# The Accessible Learning Experience S.02, Ep.01: It’s Not Cheating! Myth Busting with Kelli Suding

Luis Perez: Welcome to the Accessible Learning Experience where we help you turn learning barriers into learning opportunities. We are so excited to bring you season two of our podcast with this episode, featuring a conversation between our AEM center technical assistant specialist, Michelle Soriano, and Kelli Suding from the PATINS Project in Indiana. As you listen to this episode, you'll be energized by Kelli's passion and enthusiasm for ensuring all students have access to the supports they need to be successful with learning. And you'll walk away with a long list of ideas and practical tips for how you can start the year strong when it comes to accessibility and inclusion.

Before I turn it over to Michelle and Kelli, if you're getting value out of this podcast, please share it with others and let us know by providing a rating and commenting wherever you get your podcasts.

Without further delay, here's Michelle.

Michelle Soriano: Hi, Kelli. Thank you so much for joining us today. It's always so nice to have conversations with you just so I can learn some really great tips.

So let's get started. Can you introduce yourself, and tell us, what is your accessibility story?

Kelli Suding: Hey, Michelle. Thank you so much for having me. I'm so thrilled to be a part of this kickoff for this new school year. So yeah, I'm Kelli Suding, and I am a licensed teacher here in Indiana, but I work for the PATINS Project here in Indiana. So we are the nonprofit state education agency accountable to the Department of Education and the Department of Administration. And we support all public pre-K through 12 Indiana schools. So it's all supports around universal design for learning, accessible education materials, and assistive technology.

So for PATINS, I specialize in autism, specific learning disabilities, Google Chrome accessibility, and then the integration of accessible educational materials and assistive technology and then, of course, right alongside PATINS, universal design for learning.

So I would say my accessibility story, my journey began... I actually went to school to be a school counselor, and then I took a job as a paraprofessional and I quickly realized, like, that was my place. I wanted to be a part of that change because I also knew that what I was going to be learning as a school counselor, you're doing that as an educator anyway, right? So I noticed that so much time was spent with students just waiting around for adult to help them move forward to the next task or just waiting for me to read everything for them. And then I realized that students needed more. They wanted more. But at that time I really wasn't sure what that looked like.

But I did know, I worked with a student who loved social studies. She was on the autism spectrum, and she was pulled from the social studies class because they were learning states and it was felt that she wouldn't pick up those concepts, like that wouldn't be relevant to her, so then she could be working on other essential skills, but all it took to learn those states was some chalk and drawing the states on the sidewalk and then jumping back and forth to the states, making up songs and dances, and she picked that up really quickly. And she learned all of them. And she was from a military family who moved a lot, so that was really meaningful and relevant to her and rightfully so.

And so it didn't feel right to me at the time, like what's happening that my student who loved math, all the math materials were being modified because they felt like she wouldn't be able to understand the concepts of division or maybe she didn't need that. And all that took was knowing her well enough that she loved Michael Jackson and we did the moon walk. We did all kinds of things and she picked up the concept of just by you talking about Michael Jackson, implementing ways like the numbers were dancing off the division bracket. And that was a lot of fun.

But I do realize that we all can't sing and dance at every lesson, but what I did discover during that time that if we just embedded those interests in their learning, they definitely would pick that up with adding that multi-sensory approach and having content rich instruction. They're learning new words and experiences as they should, right? And they just needed it represented in multiple ways. And at that time, I did not know that's universal design for learning, right? Something that, Michelle, I know you're super passionate about and just right alongside me, right?

And then just, so, lastly, the assistive technology part, which really is my wheelhouse with working with the PATINS Project. I remember this day like it was yesterday, and it definitely planted the seed for me to be more an intensive advocate for equitable education is when an educator told me a student should not use text-to-speech during the school year because they were not allowable accommodations on state testing. I knew that did not feel right at all.

