Transcript – Mr. Bart Everson:

Advice on the importance of usability and accessibility (part 1)

Hi, I'm Bart Everson. Do you notice anything odd about my appearance? Don't worry -- I'll explain in a bit. I'm super excited to talk to you about usability and accessibility. This is undoubtedly the most important module in the course, which is why we saved it for last and put me in charge.

I am a professional media artist, and I've been working in CAT+FD for over twenty years. You're in good hands with me. I promise to be gentle.

Usability is not typically a consideration in traditional face-to-face teaching, but web and software developers have been contending with these issues for decades. For example: navigation. Especially in the early years, the typical experience for the typical user on the World Wide Web was that they were lost. Simply finding one's way around has gotten easier. We've gotten better at building websites that facilitate effective navigation. It doesn't happen by accident. It happens by design.

Now that we are teaching online, it's a concern for us too. The experience for the user – in this case, the student -- is largely shaped by the design choices we make as teachers. Good design choices can facilitate a good experience, meaning that the student is able to find the information they need, learn what they need to learn, and demonstrate that to you; not-so-good design choices may lead to difficulties and frustrations for everyone involved.

We want people to be able to use what we're building, so we call this usability, and there are four major principles to consider: accessibility (which is something you may already be familiar with from traditional face-to-face instruction), visual clarity, readability, and consistency (which includes findability -- yes, that's a neologism, don't worry, I'll come back to all this).

So let's start with accessibility. It's important to remember that we all experience the world differently. Did you notice that I'm in black and white? I did that to highlight the point. People with certain vision impairments see the world differently. Depending on your vision, you may not have noticed anything unusual about the color scheme of this video. Some are not able to see at all. No matter the case, we want our students to be able to access our content and learn. With a little bit of understanding and planning, we can accomplish this.

For our purposes, there are four major categories of disability that we should keep in mind when designing our course: visual, hearing, cognitive, and motor disabilities.

Now, let's consider specific actions you should take. First of all, you should have a statement in your syllabus that indicates your policy regarding students with disabilities, including any specific considerations unique to your course, and obviously aligned with university policy.

Furthermore, there are several things you can should do while building your course to enhance accessibility. These practice help with screen readers and the like. Use the semantic styles which are built into the HTML editor. In other words, don't just make a heading big and bold -- use the built-in styles to designate a first-level heading, a second-level subheading, and so forth.

When you make links, use text that is meaningful and concise. Never write "click here." Instead, write something like "The National Institutes of Health provide a useful summary," and make that text the link. Don't expose the bare URL unless it is quite short.

When using an image, Brightspace should prompt you to provide alternative text. You should describe the image as briefly as possible, or designate it as purely decorative.

When making a video, be sure to provide captions. Automatic captioning is provided by some video hosting services, such as YouTube, however you'll want to check and correct those captions for accuracy. If you write a script, like I did for this video, you can make that text available to your students or perhaps even feed it into the video captions.