

# Learning Hub Episode 3: Accessibility at JIBC

Interview with Sam Matychuk.

Senior Manager, Student Learning Support and Disability Services

and Dave Smulders

Program Manager, Faculty Development, Centre for Teaching, Learning and Innovation

## INTRODUCTION

### *Musical intro*

Welcome to the Learning Hub podcast. I'm your host Dave Smulders. I work at the Centre for Teaching, Learning and Innovation at the Justice Institute of British Columbia. I am recording this podcast on the traditional territories of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Watuth peoples. According to Tsleil-Waututh Nations website, one of the ways the Tsleil-Waututh people seek to strengthen their culture is by building strong relationships and sharing the wealth of knowledge with the broader community, and so I'm going to follow that lead and declare that as a guiding principle for this podcast and with our Learning Hub to walk that same path. So thanks to the Tsleil-Waututh people for their wisdom and resilience.

This episode is about Accessibility. Okay, so what I am talking about here when I say Accessibility. I'm going to let our guest, Sam Matychuk, help us with that answer. Sam is the JIBC's Senior Manager, Student Learning Support and Disability Services, and this podcast for the most part is a conversation between myself and Sam about Accessibility with a particular focus on what's going on at JIBC and what is going to be going on, because things are happening in this realm but there is actually more to come. All I will tell you right now in this brief introduction is that Accessibility is important for our work as educators and as those helping to cultivate the next generations of public safety professionals.

Now, at one point in this interview I refer to the 5 or so listeners who are tuning into this podcast. Are you one of the 5? I really like you people. If you are, please send me a note of acknowledgement and let me know that you tuned in. If I only get 1-4 responses, I will be kind quietly devastated about the whole thing. If I get 5 responses, I guess I will declare a job well done. If I get more, well, then I'm taking the day off. So help me achieve my mental health goal by giving me permission to take a day off.

Now let's listen to my conversation with Sam Matychuk as we talk about Accessibility and Education.

## INTERVIEW PART 1

**Dave:** Welcome. Thank you so much for coming and joining me here in our studio.

Um, I want to let everyone know here that you are new in this role. So you're new to the Justice Institute. However, it's not a new role here. We've had other individuals in that position. And to be honest, they've all been awesome! So there's something about the position. I don't know.... that the hiring strategy or something that's been working, so awesome. But you're not new to the subject matter?

**Sam:** No. No. I've been working with education and students with disabilities and mental health and that whole world for about a decade now somehow, and previously I was Accessibility Services Coordinator for four years at another post-secondary institution prior to coming here. So yes, it has been it has been my world for awhile now.

**Dave:** Yeah. Okay.

Well, that's great because one of the purposes of having this conversation is for us to kind of share information and knowledge with the rest of the JIBC community. And so it's great that we've got an expert in this and will ask you about accessibility and for everyone else here who's listening and at JIBC just to know that you are here.

**Sam:** Yeah.

**Dave:** And you're a resource for primarily for students but also for staff, is that it?

**Sam:** Absolutely! Yeah. My position is a lot of student-facing work, but there's a big part of it that is staff and faculty support as well. There's a lot of education that happens as part of my role. And so I'm always happy if people are needing resources, if they have questions about how accessibility fits in their day-to-day life, here, in their classroom, whatever that may be, even if I don't have a resource right on hand, I'm happy to work with them to find something that makes sense for them in terms of accessibility and disability resources, for sure.

**Dave:** Okay. Well, that's great because that's where we're headed here when you talk about accessibility services. So let's focus on that for a second. So accessibility, I would say from my perspective, it's something that's been gaining in our collective awareness more recently than before. So people are talking about it. There are, I see, workshops on it and people are writing about it. Now we have this BC accessibility plan and there's some accountability tied to it. It's going to affect BC educational institutes.

Yeah, accessibility broadly, you can tie it into other themes and trends like Universal Design for Learning or equity diversity, inclusion, that sort of thing. So if this understanding or this definition is broadening out, how do you define accessibility in this post-secondary context?

**Sam:** To me, accessibility in the postsecondary context is everything right? How can our content reach the right people if it's not accessible? How can we expect our students to succeed if they're disadvantaged from the get-go, right? Students with disabilities have the right to be here, to access education, to engage with course material, to be able to thoroughly

demonstrate their learning. So we always need to be mindful of the ways in which students with disabilities will engage in our courses, we need to remember that accessibility isn't only a concern for students with disabilities, right? It impacts everyone.

