



Putting King's Online podcast

Episode 8: The e-Learning assistant, as told by Ale and Bobbie

Putting King's Online, a podcast exploring the process of designing online learning courses from the team which creates them.

I'm your host Rachele Wall and in each episode of Putting King's Online, I'll be talking to my colleagues about their roles here at King's College London, within the Online and Professional Executive Education team. We'll be delving into the processes of creating online courses. From ideation to delivery, inclusive design, accessibility and where we stand in the wider online learning community.

Rachele

Joining me today in this episode, is a deep dive into the role of the e-Learning Assistant and joining me in this recording is Ale and Bobbie. Welcome to the podcast.

Bobbie

Hello [OVERLAPPING]

Ale

Thank you for having us.

Rachele

Cool. Okey-dokey. So, if we can start by just diving into what the ELA role is in a nutshell, what is an e-Learning Assistant? What do you guys do? How does that fit into the wider King's Online / OPEE remit?

Ale

Well, for me being an ELA, my job basically for me is like reading a magazine written by experts in the field, maybe of science, international affairs, marketing, cybersecurity, and so on, so forth. I would say that every day is very different and exciting. What do you think Bobbie?

Bobbie

Yeah, I agree. We're exposed to this interesting content every day which ordinarily you wouldn't get access to. It's fascinating to see the current academic content being produced by the uni.

As an ELA, we really do get to learn so much, granted that some of the content is very complex and not in our personal past academic areas, but it's still exciting that we get to view it.

We often refer to ourselves as the eyes of the student because we almost act as the first student to view the content. Just if that student was highly particular and familiar with the online learning design procedures, we follow at King's Online.

Rachele

Yeah, I think that's a really good point to make about the fact that you are almost the first student point of contact because, I mean when I started at King's Online, I started as an e-Learning assistant as well, I do you have a little sense of what you guys do on a day-to-day basis. Although, I feel, since we have boosted what we're doing in terms of the design system and the complexity of the work we do, I think it's really taken this role to the next level.

What general responsibilities do you guys do when you say that you're the eyes of the student, what does that actually mean in terms of what systems you're using, and how that role fits into the other roles within the wider team?

Bobbie

We check for a whole host of things really from issues such as grammar and spelling, which is small, I guess if you think that stuff isn't important but to us, it's really important. To more specialised elements, such as upholding consistency in UX design, transcripts, and just overall making sure that the end product is of the highest possible standards.

Ale

Yeah, I totally agree with what Bobbie says. We check all of this. We also have a look at the general layout. Make sure it looks the way it's supposed to look so that nothing is confusing or maybe repeated. We really play as the learner, as the final consumer, let's say, of the course, of the product, and we assess in a way, who would like it? Is it functional? Is it easy to understand? Is it user-friendly? I really play that part as I was the student really studying that course and wanted to be fully engaged in this course to get the most out of it.

Rachele

Yeah, you're really wearing a lot of hats, really you're having to check content but from so many different viewpoints. I think Ale what you said earlier is really interesting about the fact that you likened it to this notion of reading a magazine and having that final bird's eye view over what the student is going to see at the end.

A lot of the ELA responsibilities are really similar to that of, let's say, a copy editor in other industries. I just wondered what makes this role different in higher education and the types of skills you would need to do something like that in higher education and an online learning environment.

Ale

This was not a really easy question for me because I've never worked as a copy editor in a publishing company or in other fields. I had a thought, and I think the difference might be maybe in the way we do our checks and also the way the content is presented online because the instructional designer organises the content in more digestible, shorter parts, and that is because I think of two reasons.

One is because the learner attention span on screen is generally shorter, and also because the type of learner we usually create the content for which are usually professionals, who study around their main activities which may have a little moment here and there spreading the weak to look at the content and they need to get the most out of it.

For this reason, the way, the challenge I think the e-Learning Assistant is facing is to review and check separate parts of the content in different moments. Why would we do so? We need to keep in mind that we need to do our checks in the general context of the course.

Bobbie

Yeah, I think it's really important that we have an idea of the entire process of learning a course from start to finish. Perhaps in editorial work, you would usually work on one article as an individual piece of content, but we have to be aware of almost an entire journey of learning which the student is going to be doing. We need to make sure that the course in its entirety is being translated through our platform.

This really requires knowledge and interaction with all areas of our department, as it isn't just based on one piece of text we're copy editing, but as mentioned, involves functionality and the UX design system, etc. Content-specific though, I do think we're still in a rare position where we work so closely with academic content without actually being a faculty member. That's not to say that we change the content that the academics provide us with, and the Instructional Designers inform the content more than we do, but we're still there to highlight if anything they have intended to say hasn't translated well or if any general mistakes are there.