So knowing that, that began my journey, sprouted that seed, like we can be the change along that. So because I'm working with my amazing colleagues, specialists at the PATINS Project and working along all the Indiana educators, learning from them every day, educators from all over the country in our field. Right now, I'm being interviewed by you, Michelle, and CAST and the AEM Center, and that makes me so excited. And I'm so grateful because this journey is ongoing as an expert learner, as we all are, and it takes a village, and I truly believe that we're better together, so thanks again for having me.

Michelle Soriano: Oh, I love it. So what I heard was a lot of relevant and really, that mindset of what's required for some could be beneficial for all.

So that takes me to this next question. From your work with the many students that you've worked with over the years, is there a story that sticks out as having the greatest influence on your work? And if so, what did you learn and what would you share with other teachers that might really be looking forward to beginning their journey strong and focusing on creating more inclusive environments?

Kelli Suding: Gosh, I want to thank you for asking me this question because this is one of my favorite student stories that impacted my own learning and is why I can support other educators. And this was... and I always share the story about my student who loves spaghetti. So when I say, “love spaghetti”, he loves spaghetti for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, spaghetti on his ice cream, drawing spaghetti, doodling spaghetti, talking about spaghetti. That was a big part of who he was.

And so he was in junior high school. He had a learning disability. And so at this junior high school, they would have what's called student of the month. So when you're student of the month, your picture gets hung up in the hallway and then it lists all of these things about the student. So then, other students can look and say, "Oh, we've got some things in common," okay? So this was a big part because I'm just going to call him Johnny. Johnny could really use some friends, and this is something that we're working on to ensure just gaining like some social skills and working with friends. So spaghetti, okay? Do not forget spaghetti.

So I went into the school and there's Johnny's beautiful face hanging up in the hallway and it said his name and then it said his favorite food and it said "fries." He listed, Michelle, his favorite food as fries as in French fries, F-R-I-E-S, instead of spaghetti. So quickly, I went and found Johnny and I said, "Hey Johnny, congratulations. This is amazing. You wrote fries as your favorite food, but I know you love spaghetti. Like, what happened?" And he said, "I couldn't spell it," okay?

So this is where Johnny was. This is what our students do. They try to fit into the curriculum. They try to fit in the atmosphere, the culture that we're handing them, instead of us coming to them, sometimes. He was a student who needed to use speech-to-text, text-to-speech, word prediction. It was handed to him this piece of paper. He didn't understand why he was filling this out. It was just something, another thing he had to do, so it was not meaningful or relevant to him. So this is what he did.

Now, if he had the accommodation, he could have just said, "Spaghetti," right? He could have just said it with his voice. So the paper was not accessible for him, okay, because he was unable to really decode the text that was on there.

So with all of that said, to teachers, our instruction, everything we do is meaningful and relevant for our students. And that can just be having students' voice, being student-centered, students being able to create their own goals. That's huge. We can't underestimate that. And then students even attending and running their own IEP meetings and then ask students how they feel they learn best, and then explore those ways and help implement those ways. But then, even further, is that there's so much great assistive technology out there, but then just stepping back and ensuring that what you are creating for your students is accessible. Being mindful, "Can all of my students interact with this content?"

Michelle Soriano: I love that. It just makes me think about how such small changes and providing access for students make **huge** impacts. What a great story.

You know, we're starting back to school, and we know that teachers are really wanting to make sure that they're designing things for all their kiddos. So for those teachers who are starting the school year strong, when it comes to accessibility, what would be some tips for them?

Kelli Suding: I think right out the gate is if you have not immersed yourself in the principles of universal design for learning, friends, start there. This is definitely going to help broaden your lens on how you are engaging your students, representing your instruction and how students can share their knowledge, express what they know. And it's probably things... the principles is instead of it not feeling like it's another thing, you're probably already doing parts of universal design for learning, but really getting to know the principles and the checkpoints can really hone that skill in to make that even more accessible for your students.

