### **Transcript for E-natomy: The Skeleton of Designing a Healthy E-Course**

**ETUG Fall 2024 Workshop: Navigating Ethics and EdTech – November 1, 2024**

**Presenter: Adam Thomas**

JACQUIE HARRISON:

The first presentation is entitled E-natomy: The Skeleton of Designing a Healthy E-course. So I'd like to introduce Adam Thomas and he's an educational developer at Selkirk College. So welcome over to you, Adam.

ADAM THOMAS:

Hi, everybody. Thank you. Nice to see all of you, and thank you for all the interesting presentations this morning, what a really great session. I'd like to just, yeah, so I'm joining you here from the recently snow-capped mountains of Nelson B.C. here in the West Kootenay, traditionally, the unceded territory of the Sinixt and Ktunaxa Peoples. And happy to join you here online. And take you through some of the things I've been thinking about. Thanks, Jacquie, for that introduction. And it's true I am an educational media developer and designer at Selkirk. I started over a decade ago at SFU, and then when I moved to Nelson, I started working with. I see Teresa Southam is there, with her, and she's been a really great colleague. And while today's earlier sessions were really focused on so much minutia and detailed work, I'm going to take it in a bit of a different direction and venture into some broad concepts that I think tie back to this concept of accessibility, even though I may have, I may introduce my own definition of accessibility, which is it's linked to the traditional definition, but just through working in the online course development world and delivery and design and working with educators and content experts, I've seen some development and design challenges arise. And so that's sort of where I'm coming from and what I will start to address. So I'm going to share my screen where we are, the Share button. Do I know where we are here? Oh, there is. Thanks. And all right.

All right, here we go. So this is our brain. And taking you into the world of e-natomy. Trademark. Not really. But the skeleton of building a healthy e-course. So, there we go. We got our healthy skeleton.

Typically, you know, we teach, and maybe we're all familiar with the way that we start to build courses or deliver content online. And what often gets suggested like, Oh, just go ahead and do this. You know, take your classroom presentation and make an online course. Well, it's not so easy because we often start by maybe building a PowerPoint. Maybe we have PowerPoints. But what we do is we just often will take that content and throw it up online, and we realize quickly, or I certainly have realized quickly that we start looking at PowerPoints online as in an asynchronous online space, and they start to look a lot like this, where there's just all of these key points that we put down, but that can oftentimes be all there is. So what you end up doing is having a situation where you're kind of learning, students are learning at a glance, I like to call it. There's no context. It's just simple point by point information. Or sometimes it's jam packed. And we end up having learners just running into fatigue, and feeling like this person down here, kind of lost in trying to make sense of everything on their own.

So this is a good question. Big question ultimately is, how can I take my course to deliver this? You know, so how can I make something that is going to work in an online space for students? And I take it back to this idea of how do I build this healthy body?

So this is where we get to it. And I think that this is a... We'll jump into a different platform. What I like to do is, I start thinking about the idea that in education, there's when we're building online, there's more than just bones, but the bones are the starting block. The reality is more and more courses are being asked for to be delivered online, and more and more pressure is on educators to make that transition. The question often is, how do I actually go about doing that? How do I, you know, meet the demands for online education, online course delivery and still develop engaging healthy courses? So I think of it as a body. And, again, in a true sense, in a holistic sense, it's built of all these different systems that work, in the best case scenario seamlessly together. If you look at it, this is obviously broken down. There are plenty of other systems, but I like to think of it. We start up here, we have the skeletal system. This would almost work as your curriculum and your curriculum design. It's the framework on which everything would hang. We have the nervous system, and that's going to be the pathways that we send this information, the way that this information gets sent out. You know, and then this is the one I think well, I'm going to sort of dive into because this is the one where I think that we can have the most effect. I think of the muscular system as the connective tissue. This is what does all the heavy lifting in a body of work in our actual physical bodies. And it's under the skin, but, you know, it's what helps keep everything moving. And of course, you could make the case that if we're extending this metaphor of the body even further, might get the digestive system in there that way might be the consumable content, which would be the food. But I thought the digestive system needed a little.

PARTICIPANT:

I'm just going to interrupt you for a second. It looks like we're still looking at this slide that says, "Let's think about things a little bit different."

