Details

What You Should Know About Creating Accessible Resources with Dr. Katie Nieves Licwinko - Bonus Episode with Jotform
In this episode, I welcome back Dr. Katie Nieves Licwinko, Director of Technology, to the podcast to discuss the importance of creating accessible resources for students. You'll also hear about common accessibility barriers and practical tips for improving accessibility for diverse learners using EdTech. If you're looking to learn more about creating inclusive learning environments, this episode has you covered!

Link to live show notes:

https://classtechtips.com/2025/02/28/creating-accessible-resources-bonus/

*Creating accessible resources

Intro Sponsor Message

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Today's Intro

Welcome to Technology Essentials in Education: Practical Ideas for Educators. I'm your host, Dr. Monica Burns.

This week's episode is titled: "What You Should Know About Creating Accessible Resources with Dr. Katie Nieves Licwinko" and I'm excited to chat with Katie today. She's an educator, based not too far from me in NJ, and she's here to share helpful tips about accessibility, and what it means for all educators. Let's dive into the conversation.

Episode Transcript

Monica Burns:

Welcome to the podcast. I'm so excited to chat with you again about creating accessible resources. But before we dive into all of that Katie, can you share a bit about your role in education? What does your day-to-day look like?

Dr. Katie Nieves Licwinko:

Sure. So since the last time we talked, I actually switched roles. I am now the director of technology for a K eight school district in New Jersey. We have three schools. So dealing with the infrastructure in addition to the educational technology piece, the subscriptions, the PD, it's, it's been different and exciting to get to kind of take over that piece as well. My day to day is, I like to say different every day <laugh>. Mm-Hmm. <affirmative>. And that's what makes it really enjoyable.

Monica Burns:

I bet. Right. Especially in that role with different buildings, different groups of educators that you're supporting. Just so many moving pieces, I would imagine. And so, as we talk together today, you know, for someone who hasn't heard the term accessible, or in this context at least, can you describe what an accessible resource is?

Dr. Katie Nieves Licwinko:

So, when I think about what makes a resource accessible, and if I'm trying to define accessibility to somebody, I always tend to stick with the definition that it's a resource that is fully designed and delivered in a way that the content can be accessed, navigated, understood, independently by any learner, including those with different diverse learning needs and things like that. So, just really something that was created with the idea of access in mind and making sure that it's not just a pretty and informative resource, but that our learners can actually absorb the information from it.

Monica Burns:

I love that. That's such a, just a comprehensive overview of all the things someone would wanna think about while they're making choices or developing resources and just making sure that everyone is able to interact and access right. That piece of content. So this question that I wanted to ask you, kind of the why question, now that we have the what right? Comes down to, you know, the decisions that are being made in, in different areas, right? We, we might know, you know, what something is, but struggle to really, really wrap our head around

the why. Right? So, for someone who might not be sure, like why this has a place in their, you know, day-to-Day work, why is accessibility such an important consideration when creating digital resources for a K 12 classroom?

Dr. Katie Nieves Licwinko:

So I think as we've gotten more into the space that people are building their own resources and creating their own instructional materials. I, I know it's always been in the back of educators minds that we wanna make sure that everything we're doing in a lesson or in an assessment is accessible to all of the needs of all of our students. It is challenging to do but I think that sometimes the actual building of the materials gets forgotten about. Mm-Hmm. <Affirmative>. But in reality, it's, it's so important because I come from a special education background. So in the back of my mind, I was always thinking when a student was struggling with something, is it actually the content they're struggling with? Or is the material that I'm giving them just not working for their needs? Because I've seen both. And I think that that's something, as an educator that is really important to understand, like, okay, no, this student does not understand, so I need to pull them aside. Or, you know, what, this material isn't working for this student. But when I presented it this way, they were able to access the information. So when I try to think about, you know, why accessibility, 'cause I know it's an extra step to some people Mm-Hmm. <Affirmative> that tends to be the reason why we really wanna make sure that it's the students are equipped with what they need to fully be able to engage and participate and understand.

Monica Burns:

Yeah. And your point about, you know, so many more educators are developing digital resources, like they're creating different things. It's not just that they are grabbing something from a program that's already been created, or one that might have gone through a really nice checklist to make sure it was ready, you know, for a wider audience. It's not just something for someone who's designing a website to consider, it's for all of us, right. Who are creating resources that will go in front of a group of students. So what are some of the most common accessibility barriers student face when they're using digital tools and resources?

