ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION

QUALITY MATTERS
QM | **ReadSpeaker** 🔊
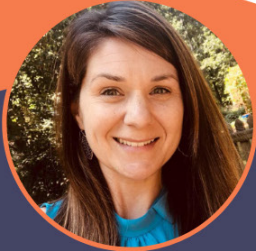
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**ADDRESSING ACCESSIBILITY IN COURSE DESIGN AND
PRACTICE WITH QM AND READSPEAKER TTS**

Addressing Accessibility in Course Design and Practice

By Keri Roberts

> *Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a longstanding framework for proactively designing accessible instructional materials across all learning environments. UDL, also known as design for all or inclusive design, consists of three guiding principles: (1) multiple means of presentation, (2) action and expression, and (3) representation (CAST, n.d.). © 2021 Quality Matters Course Design for Digital Accessibility: Best Practices and Tools Designing Online Courses for Accessibility*

Accessibility isn't just about meeting the needs of those with a disability, it's also about meeting the needs of all learners. Learning is personal to every student and the definition of student has changed over the years. Whether you work within the K12 sector, universities, colleges or even professional education, having your courses be accessible for everyone to help them learn best, will help your students learn better, make your institution more efficient and allow your organization to continue to meet quality standards of learning.

Recently Kathy Wood, the Education Partner Manager at ReadSpeaker hosted a webinar with Jim Snyder Ed.D., Director of Community Engagement and Marketing at Quality Matters and chatted with Beatriz Flores-Martinez, M.S., eLearning & Instructional Design Specialist at the eLearning & Instructional Innovation Center at [Laredo College](#) and Candice McPherson, Director of Design and Development at [Virtual Arkansas](#), about how making courses more accessible worked for their institutions, why it matters to them and why the partnership between Quality Matters (QM) and ReadSpeaker is imperative to creating the best learning experience for students.

"[For us at QM, we find that ReadSpeaker] helps participants who have disabilities, but it's also a good tool for all participants. It's helpful to blind and low vision participants because it reads text to them. Not all screen readers work in every [LMS](#) and/or browser, so having this option in QM's workshops and courses is helpful for those who need it. For dyslexic participants they can have the text read aloud to them. All participants can benefit as it provides content in both audio and visual formats giving them multiple options.

QM has eight General Standards and we feel that Readspeaker helps to address accessibility in QM's workshops and courses because its products read text aloud, highlights text as it reads (allows users with cognitive issues to focus on one line of text), enlarges text for users with limited vision, text translation helps international users who are multilingual, text mode helps remove everything but the text and allows the user to select their font and font size, and the toolbar is keyboard accessible. But it's not just for accessibility. The dictionary feature also helps anyone that needs to have a term explained to them," said Snyder on the value they've seen working with ReadSpeaker.

"For us at ReadSpeaker, we realize that you cannot provide true accessibility if you don't first have well-thought-out and well-designed courses which is one of the core principles of Quality Matters.

Our collaboration with their organization helps us promote UDL which promotes multi-modes of presentation where voice can play a key role," Wood commented on ReadSpeaker's collaboration with Quality Matters.

Strategic Planning for Education Course Design with Quality in Mind

In 2018, Laredo College came up with a strategic plan, which was to be learner-centered, life-changing, and a leadership catalyst. "[Within this plan,] our team was tasked to look for accessibility tools that would integrate into our LMS, which is Canvas. [The goal of the] tool was to give them that capability to learn online," said Flores-Martinez.

"In 2018, Quality Matters included accessibility as an essential standard, 8.3, and so this one essential standard, if it is not met, the course does not make it, so it's a make or break. And it's only fair to our students [to get it right]. Every student deserves the capability to be able to learn and become independent as an online learner.

Our interest was for our online learners, but in reality, [we chose to use] ReadSpeaker for all learners. Even our professional staff love using ReadSpeaker. We hear from our counselors, who are our number one advocates of special services, they're the ones that are always telling our students, 'You've got to use ReadSpeaker,'" Flores-Martinez continued. "[For us at Virtual Arkansas] we were actively working on improving course quality, and having those conversations with our teachers, and we wanted a systematic approach. QM had a lot of that process and work already done and have been a huge ally from a design standpoint [for us].