So these accessibility initiatives like UDL or Universal Design for Learning, justice, equity, diversity and inclusion. Jedi or JEDI or EDISJ, depending on which acronym you subscribe to.

**Dave:** They are coming fast and furious!

**Sam:** Yeah. But what they do is they create increased opportunity for all students and recognize the reality of complex and intersectional identities. Accessibility is important because we don't want to create an environment where students aren't able to show up and do their best and be their best rate. We want to create environments where students are able to participate and thrive and be a part of the JIBC. So making post-secondary environments more accessible can only make our students better and can therefore have an increasingly positive impact on the wider community too, in the postsecondary contexts and in the context of our wider society. I think accessibility is really, it's everything. Yeah. So it's beyond the topic of disability. Let's say yes, Yeah, yeah. It's a huge part of the reality of disability and post-secondary, but it's more than that. It always has been. But with a lot of the initiatives that are coming out now or being more brought to light, especially with the accessible BC act. There's been more of a recognition that these sorts of initiatives have a more wide-reaching benefit for all peoples.

**Dave:** Yeah, Has it been the case? When we talk about accommodation? We're always talking about some sort of deficit that needs to be the gap needs to be closed somehow.

**Sam:** Yeah, there's a couple of different models of disability that inform the world of accommodations. The medical model, which is one that many post-secondary institutions and, just kind of society at large, has operated off of for the longest time, is the view that disability is something medically wrong with the person and that the person is the problem and that there needs to be adaptations done in order for this individual to participate, right? The social model of disability, on the other hand, recognizes more so that there is issues with society and with our structures and our systems that create barriers for people. So it doesn't.... when it comes down to it within the social model, it doesn't actually matter what the person's disability is. It matters what the functional impacts are, right? So how is the system or the structure, or the class, or the institutions set up in a way that creates barriers. And how are those barriers experienced by people? And so then how can we improve the environment to make them more accessible space as opposed to how can we fix the person so that they can fit into the mold that we want them to fit into. So with that, I err obviously on the side of the social mode of disability, whereas where can we improve what we offer to our students as opposed to how can we make it so that we can retroactively Band-Aid/fix the problems....air quotes. With the students.

**Dave:** Yeah, So instead of needing an accommodation for single students, maybe we should be

thinking about, well, what is it about this exam that is creating a barrier for yes, at least one learner, but probably more, yes.

**Sam:** So how can we instead design the test in an accessible way as opposed to accommodate the student.

**Dave:** Okay, Yeah, that's great. Because on that topic, this topic, You mentioned barriers a couple of times. What do you see? What are some obvious barriers to learning and education that you actually observe? At this institution and others are where, wherever you've been.

**Sam:** Yeah, I think a lot of accessibility issues still lie in lack of choice for students. We've mentioned UDL and I'm sure we'll talk about it more. And you guys have, you folks have talked about it a lot. One of the main principles of UDL is multiple means of engagement. There's also multiple means of representation, action and expression. So large barriers still sits in the area of action and expression. I think student choice is often extremely limited when it comes to the ability to demonstrate their mastery of course content. I always encourage educators to assess students in a way that allows them to actually demonstrate their knowledge. I encourage providing lecture notes or slides in advance, allowing the facilitation of recording or allowing or facilitating recording, providing accessible course content. If we, if we start thinking of things in terms of how can I remove barriers, then you start to see many of the common accommodations like extra time on tests, time extensions on assignments, alternative format materials, lecture notes and advance, they start to disappear. The need for them starts to disappear. There may be still situations where there's a need for individual accommodations because of course we can never designed the perfect accessible course, but we can get a lot better. We can get a lot better in making situations where students are able to engage with the material in a way that makes sense to them and enhances their learning and still meets the course outcomes and demonstrates mastery of the content and then ability to participate in that field upon graduation? Yeah.

**Dave:** Okay. It sounds like there's a lot of work to be done here.

**Sam:** Yeah.

**Dave:** And where do you see that occurring? Like a lot of what you just described sounds like it's at the course level, so the instructor has a huge influence on how a course is shaped. There's instructional designers. All the people who participate in the production of a course. Where do you start?