And then I would say creating all of your education materials in accessible formats to meet all of your students. We have to think about learner variability, right, Michelle? So does your students use text-to-speech? Do they need audio formats because inaccessible materials can be the definite barrier to increasing the knowledge if a student can't access in the way that works best for them.

And if you're not sure how to do that, ask. Don't be afraid to ask. Seek out professional development. I am highly active on Twitter, and I cannot remember who tweeted this. I should probably find it to give them credit, but they tweeted out that, "Accessibility isn't extra steps. It's the steps you missed," okay? So it's just not another thing. It should just be the thing.

And then I would say, probably, just the three to kick us off, so we're not completely overwhelmed in sustaining all of those with UDL and making sure we have accessible instruction is the SETT Framework by our dear friend and colleague in the field, Joy Zabala. So the SETT Framework is an acronym, of course. We love acronyms in education. So SETT being, the S being "student," the E being "environment," and that's just not the physical environment. That could be who the student interacts with during the day. The "task" and then the "tool."

So the SETT Framework will help support the student and you as an educator, trying to figure out what the best support for that student to get to the task. And you're going to notice the tool is listed last, but that student definitely kind of bounces to the E, the T and the T at all times, so the SETT Framework, for sure.

Michelle Soriano: Great information.

So we know we've talked a little bit about the materials for accessibility, but now~~,~~ let's talk about that technology piece because we know that there's a synergy between them. And we know that you're well versed in the use of assistive technology to support learning. What would be some favorite tools you would invite teachers to try out this year, if they want to have the greatest **impact** on learning?

Kelli Suding: Okay, you ask that just perfectly, "your favorite tools." We get asked when you're in the field, "What's your favorite tool?" and I always stop back and say, "Well, what's the goal?" Just stepping back, what's the goal, and then thinking about going back to the SETT Framework, so the goal being first.

And then one size does not fit all. We have to make sure it's an appropriate accommodation for accessing that task. Again, S-E-T-T, SETT Framework. And then just a tip is when we're introducing new tools, just that all… these are skills that need to be taught, okay? So instead of saying, "Go write with your voice" and a student's never done that, a student's going to get highly frustrated because, you know, your device types way slower than we talk.

So just starting off with preferred activities anytime we're introducing a new tool and then let them get that play out. Let them pick the voice that they think's hilarious. Let them have it at a high rate of speed when they're using text-to-speech. You can kind of play around with those settings because students need to get that out, even in high school.

High schoolers need to do the same thing. High schoolers do that all of the time. The first thing they always do is find music lyrics and make the voice, like, sing them as best as they can, and they laugh hysterically. But I know that. That just needs to happen. So because then you're going to get burnout. Again, on Twitter, someone I think, was reading this book on passion. And again, I can't remember who it was, but they took a screenshot of this book and the line said, "Enthusiasm is common and endurance is rare." And I think if we can kind of shift that to where endurance is not rare when it comes to new tools because we've taken that time to teach those skills and keep students doing it. And when I say "doing it," consistently, not just some of the time, but all of the time in all subjects that they need.

So the tools I would say... working for PATINS, I think one of my proudest... I would say collectively as a team, one of our proudest moments, as far as our work goes, is that we have teams apply for a grant. It's called AEMing for Achievement Grant. So what happens is they get intensive support by one of us specialists and we help create policies and procedures in order to that students are getting their materials in a timely manner. So this is really important work. It starts there. Because then if that team gets abducted by aliens, anyone who comes in is still going to know how to get Braille materials, large print~~,~~ if they need it, audio, digital, whatever's needed. So that's really, really important. But part of also that grant is that this is the tool that I'm going to refer to is called uPAR. So that is Universal Protocol for Accommodations in Reading. It's not another test. So essentially, what happens is the student reads a passage independently, so they're decoding. They read a passage. Then they answer some questions~~,~~ and it moves on to a human-sounding voice. That reads the passage and then the student answers some questions. And then it goes to a text reader, more robotic voice, and then the student answers some questions. And then right away, you get this data that shows which accommodation when they are the most proficient in comprehension. So you may find out a student will be decoding, maybe they're a junior in high school decoding at a second grade. Their beginning reading level's second grade, but with a text-to-speech, they're comprehending at grade level. So it shows you that accommodations because it's not always obvious and it's definitely a tool that can be helpful.