Not too long after that, we started using ReadSpeaker as well, and prior to Canvas, we were on [Blackboard](#) and [Moodle](#), self-hosted Moodle. We had courses in both places.

ReadSpeaker worked pretty seamlessly across both of those, and then when we moved our content over to Canvas, it continued to work fine [as well so] that wasn't a big shift for us," added McPherson.

The Positive Effects of [Bimodal Learning](#)

"[ReadSpeaker] has really played a huge role in our accessibility piece, in just providing that option for students. Whether they have formal documentation or not, there are so many K-12 students out there that benefit from this. We have situations where students are below grade level in their reading abilities, and they can read, but they get into that physics class and it's not as straightforward if they have a reading deficit. So, being able to play [the reading content] aloud and listen to the words is incredibly helpful," said McPherson.

Having a bimodal way of learning helps students learn to read and become a more effective student. "When you think about audio helping with [reading], you also have to think about [those who have] English as a second language. You've got to think about your struggling readers.

When you're talking about being in a virtual environment, sometimes it's very hard to have that extra connection to help those students, as you would if they were sitting right beside you [which is why audio is crucial to helping all students learn better]," said Wood.

"[We have found that] every single stakeholder benefits from using Quality Matters and ReadSpeaker," commented McPherson. "I would say first and foremost, it's the students, because they're the ones that need to learn and access the content well, but it benefits our teachers. Through Quality Matters, [it's a] better program overall, our teachers have given us lots of feedback, and they regularly use QM to have conversations with us about things they want to do to improve their course. One teacher shared with me that it really helped them understand accessibility and resolve those issues throughout their course content.

And I would say that when students and teachers, when those two stakeholders are having a good experience, it benefits the parents and the administrators. That's what everybody wants. And so, I really feel like Quality Matters helps us give a better experience to students, and then of course, ReadSpeaker really meets some of those complex needs those students have.

Looking for a way to make your online courses more accessible? Find out [how ReadSpeaker can help your institution meet quality standards.](#)

Almost every year, we have scenarios where we have a transfer student who does not speak English. There is not an ESL plan in place yet although they're working on it. But [instead, almost] immediately, that teacher can show that student how to use the language tools in ReadSpeaker, and they can start accessing that material, and our teachers love it for that.

Another example, just last week, a physical science student enrolled who had dyslexia, and her facilitator was able to immediately show her how to use those online text readings. And so, [ReadSpeaker is] a smooth and helpful tool for all of our stakeholders," commented McPherson.

Providing Student Empowerment

Quality Matters empowers teachers and other stakeholders to provide engaging and accessible content, and ReadSpeaker is empowering those students with a tool that allows them to be successful in a style of learning that works for them and meets the Quality Matters Standards.

Flores-Martinez added, "The students gain independence, enrichment, and tools, that [allows them to] succeed in the classroom. With the pandemic, these tools came into play and were even more effective, because our students were no longer able to come to campus and [solely] depended on these tools.

Another thing that's important to note is how each of us learns differently and the feeling students get when they can learn how they learn best. "Taking notes is something very intimate to one. That's how we are able to learn. And so, we are appreciative to our readers that come to campus and read to our students, that help take notes in the classroom, but we focus on online learning, and so having the capability for our students to have that option to stay at home, these tools can build that enrichment," said Flores-Martinez.

"This isn't just a checkbox to us," continued Beatriz. "Our institution focuses on learner success, but we also focus on how our students are gaining that learner success. So, we want to enrich our students. We want them to become independent. We want them to be successful.

And so, that's what we do here at Laredo College. We want them to have a life-changing experience, a learning experience, and so Read-Speaker gives that independence to all learners, and particularly our online learners. So now everybody benefits. Our students benefit. Our faculty benefits. Even our professional staff here on campus who use [Canvas](#)."

Wood added, "We're not just talking about what we used to consider the traditional student [anymore], those ages 18-22. My sister has gone back to nursing school, and she is overwhelmed with all the reading. So I introduced her to ReadSpeaker and she can now multitask while listening to [her reading] on her phone while she's doing something else. So, if she's got to take her daughter to dance, she can sit in the van and just listen and absorb in a different way, to break up the screen fatigue or monotony of being focused on the screen all day."

