



Transcription of UX Soup Episode 11: Distance Learning UX - Educators' Perspectives

00:00 Lisa Cooper: I'd like to take this opportunity to thank all those people who donated to Marathon Mates, a fundraiser for Royal National Institute of the blind that saw Derek and I run a half-marathon each. We raised 450 pounds at the time of this recording. Thank you, on with the show.

[music]

00:33 LC: Welcome to UX Soup, a short-form Podcast that looks beyond the buzzwords to give you the latest developments impacting user experience of devices and services in the home, the car and on the go. I'm Lisa Cooper, and as always, UX Soup is presented by strategy analytics, a global research and consulting firm, providing our clients all over the world with insights, analysis and expertise. Last week, we looked at education from a parent's perspective, but good UX research involves looking at all users and stakeholders in a new product service or process. So today we are speaking with two educators, one from a high school, the other from a college, to get their unique perspectives and experiences at a time of forced distance learning. So without further ado, I would like to introduce our two special guests today. We have Renee on the line, a Dean of Students at a school district with 40,000 students. Welcome, Renee.

01:31 Renee: Hello.

01:31 LC: And also Chris, he is a Psychology Professor at a technical college that also serves about 40,000 students. Welcome, Chris.

01:40 Chris: Hi, thanks.

01:43 LC: So today, I'll be asking you both about the challenges you now face in what are truly unprecedented times in education. Renee, let's start with you. Could you tell me very briefly about your role as a Dean of a high school for anyone out there who may be unfamiliar.

01:57 Renee: Sure, it's kind of like an assistant principal, some of my duties are, I'm in charge of assessments, discipline attendance. I'm also in charge of technology on campus, so that covers everything from I'm the Google guru, I do all the trainings for teachers and students, but I also manage the distribution of our technology to students and to teachers and I'm kind of the central person for that.

02:22 LC: And Chris, could you tell me a little bit about your roles and responsibility as a Psychology Professor?

02:27 Chris: Sure, at a technical college, primarily, my role is teaching. So we have a set of courses that we have to teach pretty consistently, I teach both face-to-face and online... Not teaching face-to-face right now, and not in the building, so I'm working from home. Other responsibilities we have, I am the Chair of our adjunct support committee, so helping the psychology department's adjuncts, we onboard those people as they come in, answer questions, help provide some professional development and mentoring for them. I'm a member of our scheduling committee, so we also are about scheduling our faculty when the semester schedule comes out and making sure everyone gets scheduled. Those are a couple of my service duties at the college as well, so.

03:05 LC: Have you had challenges with doing this from home?

03:09 Chris: I think the biggest challenge for me right now is finding boundaries in time. I'm sitting in the basement at the moment, while my partner works in the office doing telehealth, and my kids are running rampant wherever they are.



03:22 LC: Wow, yeah, so you have to find very quiet places with two children.

03:26 Chris: Yes. And that's part of the reason I didn't choose to volunteer to do online live classes, so all my classes are asynchronous at this time, which is very helpful for managing them.

03:33 LC: And that's something... That's something you had a choice about, or is this something you requested?

03:38 Chris: That's something we had some choice about, they asked for people to take on the online live classes as a sort of special offering, knowing that our student populations might be more amenable to that, that that might be more helpful to them, but they ask who would be willing to do it, and I just knew with my schedule and situation that wasn't gonna be possible.

03:56 LC: So Renee, do you also do asynchronous classes at your high school? Are they a mixture of live... What is your situation where you are?

04:02 Renee: It is a mix of live and students on their own, so students had a choice at the beginning of the school year to go to a fully online academy where they had to self-pace and manage really their own education, their own teaching. Of course, there's a teacher there grading and therefore assistance, but they truly were kind of managing it themselves. Here on campus, the students who chose to stay, they work in a combination where they have every day a live meet with the teacher and all the students, and then they also have assignments that they're given. Now, the first couple of weeks, we require that the students go to the meet in order to get marked present. However, you cannot require a student to be present at a certain time, in a certain day, in this situation.

04:48 Renee: We have a lot of students who are working full-time because their parents have lost their jobs or taking care of their siblings because the younger siblings aren't in school either, so we had to make it more flexible, so we had to allow optional participation assignments if they miss the meet. And then the feedback we got from that was that it still was too restrictive, so we have meets every day, every day, every teacher does a live meet anywhere from 20 minutes to an hour. We have block classes of two hours and then they alternate schedules. And so the students that can make it during that time... Great, but what's hard is the teachers wanna be with the students, they wanna see them, and they wanna give content and valuable information, but you can't give primary content in a meet where not every student is required to be there. So it can only be supplemental, which was such a huge change for these teachers that have spent their entire lives and teaching careers in one particular method, so it was a struggle at first, but I would say within the month... Oh my gosh, everyone has just been doing great.

