Open Education Rising Podcast (www.openeducationrising.net)

Hosted by Deepak Shenoy

Transcript of Episode 11: How Can OER Be More Inclusive?

Jess: Step one is don't panic. Because I think [crosstalk 00:00:05]

Deep: You don't have to do it all in day one, Jess?

Jess: That's right. Don't do it all day one.

Deep: Hello and welcome to Open Education Rising, a podcast about growing and improving open education. I'm your host Deep Shenoy.

Deep: Today's guest is Jess Mitchell of the Inclusive Design Research Center. I got to know Jess after I saw her talk at the Open Education Conference at Niagara Falls in October 2018. That was a remarkable talk that covered some of her thoughts on normative issues about inclusion and open education. It opened my eyes to some things and other folks I talked to afterwards had similar reactions. I highly recommend you see it. The link to the video is in the show notes.

Deep: Because Jess' Open Ed talk is now available we decided to cover issues of ethics only briefly in this discussion. We focused on practical advice for faculty and designers about how to be more inclusive when working with OER. As Jess said in the teaser to this episode step one is don't panic. Improving inclusivity is not a skill to be learned all at once.

Deep: She mentions many resources, which you may wish to get to know over time. To my mind, one of the beautiful things about OER is that it's never locked down the way a traditional published book would be. You can tweak it a bit more each time you teach. I recommend that we don't take things that Jess mentions as a checklist but rather a series of practices we get to know over time and gradually integrate into teaching and learning.

Deep: As usual the links to everything that is mentioned in the podcast are in the show notes so you can look them up later and now here's my discussion with Jess.

Deep: Hey, Jess. Welcome to the podcast.

Jess: Thank you. Glad to be here.

Deep: Really appreciate you joining us today. You work at the Inclusive Design Research Center. Could you tell the audience a little bit about that?

Jess: Yeah. The Inclusive Design Research Center at OCAD University in downtown Toronto is the largest research center at OCAD. OCAD is the oldest art and design college in Canada. We just turned 25 years old this summer. For 25 years we have been working in this space of disability, accessibility, inclusion, and design. We were originally with the University of Toronto and then for about the last decade have been with OCAD University.

Jess: We're a group of people, really a global group, that includes developers, designers, volunteers, researchers, and we are a bunch of misfits. We have backgrounds in philosophy and in music and in math and in computer science and in art and in history. We bring all of those diverse backgrounds together to do this thoughtful work and do it on a number of levels.

Jess: One is teaching people how to do inclusive design. We've got a masters in inclusive design at OCAD now. We also work on an international level doing advocacy at sort of the standards level. We work on the ISO standard for access for all. It's called 24751. We work on national accessibility policies. The Accessibility For Ontarians With Disabilities Act, the AODA, the ADA, and the US, [inaudible 00:03:29], the W3C.

Jess: We work on advocacy, education, and then we have a development and design team that works on building tools and processes for others to reproduce to create more inclusive content from the beginning. All of our work on all of these levels is open. It's open access, it's open source. All of our data is open. All of our wireframes, all of our disciplines are open.

Deep: In brief, what are some of the ethical issues that you see coming up that people who are developing OER should think about?

Jess: They're the ethical issues that have existed in education forever. That is who gets access to an education? Who gets access to the content of the education? Who is heard and listened to? How do we determine that somebody has achieved a learning goal or a learning outcome? Who does that privilege? Who does that leave behind?

Jess: I think that it is a very big picture perspective but these are the issues within education that we know exist. The cycles of exclusion, the haves and the have nots, the data that shows us if you come from a particular socioeconomic background that you have a greater chance of success if it's higher than if it's lower in education.

Jess: We know that education is not this objective pure opportunity for everyone to pull themselves up by their bootstraps and to better themselves and change their destiny. We know that the playing field isn't level. We know the opportunities aren't level. We know that the access to education isn't level.