Implementation of ReadSpeaker

When it comes to implementation and maintenance of ReadSpeaker, it's quite simple. "Implementation is just about training [our students and staff]. In our orientation videos and materials for students, we have a section on ReadSpeaker, where they practice with it," said McPherson.

"In terms of impacting maintenance and revision of an online course, technology-wise, it's seamless. There's not much of an impact at all. But design-wise, it's really helpful to our instructors. We created a simulation for them where they had to use ReadSpeaker. We took a designed page of instructional text.

It's on a white background. We turned the text white so that they couldn't see it, and we required them to use ReadSpeaker to interpret the page and reflect on their experience. And that really changed the way they chose to design their pages. So, I would say it had a very positive influence on the instructors," McPherson added.

When it comes to something like Immersive Reader in Canvas, that is only available in specific places. It is not throughout the entire platform. ReadSpeaker will read the entire platform, and also provides the usage data so that you can see what you are looking at.

"As far as technology, we do have other technology tools that we've used, but ReadSpeaker has been the one that we've kept. ReadSpeaker and Laredo College made that collaboration. We've stuck together, because it really does work here at our institution," said Flores-Martinez.

"Not to mention, recently ReadSpeaker in [2021, won the Speech Industry Awards](), so that's something that we can tell our students. We are not just offering you any product. We're offering you the best product in the industry. And so, what differentiates ReadSpeaker for us is that these tools give us the capability to provide our students the capability to learn.

[And when it comes to Quality Matters], we've only used Quality Matters for our institution for online certification, but what we like about Quality Matters is that it [reminds us that], these are the best practices to have in mind when designing our courses. We know that Quality Matters works, and it's working here at our institution. It's been working and we've gone through it as a team, through professional development, we've tested out different course designs over the years, and so the more that we've used Quality Matters, it really does improve our courses," Flores-Martinez added.

"We're very selective about the vendors we get, because we have to be, financially. I mean, a lot of people are in that boat, but a primary goal we have is to support equity in Arkansas among students, and so when we purchase something, we want to keep our program affordable, so we want to make sure that return on investment is worth it for students. And we really like to partner with people who demonstrate that students come first, and I can say for both QM and ReadSpeaker, we get that sense. When we interact with them, when we need support, when we need help, and just in their innovation itself. It's like they're constantly evolving to make sure the student's have the type of experience they need to have, and that's huge for us.," commented McPherson.

Adding in, Flores-Martinez said, "Online learning and [hybrid learning] is here to stay, and if anything, it's a growing industry. It's growing here at Laredo College. Even when our students have had the option to come back to face-to-face learning, they keep selecting online learning."

Want to learn more about how to add ReadSpeaker to your online courses? Contact us at education@readspeaker.com.

Watch the full webinar [here](#).

Quality Matters is a global organization leading quality assurance in online and innovative digital teaching and learning environments. It provides a scalable quality assurance system for online and blended learning used within and across organizations. When you see the QM certification marks on courses or programs, it means they've met QM course design standards or QM program review criteria in a rigorous review process. There are over 1,500 institutional members in over 30 countries with most of them in the US and some in Canada and Puerto Rico as well. They're used by higher ed, K-12 and other organizations offering continuing educational and professional development as it's a scalable process led by credentialed reviewers based on feedback and continuous improvement which allows QM-certified courses to be recognized as quality courses at the international level.

ReadSpeaker is a global independent market leader that provides text to speech solutions that also provides accessibility tools with certified LMS integrations in the education space offering a large variety of human-like voices in varying languages and accents. ReadSpeaker's tools allow for things like enlarged text, page maps, dictionary and translate functions and make it as easy as clicking a listen button. ReadSpeaker is used by over 1,500 educational institutions globally and with an internal linguistics team that prioritizes customization, including things like acronyms and math and science terminology to create the experience a student needs.

Contact the ReadSpeaker team today to discuss how our education products can enhance your students' learning experience and learn more at
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