Hello and welcome to Teach Strong, the teaching and learning podcast for the Armstrong campus. I'm Nancy Remler, the Director for Center for Teaching and Learning and with me here today is Cory Powell, instructional designer.

Hi, how are you?

Hi, Cory. Thanks for joining me today. We're both here to talk about an important topic for all stakeholders at the university, and that topic is accessibility in our online presence, and by presence I'm talking about online learning but also any online communications that we might have here on campus. We decided to have this conversation because of a recent article that was published in the Chronicle of Higher Education.

This is dated July 6th and its Peter Schmidt's article titled One Activist has Hundreds of Colleges Under the Gun to Fix their Websites. If you take a look at this article you'll see that there is a woman named Marcie Lipsitt who has taken legal action against several colleges and universities, arguing that their websites or online learning platforms or other online communications are not accessible to disabled students or disabled interested, potential students.

We're here to talk about what such legal action might ... What implications it might have for us here at Armstrong, but also, what kinds of opportunities this kind of issue presents. Cory, would you like to talk about Lipsitt's three main focuses in her endeavors?

Yeah, the main focus she's looking at, and this is anywhere on the website, anywhere you can access information, it has to be available to all types of learners. She's focusing on missing text that should be there to describe an image. Any time there's an image, you should be able to click on it and get some information of what that image is in case someone is having a hard time identifying the image, whether its vision impairment or color blind issues or whatever it might be.

She's also focusing on people not being able to use a mouse. Everything, to be accessible, you should be able to use your commands on the keyboard to navigate a webpage just fine. On the Armstrong website, if you notice, if you do the tab it'll go through the menu options for you, and then if you hit enter it'll be as if you clicked on a mouse.

Also, videos that are on there that aren't captioned or aren't captioned correctly is another huge focus, even if it's an orientation video or just a short commercial, you should still have the captioning options.

Mm-hmm (affirmative), and for those of you who are interested in checking out this article, it is available online, and so if you have a subscription to the
Chronicle, you can see it. The Center for Teaching and Learning has a subscription, so if you need to see it through our subscription, you can. One thing I do want to recognize is that, while these three focuses are at the heart of what we’re talking about, I do want to acknowledge that, in her efforts, Lipsitt seems to targeting universities loosely connected with those whose politics disagree with hers. I think that’s a little bit of cause for concern, but when you look at the big picture, I think she does raise some legitimate issues, and I think they are issues that we all should be aware of.

For instance, as Cory was explaining how webpages with images need to have some kind of accessible caption connected to them, there are many of us on campus who are trained in expression engine, and have the capability of editing our webpages for our departments or for our offices, and so if we are going to have that kind of responsibility, we need to think about ways that we’re making our webpages accessible, especially as we move toward putting more and more information online.

Last year, we moved toward putting our catalog online through the Provost office, and so whenever we put information out there, we need to make sure that not only students and faculty and staff, but also potential students, have access to that information.

Cory Powell: Right, and when you're looking at accessibility and stuff, there's all kinds of other elements, too, that you need to consider that sometimes you may not think about, like, if you have a webpage that you're wanting someone to start, you can't just put a green arrow. That green arrow also needs to read the word start, just if you put end, it can't just be a red button. It needs to say the word end, and you can also have colors to accompany it but it needs to be different things, and I think that's something that we overlook, too, is, sometimes we get these triggers that we assume everyone recognizes, but they may not.

Nancy: You have some experience with making sure content is accessible. You come to us from the K-12 schools, so can you talk a little bit about your experiences there and how it’s influenced your work here?

Cory Powell: Yeah, definitely. These students are coming through and they're getting accommodations. They get an individualized education plan if they have any special needs, and that is a combination that's helping them with their learning to even the playing field. That can do things like give them extended time to reading, chunk their reading into smaller sections, have someone read it to you, be able to rewind or zoom in on different internet things. These high schoolers are already having these accommodations, so when they come to college, to just take those away from them is really hurting them, and that's really where Lipsitt’s really focusing, is seeing where those gaps are, of where someone had something in high school they no longer have in college, and then you're wondering why they're not succeeding.
I think that knowing that there are out there, parents are more educated on those than they ever have been before. IEP, they're very transparent. Everyone sits in the meeting, teachers, parents, students, guardians, they all sit in the meeting and understand exactly what’s expected for that student for them to succeed, so when they come to college and they're all of a sudden no getting those accommodations, that's what’s really raising some concerns.