Dr. Katie Nieves Licwinko:

So just thinking as like a broad, you know Mm-Hmm. <Affirmative>, these are pretty common ones. Lack of captions and more specifically accurate captions on videos tends to be a big one. I, I know like YouTube and things like that have the autogenerated captions that are not always accurate. Yeah. And as somebody who always uses captions, <laugh>. Mm-Hmm.

<affirmative>. It's very frustrating. I think too, when we think about digital design, large bulks of text that is uninterrupted tends to be a barrier. Color scheme is a big issue. Is there not enough contrast between the text and the background? Is it just too bright and distracting? Mm-Hmm. <affirmative>, I often equate it to growing up in the nineties and early two thousands, <laugh>, when HTML websites were so like clunky and bright and there was animations everywhere. Just very distracting. I think another one too, a lot of people are still using PDFs, you know, as we are finding things that we used in the past. Sometimes a scanned PDF is extremely inaccessible. And then a big one is also the alt text as well. Mm-Hmm. <Affirmative> not having the caption to go along with the image for somebody who might, using a screen reader or somebody who might just like that clarifying information for the image they're looking at.

Monica Burns:

Yeah. Those are all things that I think, you know, someone who might not need those particular pieces might take for granted. You know, like it's nice to have captions, right? If you're watching a television show and everyone's talking really fast. But for some students, that might be the only way, right? For them to interact with content. So some of those things that, you know, certain learners might say is, is nice, right? For others it, they really need that in order to interact with the content. So captions is a really great example, as you mentioned. So many tools allow you to turn them on or off. Hopefully, right? They are stronger <laugh> in terms of, right. The auto generation is, again nice, but not always as great right. As we want it to be for a group of students. Right. And that contrast, it's so interesting that you mention that because I've been working with a group of high school students recently and we've been doing some digital storytelling work.

Monica Burns:

And that's one of the things that we talked about was just Right, the colors as they go, you know, one on top of the other, right? You're, it might be your favorite colors, but doesn't mean you wanna pick them right. With the text and then with the background. 'cause It could be very difficult for someone to read if there's not enough of that contrast. And, you know, as we are talking today, it might be something where a listener like, hears a say this and then starts to notice it, right? In a lot of places, just like when someone says like, oh, I bought this new car and you've never heard of it before. And then you just see them everywhere, <laugh>, right? Yes. Once you are on the lookout for something, it's hard to miss captions that aren't that great or accurate. Right? Or that contrast. So, you know, those are are good things for us to consider. You know, those barriers that we might come across. Can you share some specific examples of how teachers can make their digital resources more accessible to their students?

Dr. Katie Nieves Licwinko:

So, I, I always jump into the alt text first. Mm-Hmm. <Affirmative>. And it's not just because of your students who abuse a green reader. I, I know that some of my students who did not have visual impairment at all would use that just mm-Hmm. <Affirmative> purely to get an understanding of what the image was supposed to be in the context. Mm-Hmm. <affirmative>. So it's a nice thing to start off with, just in the back of your mind of adding a picture. I need to add al text. Mm-Hmm. <Affirmative>. It's also a nice kind of editor too. Yeah. If you are adding an image and you're like, there's really no point to, like, I don't mm-Hmm. Why am I explaining this image? Do you really need it? 'cause It's just taking up space. Yeah. That's an easy one. I'd like to have teachers too. 'cause I'll be honest, it's something I struggle with a lot with design is the navigation component.

Dr. Katie Nieves Licwinko:

Mm-Hmm. <Affirmative>, because I do use a mouse. And so I often forget that there are people who are not using a mouse, who are using the tab or the keyboard or a another device to control their control their screen. So I often tell teachers, you know, try to use the tab and see if you could navigate around something you've created. Mm-Hmm. <Affirmative>, are you able to, or where's the sticking point? Where are you getting stuck? Can you go back and forwards? And then PDFs are easy to check. So if you're not able to highlight text, maybe try to get a better copy of that PDF or put it into a system where you can make it an edible PDF because the text can't be highlighted that it can't be read by a screen reader. They can't, most likely can't navigate through it. Either with that type of navigation. And there's a lot of built in tools in Microsoft and Google and all of these applications we're using that check this for you so that you're not always having to remember it. It can point it out and flag it for you if you're missing like a header on a slide Mm-Hmm. <Affirmative>, it'll tell you instead of you having to go check it yourself,