ADAM: Oh, really? Oh, no. That's okay. I can fix that.

PARTICIPANT: Awesome. Thank you.

ADAM: Thank you. Yeah, thanks for telling me that. Let's see if I find... Maybe I think it told me to share a different screen. Yeah, let's do that. Okay. Are you still seeing that sitting skeleton?

PARTICIPANT: Correct. Yeah.

ADAM: How about now?

PARTICIPANT: Now I'm seeing it, but on a smaller scale.

ADAM:

There we go. So this is the other platform. We just moved from PowerPoint to this other platform. And so I'll revise here. So then this is where I said there's more than just bones. Let everybody have a quick look at that. Oh, that's, thank you. Thank you for letting me know. So yeah, how do we build a better body?

And then thinking of it as a holistic body. This is where I was going through the different sets here with the skeletal system, being the curriculum, the nervous system being the pathways of sending out information, the muscular system, which does all this heavy lifting, and then now out of time joke of the digestive system.

But to take this metaphor back, I try to think about all of these systems working together to create ostensibly a complete body, a person. I think of the final course as a person. The way that it looks, the way that people engage with it, that's this magic combination. And in life, there's many different shapes and sizes, no singular, perfect body. And I'm not really concerned with perfection, but function is key.

So how do we build a healthy body? If I'm making, continuing this metaphor for body to course.

So, you know, we spend, typically, before we're even looking at doing online, we build our curriculum, right? As an educator. We spend years developing a course and we revise our curriculum over the years, and we get it down to a place that feels comfortable. Hopefully, we feel that we're delivering the best content that we can. So then we have all this content and information, and then we decide to figure out ways to deliver that content. So whether it's writing things on a blackboard in the old days or we incorporate videos or we make PowerPoint slides that support and demonstrate and illustrate the concepts behind us, any number of these types of things. This is how we start to send out this information along the nervous system.

And then this here again is this idea that we teach, which is the muscular system. That is the muscle. We're the knowledge experts, and in the class, we connect those ideas, and we provide the meat for the course. And this is actually the concept that I really do think is. Like I said earlier, it's under the skin. It's almost invisible, but it is really, really going to be fundamental to making a successful online course.

JACQUIE:

Sorry, Adam, I just wanted to pass along a comment from the chat, asking to make it bigger.

ADAM:

Make it bigger? That is going to be I'm on full screen on my version.

JACQUIE: Is it? That's great. That's okay.

ADAM: Yeah, I don't think I am at full screen on mine, so unfortunately. Sorry about that.

But of course, we do all these things, and then we make these courses and we put years of work into it, and then someone says, Okay, deliver this course online. And I've seen this happen multiple times, and the quick place to start of course is to take those disparate pieces of content and media and, you know, reading lists, and maybe make some quizzes. And if you're at a post-secondary institution, you put it up in your LMS and you go, Okay, you know, students, this is where you go, now you take your online course, but it's not really an online course. It becomes just a collection of disparate pieces, and students are left to navigate that on their own. Because there's something missing in that experience for people.

And I'd like to say a body without muscle cannot stand, which is where this idea of we, the educators, where we are the muscle.

So I challenge all of us to think about ourselves as the muscle in this situation. This does come with an uncomfortable truth. There is no shortcut to making a successful, engaging, long-lasting online course, It can be daunting. There's a lot. There is a lot of content that needs to be created beyond just instances of knowledge checks or content that you have, maybe have already created. But one of the things that gets missed oftentimes when people are making online courses is they don't see themselves in that space. They don't see themselves as that muscle, that is the tendons, or the connective tissue that holds all of that, all of those different systems together. If you think about how we occupy as instructors, that our time in the face-to-face classroom, students will be in the class, we present information. But then we also fill in all of these gaps between the learning. The gaps of connecting ideas and concepts and leading and guiding our students as we progress and scaffold and build on that learning experience. And that is something that when I'm working and it doesn't matter what platform, but when I'm working in developing content, I'm working with these content experts who know exactly what they need to teach, and what are the competencies that need to be met and what the curriculum is. And I don't doubt when they're teaching face to face, they know how to navigate the content in the curriculum and guide the students and answer questions and fill in those gaps. But when we start to build this online space, that online space now becomes a series of PowerPoint slides with just, you know, key concepts or key terms. Students just kind of have to go through that and navigate and a challenge. I'm always working with content experts to draw out those connective ideas, those connective tissues, that things that link the concepts and help guide the learners through that learning experience. And almost every time, people I get a look of, Oh, my goodness, that's a lot of content. And it's true. It is a lot of content. It can be. But it is really, really important, and the result has been really exceptional.