05:47 LC: And Chris, what's your experience been doing the asynchronous classes?

05:51 Chris: I've been teaching online for a long time. So I think since roughly around 2007. When the emergency stuff happened, that was more about adjusting my face-to-face classes to the online environment as an experienced instructor in online, I gave them a clear message, "It'll be okay, I know how to do this. We'll be good." And much like Renee was saying, we couldn't require them to come... Most of them had schedules, they had blocked out for time for face-to-face classes, but many of them were in situations where that wasn't gonna be possible, so I made those optional. Our class meeting is optional and recorded those class meetings and then put them out for them to access only just for the students in the class, which some of them did say they watched and watched them later and found them very helpful. And now all I chose intentionally to go all asynchronous. And so that's been really helpful with our scheduling here.

06:43 Renee: Wait, can I jump in and mention something about the recording the live meets. So we... At the beginning, at the end of last quarter, fourth quarter, when everything shut down, our teachers really wanted and started using that as a valuable resource tool for students who maybe couldn't make it to the meet or were having an issue and wanted to be able to record it and have it as documentation because you know, high schoolers are gonna jump on as soon as they're in front of the camera, in front of all their friends, they start to do inappropriate



things. So teachers wanted to be able to record that. However, we quickly learned that's a violation of the Child Protection Act to then for children under the age of 18 to be recorded and then shared.

07:24 LC: Wow.

07:24 Renee: So it took a while for us to work out those rules and regulations, so if a teacher can record the screen but they have to download it, keep it in a separate folder that's not online, so that no one else can access it. They cannot share it with anyone, and that's also a glitch that we figured out that if they put it in a folder, like a folder just for a resource, students learned how to manipulate that URL code and share it with other people. So even though it's within our locked down Google school classroom account that you can only access if you have a school account, those smart kids figured out how to record and share those recordings with other people, and they also have figured out how to jump into meetings.

08:15 Renee: My son, he told me about how they all bombed his AP Physics class with over 120 students, so during the live meet, they all figured out how to get... 'cause they love the teacher and they were doing it for fun and they had 150 kids jumping in there, even though he had a private code, only shared the link with kids in the class, they figured out how to do it. As a teacher, you're very hesitant to jump on these live meets and to do any of these awesome things you can do like record and use it, because someone's going to take advantage of that in some way.

08:50 LC: I have heard that some of these Google meets have been interrupted by, let's say, inappropriate material. Have you come across that also?

08:58 Renee: That that has happened in our district once, it wasn't an international hacker. It was someone who was hacking into... I think when we were still using Zoom. Okay, so that's one of the reasons why Zoom was not used anymore, but there also were small glitches. Talk about user experience, glitches like when you first set up a Zoom class and you share that link with people, you don't know that you have to go into the settings and click the one box that says only the teacher or the administrator can share this link or has access to allow people to enter the room or not, it defaulted to let anybody in. So by the time we figured that out, oh, there were violations all over the place. And try figuring that out remotely, not being able to sit down with a group of people and discuss what's going on, it's all happening through email and phone calls, it was a hot mess.

[laughter]

09:50 Chris: I can imagine.

09:52 LC: Oh my goodness. Yeah, I see.

09:55 Chris: I have the opposite problem when I was doing live classes is that no one wanted to turn on their camera and they didn't wanna talk for the most part, so it turned into pseudo me talking at a screen to myself.

10:08 LC: Well, and we talk about equity issues like, should we require a student to turn on their camera so we can visually see them, and on their cameras.

10:23 Chris: Yeah, yeah, we had that same conversation in discussing, at least among our faculty, but I know at the colleges in some of the training sessions of helping people to sort of realize that those issues are there and to try to find alternative ways for that student to participate without having to turn on the camera.

10:40 LC: So let's talk a little bit about training. When COVID hit, how much training did you both receive with these online platforms? Platforms I'm sure many teachers and academics were not used to using.



10:50 Chris: The College as a whole went above and beyond trying to prepare our faculty for this situation. So there were some stuff around Microsoft Teams that I went to, then they had things like more how to use some of the tools built into the Blackboard course management system. Our Psychology Department regularly had a once a month, actually about every two weeks, had a sort of meeting of how are we dealing with this together, at a little faculty meeting, which was also very helpful. So we did a lot of... The college did an amazing job of stepping up to prepare. We have faculty who have been with us for a long time, some of whom using email is a struggle, and so for them to have to go to teaching online mine requires a lot of support and a lot of help, and it's been amazing to see that come together.

