

Transcript Patrick Turner Interview (Part 1)

ROD BERGER: Patrick, it's nice to be speaking with you today. I've got to tell you that just in looking at your background and your role and contribution to education, I'm fascinated not only about your personal journey and story but also your role now working to support students.

If you don't mind giving a little bit of background and your own personal mission as to why you are in the role that you are in and what you are able to glean from that or take from that because I think our personal journeys impact, what we're doing as adults. I think what you're doing is fascinating.

PATRICK TURNAGE: Thank you. One of the things that really make me want to come to work every day and work with the student set I work with every day is having a grownup in that environment and being the same as my students.

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I recognize the value that being visually impaired allows me to bring to my job every day. It allows me to really understand what my students need and how I can help them because the technology skills that I work with them on are the same technology skills that I go home to and depend on in my daily life to accomplish everyday tasks.

So it's very important for them to develop these technology skills and it's very important that the only thing I do is support our technology teachers and our teachers, in general, to work with technology skills for our students.

I have two roles primarily and that's to support students directly but also to coordinate and support our staff's use of technology to work with the students.

RB: Where are we, Patrick, in the growth or the maturity of the industry when we speak specifically about assistive technology and where are there gaps that you would identify as areas to focus on for future growth?

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PT: The assistive technology industry is very strong. 0:02:09.8. In fact, because of the increased awareness and universal design and accessibility, we're seeing more assistive technologies actually built into the products that people use every day — products from Apple, operating systems from Google and Microsoft, IOS and Android and Windows. Basically, every modern platform have assistive technology tools built in so that people who don't need the more expensive commercial options have access where before they just wouldn't have had access.

So the assistive technology industry is very strong. There's a lot of need that are met there. Some of the gaps that I see a lot are in what people understand the role of assistive technology is, the training that's available, sometimes, for teachers who are responsible for helping

integrate assistive technologies into the classroom — so being able to provide the training and professional development for teachers.

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And, sometimes, the gaps are also in funding. Sometimes, students do require a more complex solution and it is pricey because the margin is so small that the prices are expensive. Sometimes, there can be an issue with getting the districts to fund the technology but we're in a really strong position because there's such an increased recognition of the role that assistive technology plays in creating an equal playing field for students with disabilities. And so, we're starting to see that from people who are not just the major — like Apple and Microsoft and Google who are actually designing operating systems but every company now has a statement about accessibility or they've done some testing to make sure that their products are meeting the guidelines for compatibility with the technology.

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This is all brand new in the last ten years that we're seeing this kind of convergence where mainstream companies now are starting to take an active role in making sure things are compatible, making sure that their products are useable by everyone.

It's not just in assistive technology. It's really a universal design. More people are starting to take an interest in universal design and what that actually means.

RB: I'm so glad you brought that up. I know that you're going to be speaking at FETC 2020 in Miami coming up in January. And if you and I were to walk the Exhibit Hall floor, speaking of universal design, or when we think of assistive technology, is the definition shifting and changing to be more inclusive or universal? Is it by accident or by design?

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I'll talk to EdTech companies who say, "My goodness, we never knew that there was an application for a technology with different populations of students. It's almost a happy accident." Where are we with intentionality if you and I are walking the Exhibit Hall floor at FETC?

PT: As I've said, I think that we are actually in a position where more EdTech companies are recognizing the value of serving a diverse population and inclusivity. So what you're seeing is that less and less are they saying, "Oh, I had no idea that a disabled student or a visually impaired student, for example, is using our technology." They are actively working with the operating system vendors and looking at the standards to make sure that they meet the standards. And so, what you're seeing is more companies doing that.

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To answer the second part of your question, I think universal design is just becoming the wave of the future and companies recognize, too, that educational institutions and school districts are starting to ask those questions and they're starting to have to provide proof that these products are accessible.

I think companies are just generally taking more notice of universal design. And the nice thing about universal design is we're not talking about serving people with disabilities. We're not talking about serving the student population. Universal design is about providing equal access to everyone.

And if you do that, then the side effect of that is that your product is going to be compatible with assistive technologies not because you specifically thought about that but because you've looked at universal design and you, as the manufacturer of the product, the EdTech company, you want your product to be used by the wide as possible audience so you're going to do everything that you can to make sure that that product is inclusive and built on the principles of universal design.

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RB: Companies that are starting to venture into assistive technology with the goal of creating products that are baked in or foundational in universal design, what do they need to know when it comes to requirements?

I think one of the things that makes vendors a bit nervous is the data component and also the supportive piece regarding professional development and training so that educators are brought up to speed on how to fully use the application that they are providing.

What should they know when it comes to data requirements when we think about populations that you are working with quite closely?

PT: The nice thing about the companies that are doing development is that if they follow the standards related to universal design principles and if they look at the specific standards for compatibility with assistive technology such as Fiber 8 or WCAG, if they look at those standards and they build their product to those standards, then they are going to work with assistive technology.

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Now, what I think they need to know is that it's always critical to do user-focused testing and to make sure that your test group — not just with disabilities — represents the full spectrum of your audience.

So make sure that you do have people using assistive technologies testing out your product. We see this a lot with some of the operating system vendors. Having the public beta inside their program, for example, for Microsoft — all of these pathways to beta testing where the public provides that feedback but definitely the user-focused testing to make sure that, “Yes, we looked at the accessibility checker. We followed all the standards. We think we know what we're doing. We think we've designed a product that is compatible and meets all these standards and principles of universal design.