Nancy: Mm-hmm (affirmative), and for those of you who are new to Armstrong's campus, we do have our Office of Disability Services and when students need those accommodations, it is true that they need to self-identify, and so if they need accommodations in the classroom, the onus is on the student to bring the advocacy letter to the professor. The advocacy letter, I would guess, is the equivalent of a high school student's IEP. Am I correct in making that assumption?

Cory Powell: Yeah, what they're doing, when they're leveling out with the IEP in high school, that should be taken care of for them. They should be doing that working with their ... That should be done on the high school end. The counselors and things like that should be doing the advocacy letter, but what we can really make sure that we’re doing is just being very open about, it’s out there, and just put it out there for anyone. Maybe someone just needs to talk to someone, they're not sure what they got going on, and I think it is helpful to be very open, what's there, always put it in your syllabus, always make it accessible, always have it as a topic of discussion in your first day of class, or whatever.

Let people know that it's there, where it's at. If they're transitioning to a college, especially if they travel and they're far from home, it could be kind of scary trying to find ... They’re trying to find, also, where to eat lunch. They’re also trying to find where to get their books. There's a lot out there, so I think the more we can just be out there to help them and guide them ...

Nancy: There might be plenty of students who have different abilities, but they don't really consider them disabilities, and might not present us with an advocacy letter. An example I can think of off the top of my head is someone who is color blind. Someone with color blindness might not necessarily consider him or herself disabled, but it does change the way that student can see what we post online, or in print, if we are printing in color. The points that you make about a green arrow or a red end button, with it being properly labeled, there will be no question as to what the student should look for and what the student should do with it.

Cory Powell: Exactly, and color blind’s a good one, because I think 30% of Americans who are color blind don’t know they're color blind, or something like that, so it’s one that’s out there. You don’t know what you don’t know.

Nancy: Yeah, and those of us who are teaching online have been trained in universal design, have been trained to think about accessibility of our courses, but there are many of us who are using Desire to Learn as a supplemental resource for our
face to face classes, so if we're creating HTML files and uploading them to Desire to Learn, we need to be thoughtful about accessibility, and any time we create instructional videos or audio files, we need to think about accessibility also, whether the students have presented us with advocacy letters or not.

Cory Powell: Right. I think it's good to be out there all the time. Desire to Learn is really, really good about meeting those accommodations as long as we do what we need to on our end. I encourage professors, if you don't know what that means, that's cool. Come to IT, come to us. We can show you how all that stuff's done, instructional designers ... Even if it's just running a PDF through a screen reader, because someone may have a screen reader on their computer that reads all the text for them, you need to make sure that whatever document you're giving them is compatible.

Sometimes they can be as simple as me just converting something for you on my computer, so if you just come to us and just say, "Hey, can you double check this for compliance or accessibility," we got it. We'll take care of it for you.

Nancy: Yeah.

Cory Powell: ... really promote that. With that, I also want to say, I think it's a good idea to look at this for not only students with disabilities but just all different types of learners. You know from teaching, sometimes people just identify learning differently. A visual learner is going to benefit from captions on a video just as much as someone who has an auditory problem, so I think it's good to just focus on really getting all those senses going when you're getting knowledge.

Nancy: There's a lot of research that shows that when students are engaging with multiple senses in the learning process that they form concepts more readily, and that's why, at least as an English teacher, I really emphasize the importance of taking notes, so when my students ... When I'm showing PowerPoint slides in the classroom, and students ask me, "Are these notes going to be posted online," I tell them, "Yes, at some point, but not immediately," because I want to see them writing those concepts down.

If they are listening and writing simultaneously, they've got a stronger chance of retaining those concepts, and it also helps them to figure out how to study. Many students come here with the misunderstanding that if they just review what's in the PowerPoint slides, that they have studied for a test, and we all know that studying is much more of an active engagement with the subject matter than just that. Keeping in mind these different accessibility matters also helps all of our students engage more actively in the learning process.

Cory Powell: Mm-hmm (affirmative).
Nancy: You found some different sources about accessibility, and there's one article that you mentioned to me earlier. I think it's titled, "Meeting the accessibility needs of adult students in online classes," is that ...?