Jess: I think that all of education, all educators, have an opportunity to have an impact on that. In open education the impact is I think potentially even greater and the responsibility is greater because fundamentally open concerns itself with access to education, whether it's the cost of texts or the cost of education or whether it's the

format of the content that's available. This is the great opportunity that open presents us with.

Deep: I think that when we were preparing for this interview you had mentioned that the conversation has changed over time to where some of these issues of inclusion are now much more front and center. I think due to efforts of yourself and other folks.

Deep: Now that we've gotten people talking about it I'd love to get some insights from you about what people can do. If I'm a faculty member listening to this or an instructional designer maybe and I say, "Great. I get it." What are some places you can look at?

Deep: I know you guys have developed a lot of stuff at IDRC. I was hoping we could share with the audience some of these tools and ideas they can engage with.

Jess: Yeah. Step one is don't panic because I think [crosstalk 00:06:40]

Deep: You don't have to do it all? You don't have to do it all in day one, Jess?

Jess: That's right. Don't do it all day one. You know, I remember I was at OE Global one year and an educator came up to me from a very small remote college and said to me, "Our college just made this commitment that all of our content is going to be open. We have no idea what that means. They said it's all going to be accessible. We have no idea how to do it but we're really excited."

Jess: That's a great place to be. You can only go up. Don't panic first. Don't try to do everything all at once. I mean, you certainly can but there's a bit of a fire hose of information and opportunity to do this. I think starting small is not a bad idea. I think if your campus has an open access policy, great. If it doesn't there's still things that you can do as an individual, as a content creator.

Jess: I'll mention a whole bunch of different resources because there are a lot out there and this sort of falls into the fire hose. BC Campus put together an OER called The Accessibility Toolkit. Amanda Coolidge, Sue Doner, Tara Robertson, and Josie Gray put this wonderful guide together. It itself is an OER produced in Pressbooks. There are all these wonderful formats that you could download it in and use it.

Jess: It really talks about some of the basics of making content accessible from the beginning. Tagging images, worrying about tables and the semantics of the headings and all of that stuff. It's a great place to start. It's a really wonderful resource to have out there.

Jess: From the IDRC we have a ton of resources that we've created to help content creators. One is called the Inclusive Learning Design Handbook. It's a handbook dot Floe Project dot org. F-L-O-E Project dot org. The Floe Project is our project funded by the Hewlett Foundation.

Jess: In this handbook what we've really tried to focus on is some perspectives, approaches, and techniques. If you go into the handbook and take a look at it you'll get to some of

the stickiest problems like what does it mean to make content inclusive for a cognitively diverse audience? That could mean simplification, it could also mean more links to more information.

Jess: It's a very broad issue. It's a very sticky problem. We've got some practical steps for how to do that. Designing for privacy. Things like meta data, video content, audio content, how to make those accessible. How to worry about things like charts or interactives, any kind of simulations. We've done a lot of work with the PhET simulations, the folks from the University of Colorado Boulder and their wonderful physics and math simulations. There's a lot of exciting lessons learned from that and that resource.

Jess: Another resource we have is called the Inclusive Design Guide. That is at Guide dot Inclusive Design dot ca at the IDRC. We have lots of URLs.

Deep: I'll put them all in the show notes so in case people miss them they can get them in writing.

Jess: Great. Thanks. This is a collection of insights, practices, tools, and activities for conducting inclusive design and learning how to do it yourself. Think of it as IDO and all these design shops have these design tool kits that they let you download in cards. These are our equivalent to cards. This is not a design process that's linear, that you start at step one and you go through to step 25.

Jess: Rather, these are things to keep in mind when you're practicing inclusive design and things to explore. We've got some cards in there about diverse participation and perspectives, a one-size fits one approach, things like practicing code design, how to facilitate inclusively.