Monica Burns:

That's so useful, right. To have those reminders built in. Or maybe it's a sticky note that's next to your desk that before you're, you know, hitting you know, publish on an LMS Right. For students to interact with content and just understanding that your students may interact with content in different ways than you're creating it is a really good reminder. I know I've, you know, led workshops with teachers where we're, you know, talking about what something's gonna look like in a classroom, and as much as we might try it out on all their personal devices, we wanna make sure it works on a laptop, right? If their students have a laptop, we

wanna make sure it works on a tablet, right? If they have a laptop, but their students are actually interacting with a tablet. So if for a teacher who's already built that kind of muscle for lesson design, right?

Monica Burns:

Adding in this component to say, it's not just the device, but it's how a student might use that device or navigate that space. And, you know, alt text is something that I would say I've been really familiar with as a blogger, right? I publish on the web. So before I put a picture up, right? I use, or I, I put in like the alt text that's gotten a lot easier for me now that I have, you know, a chat bot help me out sometimes, right? With generating some alt texts. I'll, I'll admit that, right? But right it from a student facing perspective, right? When you're creating digital resources, that's just another great thing to consider, right? To make sure students on whatever device they have can really interact with the content. So, you know, when we're making things for students and hearing from them about their interactions, what role does student feedback play in creating accessible resources? How can teachers gather that feedback effectively?

Dr. Katie Nieves Licwinko:

It's really, I think for me, in, in my experience about directly asking them, and sometimes I know the students don't have necessarily, especially younger students, the words to describe why it's a problem. Mm-Hmm. Something that's been designed. I mean, I taught middle school, so I always Yeah. You know, joke around that they're very honest. Like, I'll tell you this Is terrible

Dr. Katie Nieves Licwinko:

And I can't, I can't even understand what this image is <laugh>. But, you know, asking students what works for you, I always gave the personal example that I love closed captions and can't pay attention without them. Mm-Hmm. <Affirmative>. So I always have them on, so they felt comfortable saying like, oh, I do that too. Or I don't like the closed captions at all. They don't help me. And then I kind of used to document that on top of that, I would always observe my students if they're working through, whether it was a self-paced unit I created to see whether it was a navigation issue and access issue versus an understanding issue. So it's just a lot of observation. But really talking to the students and seeing what works. You know, I always did that about my lessons anyway, but like, then also the content piece. Like, do you like the way I formatted this article? Or did you prefer this way? Which works better for you?

It's really just, I think about having that like authentic conversation with them and I'm, they will definitely be honest about what's working and not working. <Laugh>.

Monica Burns:

Yeah. Right. If you create that culture in your classroom where students are comfortable, right? Talking about what they're learning, how they're interacting with different things, and you're asking them right about that too, right? All of that plays a role. So for someone who is kinda wrapping their head around this topic, maybe for the first time or the first time in a long time, are there any accessibility standards or guidelines educators should be aware of when they're designing digital materials?

Dr. Katie Nieves Licwinko:

So there's the web content accessibility guidelines that are continuously updated to reflect like best practices and accessibility and online design. I'll be honest, there's a lot in there and if you really dive into it, there's a lot of great information. If you just take a look at some of their recommendations, I always think that that's a great place to go. They tend to focus primarily on individuals who have a disability, but it really is just a nice way of ensuring that everyone has access. And it does address some of those issues that you had talked about with the, even making sure from phone to tablet to computer to desktop to laptop, that everything is kind of still seamless, so equitable regardless of what the student device is using. There's also the, the POUR principle, POUR mm-hmm. Making sure that everything is Perceivable, Operable, Understandable, and Robust. Yeah. Just making sure that, you know, things are accessible via audio and visual and that they're easy to navigate and that the language is clear and simple, which is all often one that gets forgotten about and that it's compatible the variety of devices. So between those two, those are probably, those are always my go-to, you know, that philosophy of poor and then looking at the WCAG guidelines for good accessibility.

Monica Burns:

That's amazing. And I do, you know, as you're talking there, just knowing that there is, you know, a few different ways to approach this, right? You might dive in really deep, you might look for an acronym that helps you kind of stay on track. So lots of opportunities for educators who are, are looking at what this, you know, looking at this topic and, and what it might mean for their everyday practice and their goals for, for designing resources that are going to be, be student facing. So, you know, I mentioned that that AI connection for me and the alt text, right? Something I was doing before AI, but maybe I'm doing a little bit faster now, you know,

what do you think is the future of accessibility in EdTech and, and how can educators prepare for shifts, trends, new things that might come along?