And then moving on from that to a uPAR is the accessibility of all the devices. Those are universally designed in the hands of your students, the hands of the students' devices that they may have at school. And it's like a holiday season when I get into those accessibility settings, especially when they send an update saying, "Oh my gosh, live captions are coming to the iOS." I'm like, "Yes." So don't underestimate those. Again, I spoke earlier about how there's all of these cool tools and we might get overwhelmed, but the accessibility settings start there. What does the student need? Always just start there because that's going to be easily accessible for student.

And then, I'll have to share these in some show notes, Michelle, because there's so many, like, things. Like, I work with students using text-to-speech all of the time, speech-to-text, word prediction, text levelers. Don't underestimate the power of text levelers and text summarizers to just scaffold understanding of what key points are. And that's also going to support their comprehension and their literacy skills.

And then the pre-writing process. If we're using speech-to-text for our writing, the pre-writing process should be just as accessible, if a student can't read their own handwriting, right?

So accessible graphic organizers, and then the mic. If you have a classroom sound system in your classroom, I hear so often, "I don't need that. I have a teacher voice." It's not about your teacher voice, friends. It's about having an equitable hearing experience for the whole class. So specifically, I'll share... maybe we can collaborate and share some things and put maybe some specific ones in the show notes, but I would really start with all of those.

Michelle Soriano: We’re getting all these great tools and all this great information so that we can go and make changes that are going to benefit all of our kiddos. So, awesome. Awesome sauce!

Okay, now, one of the great things about being an educator is that we love myth busters. And I'm going to ask you about a myth that is out and about in the world and we want you to myth-bust it. So I know you've presented on this idea that using assistive technology and AEM are not, quote unquote, cheating. What would be your top support reasons that you could provide to back up your answer that those are not cheating?

Kelli Suding: Okay, myth busters. I think that's a future training title right there. I loved everything about that. So let's do some myth busting.

So you're asking me that, knowing that I've got a whole soapbox conversation about that. So I'm just gonna to tone it down a little bit, knowing that anyone is welcome to reach out to me and we'll have more conversations about it. So when we think about students coming in or to our classroom, we can be super accommodating when a student comes in with a wheelchair. We automatically stand up or whatever we need and we're moving furniture around the classroom. If we have a student comes in with blindness or low vision, we're very accommodating, it's not even questioned. We make sure maybe the student needs audio and/or Braille or large print. Whatever that student needs is not even questioned, right? If we have a student deaf and hard hearing, we're not just using our teacher voice anymore. We're using that mic all of a sudden, and now we're turning our captions on. It's not even questioned. But just because we cannot see the disability doesn't make it less crucial to implement inclusive practices with assistive technology, accessibility. So just knowing that lack of knowledge does not mean lack of intelligence, okay. As is dyslexia is not indicative of one's intelligence. And I have worked with so many students who feel inferior to their peers and they feel like they're not smart. And it comes down to, their materials and instruction have not been accessible to them their whole school career up until the time that we are able to have conversations with them and work with their teachers. But that's on us, okay? We have the power to change that, flip that mindset and the narrative that those students have made for themselves by making things accessible, meeting their needs, thinking of learner variability. How can students express what they know? How can I show them what they know? How can they access the information?