This can be as simple as suggestions and changes to grammar, to things which are subject-specific, or issues with content which may not be accessibility friendly. Our role really does deal with the whole scope of elements and that diversity makes it super interesting and it's almost like product development, more than it is copy editing sometimes.

Rachele

Yeah, I think that's a really good point. The idea that you're not changing content but making small suggestions because I think the ELA role really is a unique role in that you do get to see everything from start to finish, the really earlier raw form of that content, to looking at it on Keats in the design system once it's up and ready to go, ready for students to look at.

In terms of being able to look at that content and offer like feedback and suggestions. What does that look like on different programs? How much interaction do you have with academics and the rest of the instructional design team when it comes to making these suggestions and how important do you think that is from a student perspective?

Ale

Well, I guess it depends on the topics, on the discipline because there are some disciplines that are more [LAUGHTER] understandable to me than others, there are some that are incredibly difficult, so I cannot suggest as much as I'd like to. But I think from my point of view, I've tried to flag anything that I think might be, in my opinion, improved or clarified or expressed maybe in a different way that might help the student to understand better a concept.

I play the part of the dummy person. I try always to flag when something could be ambiguous because I'm the type of person that if something can be done in the right or wrong way, [LAUGHTER] for some reason I pick the wrong way all the time. I really appreciate when the instructions are really clear. When I don't have to think, should I click this button or this other one? Which one should I do before? I try to flag anything that I think can help and obviously are always only suggestions.

It's not that I'm going to change the content myself because there might be a meaning that maybe I'm not understanding behind the way the sentence has been expressed, phrased or the concept have been explained. Also, because we see parts of the content separately. I might not know now if maybe this concept that has not been explained in detail might be actually explained much more later on and maybe the academic decided just to give a quick look, just to introduce the student to that concept.

Rachele

Bobbie, would you agree, or would you have any other thoughts about how you might approach some things slightly differently?

Bobbie

I think I agree. I think there's two things going on really. It's that we've got a really great knowledgeable team at King's Online putting their best into the online learning platform. Trying to get the best out of that for students and then we've got faculty members who obviously their concern is with the actual content itself. I think the ELA is really at the point of where those two things converge and with all best intentions from everyone involved, sometimes things can be missed, or certain functionality might not work.

It's really important for the student, without sounding like, I think that the ELA is too important, I would say that is one of the areas where our work has the most impact because it's a collaborative effort from everyone on the team. But I think that we allow their superb work to shine through even more because the worst thing would be if they did all of this amazing work for the student and then it was overshadowed by an ill functioning platform, spelling mistakes, inaccessibility, etc. It also means the amazing designs and processes that our team develops for learning can actually reach the student and it doesn't get lost in production. We're essentially, we're there to ensure that the overall student experience is just as our team intended it.

Rachele

I really like that you mentioned collaboration there because it's definitely a theme running throughout pretty much every episode, every topic, every one of our roles. I think everyone has very much got this idea of collaboration at the forefront of how we work. Not only just within King's Online or within OPEE, but with the faculties as you mentioned as well. I think the ELA should get enough credit actually because I feel like you guys do so much behind the scenes.

It's those little things that make a huge difference to the student. It's not being able to work the system or a page not functioning or a sentence that has loads of spelling and grammatical errors is a lot more noticeable than an overall product that just works correctly. We are so used to functional design. We notice more when things go wrong rather than having a huge appreciation for when things go right. I think it's a huge testament to how well you guys do your jobs in that sense.

Switching pace a little bit. Just wondering if we could talk a little bit about the skills that somebody would need in this type of role. I don't know whether you both have previous examples from previous roles that you've done that you think really help you in the day-to-day of this type of role here?

Bobbie

Yeah. In my previous role, I was part of a really small learning tech team at another higher education institution, which is obviously, we're quite a massive team at King's Online, I think. It was quite a change of pace. But having that exposure to learning design with those fab past colleagues who really really did wear more than one hat, from learning tech to instructional design to UX, a team of four were just doing all of this.

I really feel that that helped me gain the knowledge to see a whole product and the contributing elements of production that also goes into King's Online. It gave me really valuable knowledge and exposure to how to convert university degrees to online platforms and how the approach varies between MOOCs, undergrad, post grad, etc.