Dr. Katie Nieves Licwinko:

I do think that AI is gonna become more prominent. And not that it wasn't, I like to always say accessibility and assistive technology specifically has always had like a machine learning AI background. But I think a lot more is coming to the forefront as we continue to develop and grow. I like to think that eventually we'll be getting a little bit more precise with some of the ai. Like I know I use the AI generated transcripts a lot of times, and it's not, it's getting better even in the last like year and a half. It is improving dramatically from where we started. And I'm hoping that that's kind of in the future we'll be going more in that direction where it might be a little bit easier to have some of those accessibility checks using AI. But then also I'm kind of hoping that I know the universal design for learning guidelines just were just updated. Mm-Hmm. <affirmative>. So I'm hoping that there will continue to be more of an intersection between that framework, the world of EdTech, just to make sure that any software tools that we're using with students is already considering accessibility or considering it further than they were further than the legal requirement. I guess the answer would be, so those are really kind of where I hope to see things going in the future. And

Monica Burns:

That UDL connection is one that comes up a lot for educators when they're thinking about all the different entry points and different ways that their students might interact and access with learning experiences. You know, the AI piece is one that comes up a lot for, for different avenues, right? Maybe it's for, you know, coaching with students if they're working on their own. Maybe it's for educators who are looking for support, designing resources, like getting differentiatEdTechs, for example. But there's also that AI connection to making sure that things are, are ready for everyone. So I'm glad that you brought that up and, you know, made that connection for someone who's looking for their, maybe their why, right? As they're exploring AI tools and resources. So the last thing I wanted to ask you today, right? Is kind of that, that next step a question if you will, right? For educators who are focusing on accessibility, lots of resources out there, lots of things for them to consider. But if they're looking for that one first step, maybe to tackle in the next week or two just to get a little bit better in their practice as they're building and building on top of that, what is something they can do to make an immediate impact?

Dr. Katie Nieves Licwinko:

I think if they haven't already, the first thing and it's easy to do is to simply ask and talk to your students about it. If you haven't had those conversations, just get that conversation going. That shows that you are, you know, reflecting on your own practice. Mm-Hmm. <Affirmative>, which is great for modeling anyway, but then to get that feedback of something simple that you might be able to do right away that your students want. Or at the very least, I, I know looking at kind of there's like these nine big principles of digital accessibility and seeing that at the forefront can be overwhelming. Yeah. Mm-Hmm. <Affirmative>. So maybe just picking one to start off with that you could start bringing in and thinking about in your day-to-day practice. Once that becomes second nature, you could start building in a little bit more. Ideally it could be something that your students would really benefit from. Even as something as simple as, you know, making sure that there's closed captioning and that's accurate. Or simplifying the language that you have in a digital resource you're creating or breaking up that giant block of text. Even just something small like that just to feel like you're making progress toward being more accessible as you're learning and working on all the other areas as well.

Monica Burns:

Perfect. Well that is just so many things that people can, can choose from. Right. For their next step. Thank you so much for providing this context, giving everyone a why <laugh> for exploring this and helping listeners understand why accessibility should be front of mind for them as they're designing different resources. So Katie, thank you so much for your time today.

Dr. Katie Nieves Licwinko:

Thank you so much for having me.

So let's make this EdTech easy with some key points from the episode…

Accessibility ensures all learners can fully engage with educational resources.

Common accessibility barriers include inaccurate captions, poor color contrast, and inaccessible PDFs.

Adding alt text, checking navigation, and simplifying text are small, impactful steps.

Student feedback is critical for understanding how they interact with digital content.

Remember, you can find the show notes and the full list of resources from this episode by heading to classtechtips.com/podcast

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Episode Resources

- Check out Dr. Katie Nieves Licwinko's website & podcast
- Connect with Dr. Katie Nieves Licwinko on Twitter (X) & LinkedIn
- Must-Try Chrome Extensions for Educators with Dr. Katie Nieves (Podcast Episode)
- Automatic e-Signature Tool for Schools (Blog Post)
- Make Custom Forms for Back-to-School (Blog Post)
- App Builder for Educators with No Coding Experience Necessary (Blog Post)
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