11:42 LC: Renee.

11:42 Renee: I've been teaching for 20 years, and over the past year and a half, my principal chose me and a couple other people on campus to go to the Google guru training. I created a resource, I created a Google classroom just for our faculty where they could ask questions, I could give documents, share those instructional videos also so that they could separate the classroom student user experience and teacher resource from district mandatory instructional information in general. Daily things we have to do like a bell schedule and when is lunch, and those kind of things. So that Google Classroom has been a really great resource for teachers, and that was a really a place that they would go to.

12:20 LC: Go ahead, Chris.

12:22 Chris: We did something a little similar for the psychology department, just as a whole, is that as we as a department, were finding things and people were trying out different tools, we put those into a Blackboard course for our adjunct faculty to use as well, so that little different approach, but same sort of idea.

12:40 LC: Renee, are you using the same platform across all the schools within the district?

12:46 Renee: In March, and before that, we had teachers who were using Blackboard or some other... It was kind of a use what you feel comfortable with. And then in April, when we didn't come back, it was a streamline, everyone's using Google classroom 100%. But we shut down due to the pandemic right in the middle of our spring break, so teachers didn't have resources, they still had in their classroom, all of their documents. How do you then upload to your Google Classroom that you've just started, if you don't have any of your documents, they're all sitting your desktop computer at school? Or how does an art teacher plan on teaching her art class if she doesn't have any tools at home? So you had 30 minutes to run into your classroom, get what you needed and get out.

13:34 Renee: And again, I'm really lucky that I already was 100%. I'd been using Google Classroom for two years already, so I was good, but there were a lot of teachers that it was their first rollout, and while the district would send out valuable information, dos and don'ts, in order to really understand it, you have to see it. But also something that wasn't provided was what about the student side? If a teacher gives an assignment, what does it look like for the student, so that when a student ask asked the teacher, "Hey, I uploaded my document, but it's saying I didn't turn it in," the teacher has no idea what it looks like from their end. So I would get my son's computer next to mine, 'cause he is in the district and was in Google Classroom also, I'd record his screen and simultaneously give him an assignment I made a pretend family Google Classroom, and then we'd record both and then piece them together in iMovie and make it a video.

14:31 LC: That's smart. Yeah.

14:33 Renee: "Hey, this is what it looks like." For the teacher and then the student, and then I even did a pretend Google meet and then have my other son pretend to hack in, and then I would walk through the steps about, "Okay, teachers, he was able to get in when this happened, don't do this." So...

14:49 Chris: That is some amazing troubleshooting.



14:49 LC: Yeah, but you did a phenomenal job though.

14:51 Renee: Thanks, I just figured, if these are issues that are gonna come up, let's solve them now.

14:55 LC: So what kind of training and help was given to students when this all first happened?

15:02 Chris: Our systems are working pretty well, while they really did a great job with training and providing lots of training for faculty, they also tried to do that for students, especially over the summer. They try to create some resource pages where students could find kind of a one stop, like everything you could possibly need technology-wise, and that was run through our library system. So our librarians have done an amazing job of putting together those resources for students and being available to help troubleshoot stuff for students. Many of our faculty learn how to navigate some of that, so I'm sort of the first line of defense if the system has a problem, and then if I don't get it, then I'm like, I direct them to that spot so that they can get some additional resources that way. I just ran into a situation where I have a student, she's never really used an online system for learning, and I spent, I'm not even joking, two, probably two and a half hours on a video call with her trying to walk her through how the class is set up where everything is. And she was, I think, information overloaded.

16:13 Chris: Her group in the online class has been making videos to help her. And I was like, "That's not fair to them. And they let me... As soon as they let me know that, I was like, "Okay, we gotta figure something else out." So I talked to our Student Achievement Center, and the director there got in touch with me and put me in touch with some people that could serve as technology tutors for this student who really just needs that extra help. So there are things that they've put into place, but you run into, I think, some of the same problems where if somebody is using one system and somebody is using another system and then you have different devices people are using, like no one person knows how to navigate all of those devices.

16:48 Chris: And so sometimes it can feel like a run around, I think for the students, "Well, why couldn't this person help me?" Well, 'cause they don't know, use Macs or whatever. The other thing I think we're running into is the proliferation of mobile stuff, that students are trying to use a phone to take a test on Blackboard, for example, or whatever, and while it's increasingly becoming more mobile-friendly, I think some things just don't work very well in that format. And so I've had to tell students, "No, that's not gonna work on your iPad, it doesn't work very well." So if you can find some way to do this, and normally in a usual world, I'd say, "Go to your local library, get on a desktop, get on a computer." Well, libraries are closed, so there have been little incidences of that.