**Sam:** Yeah, that's the question, isn't it? My recommendation is always to start with being proactive. Like I said, I'm a big proponent of UDL and EDISJ, or JEDI. So I find a lot of value in looking through, at accessibility through these paradigms. On an individual level, it's important to remember as you're working on your course and designing your tests, that students have different motivations for being in the classroom, different motivations for

learning, different strengths. And some students enjoy the social aspects of learning. Others thrive in independent settings. Some students need visual representation in order to engage. Others require written expression. So thinking of how you can enhance things just by providing a variety of teaching and learning activities. The use of technology, the ability to incorporate, encouraging students to incorporate learning into meaningful experience, right? So that's my big one.

There's, there's easy step-by-step ways to start in terms of making sure that students have access to accessible course materials, readable PDFs, open source textbooks when possible, copies of course materials in advance, I mentioned closed captions on, on video content. Ability to re-review testable course material is a big one, namely by way of accessing, accessing recordings. Supplement your lectures with visual content and allowing those accessible materials really allows students to engage with the content in different and multi-modal ways, which ensures that they can actually participate. Further reinforce that learning and building these accessibility measures into your teaching practice not only means that students are able to learn in a more dynamic and varied way, but it allows them to engage with different styles of learning and demonstrate their knowledge and kind of challenging ways can help to push the field forward to. And again, it also means there's less need for individual accommodations. So taking steps like captioning and accessible materials and things like that are very practical step that you can take that already improve the accessibility of your course.

## COMMERCIAL

And now, a word from our sponsor.....

*((music))*

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And now, back to our interview.....

## INTERVIEW PART 2

**Dave:** So what do you recommend for someone who wants to improve their course, let's say. And they, they're excited. They want to make it accessible to all their learners. They've got in our environment for online courses where in Blackboard, we have manuals that we distribute. People have PowerPoints that they may run. How does someone tackle that aspect of their course revision to make your course more accessible?

**Sam:** Asking questions, asking your colleagues what they do. Ask your program managers, ask what has worked for other people because you're not the first one to want to do this and hopefully it won't be the last. And so finding out what has worked for other people in terms of practical tools to practical strategies, think is a really great place to start. Connect with your teaching and learning team. Talk to CTLI.

**Dave:** -- absolutely ---

**Sam:** And ask those questions, dedicate some time. Again, proactive, not an afterthought is great. I know that it's extra work and I know that it takes time, but it saves a lot of extra accommodation in the long run that yeah, ask the questions, set the time aside to work on it and make a commitment to making these improvements. Not only for making your course more accessible, but for looking for new and exciting ways to test and challenge your students.

**Dave:** I was just in a discussion this morning about digital literacy and I was thinking about our conversation today and I just kept thinking about, oh, we're, we're also pushing how important it is to be up on digital literacy as an educator because you want to share that knowledge with your students. But I kept thinking this is about learning to use the online digital environments and navigating in there and being discerning about the kinds of information you get. This also has an accessibility component, right?

**Sam:** Yeah.

**Dave:** Just being more knowledgeable about all the things we do as educators, like every time I create a, an artifact of some kind, whether it's like I'm creating this recording now and even before this interview, I was thinking, how am I going to get transcripts for this thing? And where do I put them afterwards? I've got some work to do on it. Actually, this software is not going to help me. I need, I need some other software. But yeah, and people who are developing their own content, it's just, it seems to be part and parcel of this growing awareness of digital literacy as well as. Digital literacy isn't just about using the technology, but it's about using the technology to make learning more possible, in fact.

**Sam:** Yeah, and thinking of the ways that people are actually going to access the technology, right? So looking at somebody with a visual impairment, how are they going to navigate your tool? How are they going to find the resource? How are they, Are they able to read it with the

technology that they use. So the popular screen readers, like Dragon Naturally Speaking, or Jaws and all that kind of thing, right? So you're looking at how does it interact with these other, how does this technology interact with other technologies in a way that improves or creates additional barriers for accessibility? Yeah, it's all it's a puzzle. Yeah. Everything's interconnect.

**Dave:** And speaking of interconnection. So we're talking about like the ground level view when you're developing a course or when you're teaching a course. How does that plug in to that higher level, that BC accessibility plan? What's the connection between that plan? Way out there somewhere. And then here we are working in the classroom. So how does how does the BC accessibility plan and the Accessible BC Act kind of impact the day-to-day work?