Ale

For me, I think it's a combination of two different jobs that I had in the past. The first one, I was a quality manager in a small manufacturing company. I think there, I really learned what it means quality checks and the importance of those, especially at the beginning of the production process, because obviously if you can pick any issue at the beginning, you will not end up having faulty products at the end. There, I think it really stress with me the importance of that.

On the other side, I also learned the importance of be able to deal with two sides. I think working in quality gives you two perspectives and you also need to help in both sides. Either you try to look at things with the final customer eye, so you play the client role. But at the same time, you also need to remember that you are part of the team that is creating the product. You need also to understand your team members and the reason why they made certain choices and try somehow to convey them to the final client. In that case, when I was working in the production, a small manufacturing company. That gave me that understanding of both sides and understanding that in my role, I need to take care and help both side to find a middle ground where both would be happy with the result.

The second job that I think helped me a bit for this one was I worked as a aftercare assistant in a small Visual Effects Academy and I was helping students to create their own portfolio and CVs. I meet with many of them, and we talk a lot about all the issues they might have or the concern that they might have, and I also learned that sometimes they focus on things that I would not have paid much attention to and I try to understand why they do so. I think that helped shape me a bit.

Those two experiences shaped me in the kind of e-Learning Assistant I am today. But in terms of skills, I'd say that for sure attention to details is a very important skill in this job. I know usually it's called soft skills, but I think in this case is really hard skill because you really need to pick up things very easily, naturally. Another skill can be have high level in written English, spelling, grammar and punctuation, and being comfortable in using different tools. We use many tools in [LAUGHTER] King's Online. I think it's also fun because of that.

Apart from usual Google spreadsheets, but also, we use project managing tools such as Trello, Kaltura for videos, Frame IO sometimes, and also a little bit of HTML coding, not much but just a little bit so that you can tweak things when they don't look good.

Bobbie

We always joke that being an ELA is more than just enacting a job role and that it's rather like a mindset because we may all be undertaking tasks of the job but the ELAs all have a really similar analytical detailed focus personality which goes far beyond just skim reading text. I think that's what makes the job so perfect for us because day-to-day, we get stuck into the course material and the learning platform and we do copious amounts of reading and analyse the learning design of the team's production.

To a lot of people, that could probably sound a tad lonely or even boring because we really do focus on the small stuff and we have debates over tiny things. You wouldn't even think a student would notice what we deliberate, but it's how we ensure the quality of the product is upheld and that the higher level decisions made in our team is carried out throughout production.

Rachele

I like that, I like that it's like a mindset. I think that's really true. Every role has their own little quirks and ways of approaching the work that they do. But actually, the ELA role does wear a lot of different hats as we've talked about previously, but also, you're looking at so many aspects of production and content from so many different perspectives that it does become ingrained in a way that's very much a way of just approaching things in general as a mindset rather than a general skill set, I guess.

Bobbie

Yeah. It also goes out into our own real lives as well. Like we're all really similar [LAUGHTER] and how we approach things in real life, [OVERLAPPING] it's quite like a little group. [LAUGHTER]

Ale

We spot the same things. We think in the same way about lots of things. Sometimes it's really surprising. [LAUGHTER]

Rachele

Yeah, I think I noticed ages ago when our team collectively did those series of personality tests, they're introvert, extrovert tests.

Ale

Yeah.

Rachele

I was looking at the spreadsheets at the current ELA team and the people in the team who had started off as ELAs and had progressed on to different roles within the team. I noticed that a lot of us who started off as ELAs or are current ELAs have really similar personality types and I think it is a testament to the fact that, whether it's past or present, we do think in similar ways and it is such a specific type of role that takes a very specific type of person to do.

Bobbie

Yeah. [OVERLAPPING] That King's Online are really good at spotting a good ELA to hire. [LAUGHTER]

Ale

Yeah, it's amazing. I can't believe it. But yes, they get it right all the times.

Rachele

So with that in mind, if we were hiring for new ELA, what sort of advice would you give to someone who is thinking of applying for this type of role or advice you would give to someone who is new to the role brand new in the team?

Ale

Bobbie, do you want to go or shall I go? [LAUGHTER]

Bobbie

I don't mind. Who wants to go first. [LAUGHTER]

Ale

I think the role is definitely much more fun than it looks on paper because it's really varied. I think if you are the type of person that spots immediately a spelling mistake on a page or when reading a paragraph on a magazine or on a book, you thought, oh, well, this could've maybe been explained differently to allow better understanding. Or if you're reading a lot and you're curious about many things, then I think this job is definitely for you. I think you will like it.