Jess: These are starting places for doing some of this work. Some of the tools are things like personas, use cases, mind maps, wireframes, prototyping. We take a slightly different approach on these tools than others. Some of the activities are a lot of fun and pretty exciting. There are things like the toddler/grandparent conversation, this sort of perpetually asking why [inaudible 00:11:28] reasons or fundamental motivations, which has this wonderful outcome of expressing biases and helping us understand biases and assumptions that we're making in any of the design work that we're doing.

Jess: That's another great resource to start with. Those are really from the perspective of creating content and building a community of practice around doing this work of open, doing this work of inclusion. We just recently created a resource for co-design and how to authentically work toward co-design, which I think is an aspirational aspect of a lot of the work that we do.

Jess: This is addressing the nothing about [inaudible 00:12:13] that's at Cities dot Inclusive Design dot CA slash resources. It's probably the work that we've done in a smart city project. It really gets at what does it mean to build trust? What does it mean to bring diverse folks together with diverse experiences and give them a space to talk about their own experiences?

Jess: Those are all ways to do this work. Then we have quite practical tools like from the Floe Project. Again, the learner options toolbar, which has been released in Chrome as a plug-in. It basically is a preferences toolbar that lets the learner declare how the content should be presented so that they can learn best.

Jess: This is addressing this meta-cognition issue in learners. How do I know how I learn best if I've never had a chance to try out different ways of learning? Now we've got your course lecture in a video with an interactive transcript. What this toolbar lets learners do on the web and with open resources is transform the content to their needs or preferences.

Jess: Let's say you need high contrast because you have limited vision or because you're in a really sunny place and you want to study in that place and that's a place you feel comfortable and tuned in. There are ways that we can transform the content on the fly with basic web tools, open standards like HTML5, CSS, and Java Script, that will allow learners to get the content to match their needs rather than asking the learner to adapt to whatever content format or well-intentioned presentation has been decided by somebody else. It's really about creating agency and empowering the person who is the learner and who is consuming the content.

Deep: That's an amazing set of tools and we will get links to all those up with the show. I guess when you've had conversations ... This is changing a lot of how we design courses. When you've had conversations with folks who this is new to what's some of the resistance you encounter? How do you overcome that?

Jess: That's a great question. Some of it is complexity. I think that ... Like I mentioned, the fire hoses of information it can be overwhelming if somebody comes to you and says, "We have a policy now at our institution where all the content needs to be accessible." You don't know how to do that. What you're looking for is a bit of a checklist approach to that.

Jess: What we find is that accessibility is not something you address with a checklist. It has to be a perspective shift. This is where the inclusive design perspective really comes in. Shifting that perspective away from there are some people who benefit from this and those are the people who have visible disabilities.

Jess: We take a much more environmental approach to defining disability. It's not a feature of your medical abilities or lack thereof. It has to do with the tools that are available to you, the context that you're in, and the goal that you have, the thing that you're trying to do.

Jess: We call this ... This is mismatch, right? When those things don't come together that's mismatch. That's where technology really bears the burden to fix it. It's not the burden of the individual.

Jess: It means, as you can imagine, thoughtfulness and a perspective shift all the way from the content creators, the application developers, the people who are creating the technology, everybody to have this kind of perspective shift.

Jess: I think that it's exciting to some people who are excited by these kind of cerebral puzzles and it's overwhelming to other people who want the 10 steps to get this done. I think that that's a bit of the resistance.

Jess: The challenge has been, I think, to make meaningful connection with the people who want to start small and hit the checklist but also not settle for that checklist approach, not let people settle in and think that they've solved that. Helping people understand that this is a practice, that we're all practitioners of this, and that this is something that has to be a value that we continue to do over and over again. It's not once and done. It's like bathing. We continue to bathe. We should continue to inclusively design everything that we're doing. It can really change everything.