So having high expectations for our students is offering ways to access information so they can gainthatknowledge. Gainthatknowledge. That can be a game-changer. And we have to think that... I think the national research shows that 74% of children who are poor readers in the third grade remain poor readers in the ninth grade, Michelle, okay? And then they're four times less likely to graduate by age 19 than a child who **does** read proficiently by that time. This makes me super sad. And it makes a lot, all of us educators, super sad. How can we support that with the appropriate accommodations? Appropriate accommodations.

And then, if you've not... I have tons of teachers print this out and put it in their teacher lounge or secret QR codes where educators can scan the QR code and up pops the definition of literacy, according to the International Literacy Association, and I'm going to read this. So the definition is, "Literacy is the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, compute, and communicate using visual, audible, and digital materials across disciplines in any context." It does not just say visual. Audible and digital, my friends. We have to think about our readers who are visual readers, auditory readers, tactile readers, maybe all three, maybe just one, maybe just two. It doesn't matter, however they need to access the text, if we're making our instruction accessible, then they'll be able to gain that knowledge. And so decoding the content, interacting, and responding are all different skill sets. So what I mean by that is we could have that junior in high school who's beginning reading level, their independent reading level could be at fourth grade, but their comprehension level is at grade level or above. That student should have access to grade level materials. This is not a student who goes to the library and has to pick fourth grade reading material. That's just not appropriate for that student.

And so when it comes to it’s cheating, some will hear, "Well, they don't need to use the assistive technology accommodations in math because we're just working with numbers." But let me just say that every single test and assessment that you are giving your students, there's two things being tested first before they even get to the content. So let's talk about math, that math test.

First is a test of engagement or accessibility. Can my student interact with the paper and pencil for this test? Is this the only way I'm giving it to them? And then the second, it's a test of reading. So every single test and assessment we give our students is a test of reading. And if they cannot decode the directions to the math test, they're never gonna be able to show you what they know on the math.

So assistive technology and accommodations at all times, everywhere, in all subjects. And then just ask yourself, "What am I testing? What am I measuring? And is this creating an equitable opportunity for this student?" Yes. We cannot fix a student who comes in with dyslexia or specific learning disability, but we can support those students by integrating those characteristics of dyslexia into their daily life and using their strengths to support their weaknesses. And oftentimes, that **is** with assistive technology. And assistive technology, I think some educators are fearful that it's replacing teaching, but assistive technology is parallel with teaching. It's not replacing. It's supporting those students from getting further behind when they are working on those independent tasks.

Michelle Soriano: Wow! That's amazing. So, what I took from that is making sure that we understand that there's learner variability, everybody learning differently. We know that there are preferences and requirements. We need to provide that access! We need to give them access so that they can progress and that it's not cheating! Myth busted right there.

One more question. I promise this is the last one, although we could go on all day. Kelli, how can people stay in touch? Where can they find you?

Kelli Suding: Okay. So like I mentioned earlier, I'm highly active on Twitter for professionals, so I tweet out a lot of things that I learned, tried, fail, all of that. I have different trainings that we have, so you can find me on Twitter @KSuding. That's @KSuding. More importantly, follow PATINS Project. You can find PATINS Project on Twitter, Facebook. Our webpage is patinsproject.org. That's patinsproject.org and look up all of my colleagues. They have tons of resources and materials out there. And like, we are a team that definitely bounce off ideas together, so you can find me there. You can find me on LinkedIn as well. And I am happy for anyone to reach out to me anytime.

Michelle Soriano: Well, I definitely have written that down so that I can reach out to you continuously. It's always a pleasure to learn with you, to learn from you, and we can't wait to hear more. Thanks so much, Kelli, for being here and joining us today.

Kelli Suding: Michelle, thank you so much, and I appreciate all of your work that you do with all of the states.

Luis Perez: Thanks for tuning in to this episode of the Accessible Learning Experience, brought to you by the National Center on Accessible Educational Materials at CAST. You can find us on the web at aem.cast.org. There, you'll find show notes with links to all of the resources mentioned on each episode. Thanks again for listening and remember, accessibility is everyone's responsibility.

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