17:34 Renee: Well, I live in... Well, the school is in a minority, low socio-economic demographic area. So when I first wanted to make sure students that they had an avenue to, first of all, ask questions, but then also have a resource, so I made a Google sites for them, but then I was sure to translate it also to Spanish, on each page, I made a couple of Google Forms that I shared, created for teachers and shared in our Google Classroom that they could then share with their students so that they could ask questions. They asked the teachers directly, and the teachers, I believe, were prepared enough to walk their students through those issues, I think they did great. If there was a bigger issue that seemed more a broader scale, like a student's password all of a sudden wasn't working or something like that, then they would forward that on to me, and then if I couldn't solve it, I forwarded it on to district, but usually we were able to solve those here on site.

18:31 LC: Have you experienced any other UX issues with the interfaces that you were dealing with, Chris?

18:37 Chris: Our college switched to some mobile navigation version of Blackboard, as all this was going on, that was already planned before this happened, and it's created lack of efficiencies for me as a faculty member. I had been using it for so long that I had found all kinds of little tricks and tips to make things happen quickly and be really efficient in my work flows and changing that interface totally hosed it all. So while on the one hand, this idea of making it more mobile-friendly has its advantages, I think there are times where that does not necessarily create real advantages for people who've learned the system.



19:14 Chris: It's just gonna take time for me to get adjusted to that new platform that new navigation system, but that's time in that, right now, none of us has. So thinking about when do we deploy these things and how do we get input and feedback from people about how they're working or not. I think we had one training session about this new interface that I went to and I was like, "Okay." And then the summer, I didn't teach all summer and then I was sent down to actually work on my class and I'm like, "Oh, that's kind of a mess." Carefully closing out the browser and I'm like, "Oh, what am I doing?" A number of other faculty have really struggled with the new interface, especially when they first came sat down to get their classes set up, and that gave me kind of a warning like, "Oh, this is gonna be harder than I thought."

20:00 LC: Yeah. Yes, Renee, go ahead.

20:01 Renee: Right now, other than... I know there are the small group of teens and kids that are very tech-savvy, but when someone says, "Oh, kids are tech savvy, they'll get it." No, if it's more than one or two clicks on an app on their phone, they are lost and they do not know how to troubleshoot beyond that, so even the vocabulary is unique. I will go back and forth with someone, with a student to over-email where they say, "I have emailed my teacher multiple times and asked questions and they're not replying." And we dig and dig, and it ends up they made a comment, a public comment on a document within a Google Doc, and they think that they emailed the teacher.

20:47 Renee: So those kind of vocabulary and processes, they have no idea the difference between those issues. When you turn in something, you upload something, it's not turned in, you still have to click turn in. So when all of a sudden you're getting all of these, I turned it in, why is it not marked?" Well, you uploaded it, but you didn't click this extra button. Just because they're teenagers doesn't mean that they get it, that they just know computers and they know technology. No, they are still teenagers.

21:17 Chris: Yeah, and I think sometimes having multiple ways of doing stuff leaves them even more confused 'cause then they... 'cause like you said, they don't know how to troubleshoot it, so then for me, I'm like, "Well, you could get there from this way, or you can get there from that way, or you could do it this way." And sometimes I put those things in there intentionally to make it easier, but sometimes it feels more confusing to people, I think, and then they have more trouble 'cause they think this is the only way I can do it because they're so used to one click this, one click that, one click this, it all happens that they're not used to having nested folders, say in a Blackboard site or whatever. You have to go into this folder and then into this folder, and then into this one. They just say, I can't find it. I have been amazed at how teachers and administrators and staff have really pulled together at my school, and then looking at other people I know that I've talked to in secondary school, elementary schools, how much work everybody has pulled together to try and make this the best that they can in what is an awful situation for everyone.

22:19 Renee: They're being so creative and making it work.

22:22 LC: Yeah, they are. And I know we really appreciate all the efforts that they are taking, all the teachers are taking in the school district for our own daughter coming up with new and creative ways to teach these different subjects. I want to thank both Renee and Chris for their time today, providing us with invaluable insights into the challenges that educators are facing right now during what is a difficult time. If you'd like to receive updates from our recent research, head over to ux-soup.com where you can sign up for our newsletter at ux-soup.com. You can also listen to all the episodes linked to the show on your favorite podcast platform, and connect with us on LinkedIn and Twitter. You can also email Chris Derek and myself directly with your questions or feedback at UXsoup@strategyanalytics.com. As always, UX Soup has been brought to by Strategy Analytics, check out the latest user-centered insights and analysis by visiting SA-UX.com. Thanks again, bye for now.



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