Deep: Yeah. You know, it's interesting that you mention this ... You and I met at the Open Ed Conference in October. A theme this year was let's not just talk about savings. Let's also talk about student success. As I've been working with people to go along that journey there is a very parallel issue where people say, "Okay, do I just want to get to the open textbook? Now do I want to start tweaking the open source materials, not just textbooks, and make them better?"

Deep: I think what's a challenge for us right now and it just strikes me it's very parallel to the inclusivity issue, or it's probably the same issue, which is that we have a lot of folks in our community or in different places and we need to find a way to engage everybody where they are.

Jess: Yeah. I think that the approach that we take is a yes and approach. It's not that any one of these things is going to solve for access or solve for reaching the folks who are falling through the gaps in education. It's all of these perspectives.

Jess: If we're doing something and we're saying, "It isn't the case that we should worry about students and the cost of textbooks. What we should really be concerned with is this over here." I don't think that we are in a position where we need to cut our nose off to spite our face. These are issues that need to be addressed on all levels.

Jess: On the level of pedagogy, on the level of cost of education, on the level of access, which gets into fundamental issues of equity in our culture, in our society. I think in terms of content creation and making different modes, yes, it's one of the ways to get there but all of these have to be addressed. We have to address the ethics in what's going on in education, we have to address the cost because cost is an ethical issue. Who is establishing the cost? Who is establishing the rules? Have the rules adapted to mitigate some of our modern problems? Have we revisited them and asked, "Do these rules still make sense?"

Jess: I think you see elements of this politically in New York for instance with a push toward free education, for community colleges in California you see this. I think we need to ask more of those questions, push farther.

Deep: Another theme that I've seen come up is communities of practice around OER in lots of different ways. How do people who are maybe working in different states, in different countries connect? Are there ways that you would recommend for people who are especially passionate about inclusion to connect with each other?

Jess: It's a great question and it's one that I think about because what happens in communities is when you get a momentum together it's because the community has fomented in some way. Then as soon as it foments the risk is that it excludes, that it doesn't continue to push itself to reach people outside.

Jess: Maybe it starts and it gets really strong in North America in English speakers but then it doesn't include people from South America who are producing OERs in Spanish. We start to see the community go through some growing pains and some issues in how to address keeping the strength of a community and also keeping it open.

Jess: A lot of people who work in OER seem to be on Twitter. Twitter has its issues. It also has its benefits. It's a platform that can amplify the loudest, angriest voice but it can also be a great way to connect people. You've got examples out there of people who have been making really wonderful connections over Twitter, supporting each other.

Jess: Cable Green from Creative Commons is a great example of this. [inaudible 00:20:58] who is an educator who is really breaking down international barriers to access to open content from conferences and her VC connecting, the virtual connecting work.

Jess: You've got other great researchers who are on Twitter. Robin DeRosa, [inaudible 00:21:20], Jesse Stommel. They're all active on Twitter and responsive to people.

Jess: What I love, though, is when you stretch outside of the usual suspects and that's something that Twitter makes possible. There's this guy who teaches at Fresno State, Howie Hua. I've never met him but he's done some lovely things on Twitter and that's how I know of him.

Jess: He was saying early on instead of asking your students if they have questions ask them to come up with two questions and then talk about those. It's really inspired so many people. It sort of went viral. Just the other day he posted that he had written about 180 thank you cards to his students because he hates it when things end.

Jess: I just think it's such a lovely ... He's this lovely educator that I would never have access to if it weren't for Twitter. I've learned a ton from him and I've learned things that have influenced the way that I work and the way that I talk to students and think about how to encourage other voices to come out by asking people to come up with those two questions as sort of homework, if you will.

Jess: I love the idea that you could go to the usual suspects and then I love the idea on Twitter that you can reach out and broaden your own community by listening to voices that aren't voices that you would interact with generally.

Deep: Well, Jess, this has been a great conversation. I've learned a lot. I'm really excited to learn more about the things that you suggested. Thanks for joining us.

Jess: Yeah. Thanks so much for having me. I appreciate it.

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