If you are new to this role, I think you will be probably overwhelmed at the beginning, because we have many tools we use and many things to keep track on and so it might be a little bit, yeah, difficult at the beginning, but eventually, it will be fine. Everything will make sense and after all everyone in the team is incredibly helpful and happy to help you anytime time, it will be fine.

Bobbie

Yeah, I agree. You have to be really willing to work independently and be committed to the ethos of King's Online as well because we are the last step before it goes to students and we all do genuinely care about the product that we deliver to them. The role is almost never as straightforward as it seems on paper. Working with so many varied people in different areas requires a lot of adapting and you sometimes need to be firm in making sure that processes are followed with whoever, whether that's faculty or your team.

But at other times, you also need to consider what factors could contribute to deviating from certain processes that usually are so strict. This means using a lot of judgment in specific situations. Which also means that you need to be willing to learn the knowledge of basic production in online learning to have at least a foundation to make those judgments and as mentioned, that covers all areas of specialisation. Then for more specific or complicated scenarios, you'll need to be good at communication with all of your great colleagues who have all the in-depth knowledge to discuss through certain points.

Rachele

Cool. The final part, which is my favourite part of these interviews now, is finding out the fun information that people have retained through looking at so much course content in so many different subject areas. Of all the projects that you both worked on, do you have any particular memorable bits of information? Or funny anecdotes that have just stuck with you through the years?

Ale

We read much, it's very difficult to retain much information I have to say. But obviously, there are maybe a few things that stuck in my mind because they were either a little bit scary concerning, or unusual. Recently I've been reading a lot about cybersecurity and particularly about thousands of ways in which an external attacker can easily break into your network if they want to. I think I realised my computer is not that protected and I got a little bit oh oh, this is not good.

Another thing that got stuck in my mind was actually when I was reading about public health. There was this story about a lady nicknamed Typhoid Mary. This was a real case, something happened around 19th century. There was this lady that was working as a cook, and she had unknowingly, it is believed, infected 53 people from different wealthy families she worked for, with typhoid fever. She would change jobs anytime the breakout of the disease had begun. It was very difficult for the investigator on the case to identify her, and because she was actually an asymptomatic carrier of this disease, even the concept of healthy carriers was unknown back then.

Because she was healthy, she thought that she absolutely was fine and it was not her fault. Even though they tried to put her in quarantine several times, she somehow managed to escape and try to go back to work. Think for the time, it was quite an interesting case and I thought it was very interesting to think how things were handled 19th century, for example, compared to the way things are handled now.

Rachele

I love that, that's so scandalous. The fact that she just kept breaking free from quarantine [LAUGHTER] [OVERLAPPING].

Ale

Yes, because the thing is, she was working as a cook for a very wealthy family, it was a very well-paid job. The investigator and the doctor told her, "You cannot continue with this job because the fact that you are handling food is actually the way you are transmitting the disease and killing people", because she also killed three people supposedly. I mean, it's not proved, and she was then suggested to do other types of jobs that they were much less well paid, so she didn't want to do those. That's why she wanted to go back all the time to be a cook. She was actually moving around the country to do so.

Rachele

Wow, that is scarily reminiscent of what's going on in the country today [LAUGHTER].

Ale

Yeah, a little bit yeah [LAUGHTER].

Rachele

Bobbie, did you want to share anything funny or weird or obscure?

Bobbie

I'm not sure I can keep up with Typhoid Mary story, but [LAUGHTER].

Rachele

It's a tough act to follow [LAUGHTER].

Bobbie

I think in general our transcript bloopers is always a funny thing. The things that either machine or transcribers come up with in place of what actual content is meant to say, can be quite off the mark sometimes because obviously our content's not the easiest to understand. But yeah, that's why we're there, I guess, to go through and make sure that everything is, there are no rude words put into transcripts [LAUGHTER] where an academic has spoken.

In general, I just love how bits of information I pick up in this job randomly come up in conversation in general life a lot, even from subjects that I wouldn't think had gone into my brain and stayed there because again, like cybersecurity is totally out of my realm. But yeah, I just remember thinking, Oh, I've read that recently in my course that I'm doing at work and I just think it shows the quality of the faculty at King's really, and its relevance to current discourse.

Rachele

Yeah, I think that's a really good point. Yeah, the things that I'm able to tell people about a program I'm working on. We should all form a mass collective pub quiz team, I think, and we'd absolutely wipe the floor with anyone I think [LAUGHTER].

Bobbie

Yeah, Absolutely.

Ale

Totally.

Rachele

Awesome. Cool. Thanks so much for giving up some time to have a chat with me today.

Ale

Thank you.

Bobbie

Thanks

[MUSIC]

Rachele

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