So the hard truth is, you know, you have to start by, you know, somewhere. And so I kind of asked at the very beginning that instructors, think of the space that you yourself would fill when guiding learners. What do you do in a classroom that helps them? And then when you have, you look at your curriculum, I ask that you think about the connections between these concepts and find a way to express those. Articulate those. Then I always think it's really important that you let learners know what they can expect to learn. This online place is, if you're asking them to spend hours at a time in an online space, they really find more and more people just want to know. What can I expect? What's coming down the pipe? Be very explicit. Be very clear. There should be no... We're not here to surprise people. We're here to support them and get them, you know, engaged in what we want them to learn. And so that also slides down to articulating the reasons for this information is important. Why are they learning this? How is this going to help? There are a lot more questions, but these are sort of four really key questions that I ask people to think about before we get started in the online course development. And then you take that and you add it all into your online course.

And that can be in kind of any flavour, right? You know, these are the things that you kind of have to do. You offer clear instructions. I try to think about creating blocks of learning because online fatigue is real. Creating really quick consumable digestive blocks of learning with clear outcomes and clear overviews. It will help all of us as educators really see what we are, the content that needs to be there with content that might not. But also allows our learners to really experience these pieces in a way in a space that could be never ending with content. Think about the transitions and of content between ideas. How do we lead from one idea and concept to the other? And find a way to articulate that. I'm a big fan of creating learning summaries for either chapters or sections or blocks so that it's almost like an opportunity for students to review really quickly about the key concepts that came. It just proves to be really, really helpful. Find ways that you can deliver this content in new ways. Are there games? More and more, there are lots. There are many avenues and options for creating content this way. It could be text flip, could be any number of things. These are just opportunities for people who are sitting online to engage in this content in a little bit different way than just an endless text of screen, text scroll. I recommend that we make resources and reading materials available offline. I love this idea so that they can take that content, maybe away with them. They can read it on their own, they can download it, whatever. I'm a big fan of that. I'm a huge advocate for open educational resources, but this might not always be the case, but making these available offline, so that you're not compelling people to always just be sitting in front of their computer. Always, of course, now, this is just simple best practice with any education situation, making sure that your assessments support and align with the stated outcomes. That's not necessarily just tied to online. And then always ask the question. Is there any space that can be made for face-to-face or virtual synchronous check-ins? Is this a truly fully online course? Is there a portion of it? Find out what percentage that is? Because even if they're not able to, you can do that, you know, through chats or message boards or things like that. Padlets are great. Anything that can allow cohorts to join together to connect anything like that?. Is there room for that? And try to build something in like that.

So, you know, the nature of accessibility is one of, you know, one of the, you know, concept, key concepts of this particular ETUG. And so with all of this stuff in mind, I wanted to tie it back to this idea of accessibility. As I mentioned in my sort of preamble, what do I think about accessibility or how do I think about accessibility?

And so, you know, I was talking about this complete body. So now we have a course, which is our body, and it doesn't really matter what platform these are being delivered. If you are doing things on PowerPoint and engaging with students there, or maybe it's being delivered through Zoom or you've got a Prezi or Pressbook or just an LMS shell or whatever. I'm using right now, we're looking at a third-party platform called Articulate Rise. And this is just something that I found is a really good way of, it's an easy fluid way to build a course. But I'm. People who know me know that I'm technologically agnostic, meaning I don't hold any particular technology, you know, beyond reproach or advocate for anything specific. I always feel like, no matter what, everything should fit the need and support the need, not make the need to the technology. But how does this relate to accessibility is that there are with all of these, there are so many things to consider. There are just straightforward technological considerations that apply to accessibility. And these are absolutely more and more being just demanded by learners across the board. You know, I'm sure many of you come across colour accessibility and compliancy. You can use a contrast checker. There's free ones online. This particular platform has it built in so when you choose colours and things like that, it will check for compliances. Fonts and legibility and font size, but not being able to make this larger is kind of ironic, I suppose. When you're adding images, creating alt texts for images so that, you know, there can be image readers and image-to-text translation. Are there ways of creating open and access low-tech options? So finding ways around technological or even cost barriers is really important. There are plenty more, but these are the hard accessibility things that I'm not going to get into the weeds on because those are clearly stated in a number of accessibility requirements both through most of the provinces have them. And most post-secondary institutions are in the middle of developing them. So recommend you look to your institution or your province for guidelines.

