not just how do we adapt this for what we're doing now, but are we, in fact doing this, the way that actually is best for what we're teaching and that's kind of what I want to encourage people to do is to really reflect on, not just in terms of accessibility, but accessibility as this broader aspect of: are we teaching this the way that is best to teach the material.

So in SALC, we have the sort of assessment rules are really elaborate and Draconian and have a lot of emphasis on things like word counts. And that really can stand in the way of adding flexibility and adding options and doing assessments in a style that is other than the sort of traditional written essay, which is not a style that works for all students. So, looking at these policy documents and looking at where things could be changed a little bit to make it easier to sort of go forward with some of the things that we've been able to do over the pandemic and further.

**BB: When we are talking about assessment choice can that also be in the mode of assessment?**

WK: It can be. So I think there are some of the course units through UCIL are doing some interesting things with assessment choice. And yeah, so I think it's going to depend on what the specific learning outcomes are and what kinds of assessments are going to fit with those learning outcomes.

But just on a very sort of tiny level in the course unit that I'm teaching now - for one of the assignments I give students a choice between two fairly different kinds of tasks that engage with different aspects of the course unit material. And they can choose whether they want to do one

versus the other. So, you know, giving the students, the options of things, like, instead of you have to write an essay for this. Maybe you could write an essay or you could record a video. Instead of saying maybe this has to be a traditional essay, you can offer them the option do it more of a blog post style. So there are a lot of ways in which we can give options that meet the same learning requirements.

Another thing that I think that some colleagues are doing that I think is really useful is doing a portfolio of assessment, like small assessments throughout the semester that are formative in and of themselves, but then the students at the end submit a portfolio and they can choose which ones go into that portfolio.

**BB: Do you think there are barriers for staff to suggest an option of say two different ways of completing an assignment?**

WK: Yes, but I think, I mean, there's a lot of I see a lot of hang-up on parity in the way that ends up meaning standardization. It's based on this idea that that we need to have everything be the same, and therefore, that will be parity. When, you know, for example, a student with dyslexia might really struggle to write an essay but could produce a video talking about the same thing.

I think getting people to focus a little bit more on what are intended learning outcomes actually are. So like we have these like ILO's and have to list them off. And even I when I'm listing them off on the course unit descriptors just sort of dash some things out and we don't really give a lot of thought to them and I think that one of the things that ends up happening is that we get fixated on parity in things that aren't actually what we're trying to teach about in the moment.

So, in SALC, there's a lot of the sort of, you know, grade schema, and all of these things, look at a lot of things that have to do with writing. And it's useful in a program level to have, you know, it's important on a programme level to have that as part of the overall programme but not every single assessment for every single course unit needs to be assessing that. And so we end up assessing things that are not really part of what we're trying to do in the moment. And so I think it the sort of, you know, one of the ways around this kind of barrier, that makes it seem sort of overwhelming and complex is to just say: Well, what specifically do you want people to show that they've learned in this assignment? And is it, you know, are these activities? Do these activities have parity in terms of that?

I find that students actually can get a little bit scared of non-traditional assessment types, because there's some wondering: what's the catch? So, I always just have to be really clear about say like: No, this is specifically what I'm looking for. This is what I want out of this, all of this other stuff you can do in so many different ways, but this is the thing that I'm looking for. And they just get really worried that if they don't do the traditional thing that there somehow going to be penalized for it. So I always have specific rubrics for every single assignment that I give. It's really detailed. That makes it all so easy for marking and feedback to have the very specific rubrics. But that I find it helps a little bit just to say like to communicate to the students and also just sort of establish what it is you're looking for in the assignment, to say: Here are the specific things that I'm marking you on. Your grade will come from this rubric.

**BB: And, of course, in in the past, our students are typically people who are very good at exams because that's the way they usually get into the University of Manchester is being particularly good at doing those traditional kinds of exams. But obviously, over the last two years that's not necessarily the case. I know different sixth form colleges and other places where our students are coming from have assessed our students in different ways. So that gives another opportunity**

**where we've hopefully got students who are more used to different ways of assessments. At least, more used to them than they used to be a couple of years ago.**

WK: I have a ten percent participation mark for my large first year course unit. And what I've started doing now is saying that students can basically get points towards that in two different ways - either by participating in seminars or by participating in discussion forum posts on Blackboard. So it's multiple means of engagement as part of EDL, which is basically just you know, some students aren't comfortable speaking up in the classroom, but will be comfortable discussing things on the forum. And for some people putting things on to the forum doesn't work for them and they'd much rather be there in person and do it in the classroom. And so just giving students the choice to engage in one of those two ways. I mean the participation requirement is very small and it's not marked as such.

**BB: And it's such a simple thing that and it doesn't take a lot of effort to allow it to happen, but it makes a huge difference I think to a lot of people, for whatever reason that they find that that really difficult in seminars, I think.**

WK: And in my large lecture, I've started using a Padlet for just taking questions. Because very few students even students who will participate happily in seminars aren't going to sort of, you know, raise their hand and say something in a lecture hall with 150 students. Or at this point in the semester, more like 75. I noticed over the pandemic that when we were teaching on Zoom was miserable for so many reasons, but one of the pluses was that students could type in the chat box, instead of having to, you know, have the spotlight on themselves. So, I just been trying to sort of recreate that. Partly because the dual hybrid means that, I want to get engagement from both those who are in the classroom and those who are on zoom and also just, you know, as a way of making it easier for students to ask questions and participate.

And if we look at like the types of disabilities that students are typically registering with, the largest growing type of disability in higher education is mental health disabilities. And this is an area where like, it's imitating already for most people to be in that kind of situation. But then, if you have anxiety or depression on top of that, that's just going to just put up this barrier. That means you're just going to check out and not be able to sort of engage as fully. And so providing people with these other ways of engaging with it and other ways of participating is, you know, it's both good practice and also accessibility.

**BB: And I think that's the way we need to think about accessibility that it is just good practice. It's just what we should all be doing all the time, but having these ideas and kind of concrete examples, just makes that so much easier.**

WK: One of the things I'm that I'm going to be doing as part of this project is just really actively seeking out who is doing good work around accessibility specifically and I think one of the things that I'm just going have to do is include that in my survey to students just to say, is there a course unit that you found particularly accessible, and what did they do? And then the sort of, you know, go and knock on that person's door, send them an email.

**BB: So if you know of any good practice in this area, do get in touch with Wendell. But for now I want to thank you, Wendell, for coming to talk to us today, and wish you every success with your project.**