**Sam:** Yeah. So yeah, that's a big one and there's a lot of people talking about this right now, because obviously it's very, very important and also new. So the Accessible BC Act being a new piece of legislation that aims to identify, remove, and prevent barriers to full and equal participation for people with disabilities. And they've broken it down a little bit further recently in terms of their priorities within this act. Priorities being creating a culture of accessibility and inclusion, information and communication, buildings, infrastructure in public spaces, employment in the BC, public service and delivery of goods and services.

And I think that these priorities that they've broken down really speak to what needs to be done in order to effectively implement the act moving forward. There are three essential components of what the Act asks of organizations like JBC. The first is to create an accessibility committee, and the second is to create an accessibility plan. That's kinda the big one. And the third is to create a mechanism for community feedback related to accessibility. So these five priorities kinda helped to inform the creation of the accessibility plan, that second piece of the puzzle, and to address the different types of barriers that people with disabilities may experience. Whether they'd be environmental, attitudinal, practical policy-based, informational, communication based technology, technological barriers. And looking at how within the context of our work, we can think differently about those different aspects and the barriers that they may put in place or how we can remove them or lessen them, right? In terms of how it affects our work. First and foremost, it asks us to be aware of these barriers and accessibility within these public spaces.

In order to be accessible, our classrooms, our campuses, our online environments, our services. They all need to be aware of these priorities and to reflect these priorities. So that means they need to embody that culture of accessibility, inclusion, not as an afterthought, as a forethought, as that kind of proactive approach to it. They need to have accessible information. So like you were saying, is how are people going to access this content, right? And that goes all the way from, I have a reading that I want to share with my class. Can everybody actually access this to the information on our website, the pamphlets that we create, advertising different programs or different initiatives, that kind of thing. Thinking, how are these going to be accessed? So looking at how our spaces physically inclusive and accessible, are they technologically available? Are there equal opportunities for students who do experience barriers?

A lot of that is where kind of accommodations fit in now is in leveling the playing field a little bit, but wanting to make sure that we're thinking about this in our course design, in our program offerings, in our application processes, in our advertisements for the JI, that kind of thing.

**Dave:** Obviously, this is going to impact your job and you're already doing stuff. How does it impact the rest of the staff then in terms of participating in that?

**Sam:** Yeah. I think there may be a call to adapt the way that we're doing things in order to remain leaders in the area of accessibility and inclusion and innovation. It may also mean that some folks are called upon to be part of the Accessibility Committee to participate in an audit of the accessibility of your content at some point?

**Dave:** I was thinking about some kind of audit, does it? It's not something you would actually create.

**Sam:** There are a lot of tools.

Big head shake.

There are a lot of tools out there already. I'm not I'm not looking to reinvent the wheel. There are physical audits. They are technology-based audits, they are content-based audits, all of that out there already. It's choosing the right tool for us. And that's part of the role of the Accessibility Committee, is looking at what what needs to happen here to properly examine where we're at in terms of accessibility and determine the next steps. So that's still to come.

But again, that willingness to participate, that willingness to be involved. If you are called upon to have a look at your content, have a look at the role that you do and think about accessibility and how it plays into that.

And then by supporting these initiatives, that's that's how people can do their part to make sure that JBC is meeting the expectations of the act, but also making sure that we're being leaders. Moving towards a barrier free experience for all students and especially for students with disabilities. It's going to impact everyone in different capacities depending I can, I can just say, start thinking about it.

That's gonna be the big one is think about the little things. Do I have a video in my course that doesn't have captions? Can I add captions? Can I add alt text to images that I use on Blackboard or the PDFs that I'm sharing with my students readable, you start thinking of these things now and doing these things now you're gonna be in a good place, right? And presumably we're going to report back at some point, presumably accountable.

So part of the part of the plan, the actions that it asks, again, there are no, there are no clear like steps or actions that come with the plan. It's more of a guideline. In terms of figuring out what needs to happen for your institution. And that's where the committee and the creation of our own accessibility plan comes into play. But there will be at some point, that feedback loop



that we look at what we're doing. We look at what's missing. And then we come up with a plan of how to address that. So there will be eventually those next steps coming as well.

**Dave:** Okay, But it sounds really interesting as we were talking about earlier, we're already thinking about these things. It's just a question of fitting this in. This is going to be a practice that we're going to have to be part of?

**Sam:** Yes.

**Dave:** and fitting it into our regular practices of.....,this course needs revision. Often you think about the content needs revision, but here we actually have to think about if we're going to talk about the content needing revision. Let's also talk about the accessibility, among other things like, Let's talk about and Indigenization. Yes, Let's talk about equity and diversity. Like are there are courses representing these concepts? Are they demonstrating good practice?