So I do think of accessibility is more than just tech. You know, It's really what I like to think about is, like, how it's the bigger gesture of allowing our learners to feel supported and trust the value that they're getting when they spend their time online. It's the combination of design and content development that allows us to guide them and for them to feel supported. And ultimately, you know, really, that's going to be the most accessible way that we can get students to be engaged and not to run up against challenges that act as barriers. It can be really intimidating, of course, to try to think about taking all of this stuff and putting it online, and if you just need to, you know, just throw it out into the internet. But I think that you can start if you start thinking about this complex system being this body and that we as educators are that muscle, that is where we get to make sure that we are developing the content, the way that we would hope the students can best engage with it. We have control over the translation of our information, the way, the tone, all of that kind of, all those nuances that we bring to the classroom can be translated to online as well.

And so ultimately, you know, I think about this is the kind of idea that ultimately accessibility is successability is where I like to think about it. You know, with all of these things combined, you know, you end up having a healthy skeleton, a healthy body for teaching and learning. So that is the core of my presentation, but I would really love to open up to any questions at this moment, if people have them, and, you know, get into if anyone has any experience with building a course online like this or has felt challenged or any of these things.

JACQUIE:

Thanks, Adam. So if you have any. We have a couple minutes before the next presentation, just a few minutes. So if anyone could put their hand up or put a question in the chat, then I can relay that. I loved your analogy. It was great.

ADAM:

Okay, great. Thanks. Cool, make it big. No, I see those.

MELANIE:

I have a question here. It's Melanie. I just wanted to say, thanks for the memorable analogy. I think that really helps illustrate the course design process for sure. Is this a new analogy and system that you've developed and are working with subject matter experts, or have you used it for a while and you're getting some feedback? I'm just curious kind of where in your process it is?

ADAM:

Yeah, I mean, I actually kind of just, put a name on it, I suppose for myself, just over the last year. I've been working with, you know, content educational media design for a little while. And it's been slowly and slowly becoming more and more online, right? And you know, as that started to happen, it was over the last year, I sort of there's been a flood at Selkirk of micro-credentialing and online course development. And it was a process that sort of started to emerge in my mind as I was working with content experts. And I kept saying I got known as the content monster because I would just be working and I would just say, Yeah, great. But, how does this connect? What's this part? We have this, and then we go to here. And I'm looking at it through the eyes of a learner. I sort of say, I don't know how we got from here to here. I don't know why. What's the connection between these two learning concepts? And so I would say, like, what's the connective tissue? And that kind of started to emerge. I started to think about more. I just sort of said that, and it was, it is connected. Then that's the voice of us as instructors being that tissue, like you know, that is those connective moments are really what we do as educators. If you think about all that space we fill in a classroom, it's filled with us, you know, talking to students, making analogies, making connections, guiding them from this thing to you know, we just do that naturally. And so I felt like that that content needed to be present in an online space for that content to be delivered in a way that and the response has been like I just went through the content and it just, it seemed it flowed really well. Everything comes back to flow. And if you can allow your learners to experience that flow of engagement, then they're not really thinking about being in that online space. They're coming into contact with that content, which is what we want, right?

JACQUIE: Thank you, Adam. a really descriptive presentation and response and a great analogy. I'm going to keep that in mind when I'm building my courses.

ADAM: Sure. Yeah, you bet.

JACQUIE:

There's a couple of questions for you in the chat that I'll leave you to address. We'll move on to our next presentation.

ADAM: Great. Thank you very much.