Cory Powell: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Nancy: What can we learn from that article?

Cory Powell: That's just several major universities, like the University of Kansas and DePaul University, where they're just talking about the rise of online courses, how it's only going up and how it needs to be accessible, and it needs to be there for everyone, just because we're consuming knowledge differently. We watch TV differently, we get our news differently, and education's not immune to that. It's the same thing, so it just talked about the number of students who are enrolling in online is increasing, but so is the number of students who register with a disability is increasing. It went up to about 17% in just the last two years. It went up 17%, so that's a lot of your population who might have a disability, and I think it's best to just go ahead and just have it covered for everyone.

Even if they don't bring it up, have your videos captioned. It's really easy to say, "No one showed me this. I'm okay not having captions," but sometimes it's nice just to have yourself covered, I think, and again, our department's here to do that for you and help you out.

Nancy: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Again, I'll put out a little plug for our Office of Disability services because, of course, Kelly Woodruff and her staff also have expertise in how to provide accommodations for any student with disabilities, and of course, she stays in contact with us as she needs to in helping provide such accommodations, especially for online learners. When it comes to creating the actual teaching and learning tools, our instructional designers can assist all faculty with that, so I would encourage our faculty not to assume that we're just here for assistance with online classes. We are also here to assist with blended and face to face courses.

Cory Powell: Yeah, and a big thing we've really been helping out with a lot of professors is archiving and digitizing your content, and that covers so many accessibility issues, just to have your lectures digitized somewhere, and all your files somewhere, whether you're recording a podcast and then having a transcript of it. Even if you're not online, there's still a lot of stuff you can do with that D12 platform, even if it's just being a storage for you, where students who need these accommodations can come and re-get information. Like I said, the IEPs, a lot of it is just being able to access information again and repeating stuff to them and going through things a little bit slower and stuff like that. If it's online, where they can access it at any time, you've covered yourself in so many ways already.
Nancy: Mm-hmm (affirmative), and it also ... By being proactive earlier, it helps to prevent our creating more work for ourselves later on. In these days, we’re having more and more to do more with less. I think that's something to keep in mind, too.

Cory Powell: Right, right.

Nancy: Yeah, yeah. Again, coming back to the article in the Chronicle, we've had conversations among faculty and administrators about, unfortunately, there's a growing cottage industry arising out of pressing lawsuits against colleges and universities that post images online. Now we see it's happening in the way of presenting information to students and potential students online, which is unfortunate. Although we should keep this in mind, and I think, take a little bit of preventive action, I also think that if we are designing our materials and our instruction in a way that's going to suit the needs of different learners, and also suiting different learning styles, then we're also, kind of, avoiding potential legal action, as well.

Cory Powell: Yeah, it kind of serves two fold, because you're giving the students the content in different ways but you're also covering yourself if anyone needs there, and if anyone is wondering where this is coming from and if you're a little bit out of the loop with Lipsitt and stuff like this, section 508 ... Everything has to be 508-compliant, and if you look that up, it'll really tell you what those things are, and that is saying that we are legally bound, any information we give out there, as an educational institution, a public educational institution, has to meet the accessibility for all people.

Nancy: Yeah. You hear administrators and faculty throughout that term 508-compliance, and that’s what we’re talking about, is adhering to the law that we need to make sure that students have access.

Cory Powell: That's the backbone of what they're using for their argument of, as soon as something doesn't meet that. It came out originally just for government agencies, but then it switches to where it's also for educational agencies, as well.

Nancy: Mm-hmm (affirmative), great. Again, if anyone needs assistance or if anyone has any questions about whether their teaching or learning materials are accessible to students with disabilities or to just students with different learning styles, please come to the Center for Teaching and Learning and talk to us, and we can help you make sure that your materials are as accessible as you can get them.

Cory Powell: Yeah. Always be safe. You'd rather be safe than sorry. You can shoot me an email any time at corey.powell@armstrong.edu and I can just check your course for you right online and tell you what's accessible and what's not and we can get I fixed for you, so that's what we're here for.
Nancy: Okay. Great. Thanks for talking to me about this, Corey.

Cory Powell: Thank you so much.

Nancy: This podcast was not sponsored by Blue Apron, stamps.com or MeUndies.