**Sam:** Yeah, absolutely. And that's, I think that's the main takeaway from the act, is that it's asking for accessibility to, again, not be a retrofit, not be a band-aid solution, but to instead be something that we think about and it becomes a part of our standards, it becomes a part of our everyday practice.

And again, I don't think that they allow a lot in the Act for us to have it be a long-term plan. Right? It's not like everything has to be fully accessible by next Tuesday. We have to just demonstrate that we're critically thinking about the way that accessibility plays a role here and how it impacts our students and addressing any shortcomings that we find along the way. So it's just that, that critical look for really good reason at what we're doing, what, how and why, and how can we be better? How can we continue to be a leader in the post-secondary world? So I know it's daunting and looking at kind of what the act is putting forward. It feels like a lot. It really does get excited about it, mostly because I'm a nerd, because I think it's a really great opportunity to improve and to be better and do better for our students. And I think that's, I mean, that's, that's why we're here, right? As we want to see our students succeed. And we want to make it an enjoyable experience along the way that isn't wrought with barriers on the basis of different identity categories because that's not what school is about. So yeah, I get excited about it. So if anybody wants to have their mind changed, but what the legislation is asking us to do, come talk to me, I'll change your mind on I'll get you on my team.

**Dave :** I've seen it! Good.

Well, i'm, I'm also thinking about from my perspective where I work Center for Teaching and Learning Innovation. We often talk about supporting and promoting a culture of teaching and learning. And then you're talking about a culture of accessibility as you're talking now though, I'm seeing that these two things are within the same culture.

**Sam:** They're not mutually exclusive at all, right. Yeah. Yeah, it really is it and I don t think, I think that's a great point, is that accessibility isn't mutually exclusive from anything that we're already doing, right?

Right. It's, it's one and the same. It's in the same breath as all of the hard work that's already being done. It's just contextualizing it within the world of accessibility and disability.

**Dave:** Thank you again for coming here and talking with me and helping me and everyone else, the five other listeners, that we can learn more about accessibility and just get better at our jobs and be better educators.

**Sam:** Thank you for having me. I appreciate it. And like you said, my door is very often open and I always like to talk about these kinds of things. I've, I appreciate curiosity related to accessibility. And so if anybody has any questions or wants to talk about it or get more resources, come chat with me. I'm always happy to talk about it, correct?

**Dave:** Yes, you are on the second floor. Easy to find.

**Sam:** I'm glad you think so. I think I'm right by the corner,

**Dave:** But yeah, I think, yeah, you need your sandwich board or something?

**Sam:** I do! Someday... Someday I'll get a sandwich board. We'll order bulk!

**Dave:** We're talking a lot about sandwich boards. Gotta get the word out. Thank you again, this has been great.

**Sam:** Thank you. I really appreciate it.

## CONCLUSION

OK, before we go I just want to summarize a few key points from my conversation with Sam, so that we've got something we can take away from here and go off and actually apply to our working lives. Also, you should know that Sam welcomes inquiries from JIBC folks so give them a call if you have any particular questions or anything you want to follow up with.

Let's capture a few key points. First, accessibility is everywhere and in everything. It involves physical changes, like making buildings more accessible, having doorways that are passable, opening up spaces, etc. But it's more than that. And as an educator, I trust that sort of change to other areas of the institute. For my purposes, I'm more concerned with what the impacts are for us as those who create, maintain and teach the courses. And so that's Accessibility in the classroom and the online teaching and learning environments and relates to where we can individually make positive changes. It starts with little things, like putting in those ALT tags on images. It sounds trivial but imagine for someone what a difference that makes, especially as we encourage more visual elements in our content. Using more than text is great and can really enhance a message, but that doesn't mean we abandon those who won't have access to those images. Just do the work. It's not a big deal.

And it continues to other aspects of our course work. For that, I encourage listeners here to read the other more detailed articles in the Learning Hub, about making learning materials more accessible or reading the testimonies of our Voices section about where Accessibility hits home. The thing about that section, Voices, is that once you get a sense of someone else's point of view, you realize how hard it is to think of all the possibilities yourself. That's why we work together and consult and include, etc.

So I hope you've found this conversation helpful, as well as the other pieces in this issue of the Learning Hub. Please check everything out. If you like what you hear or see, drop me a line. I would love to hear from you.