



EmpathEd: An Immersive Portrayal of Neurodiversity

Lauren Clouser:

Welcome to the LDA Podcast, a series by the Learning Disabilities Association of America. Our podcast is dedicated to exploring topics of interest to educators, individuals with learning disabilities, parents and professionals to work towards our goal of creating a more equitable world.

Hi, everyone. Welcome to the LDA Podcast. I'm here today with Kirsten Bronkovic, the co-founder and CEO of EmpathEd, a multimedia platform that aims to create empathy and understanding for neurodiverse students, students with disabilities, and students with mental health diagnoses. Kirsten, thank you so much for being here. We're so excited to have you.

Kirsten Bronkovic:

Thanks for having me, Lauren.

Lauren Clouser:

So I wanted to give you a chance to tell us about yourself and your background before we get in too deep.

Kirsten Bronkovic:

Yeah, sure. So I've kind of had an eclectic background that brought me to this point. I studied political science and German and worked in political fundraising to start off with, went to school for education, didn't really use it, and then worked as an executive recruiter. Started another business early on in my career and then got into education once my kids were in school. So it was there that I was a teacher and advancement director at a school, and then moved back to the east coast. I was on the west coast, then moved back to the east coast and continued my journey in education. And it was while I was in that education space that I kind of hatched the idea of EmpathEd.

So, kind of I felt like all of my experiences in fundraising, education, sales, life experience kind of brought me to this point.

Lauren Clouser:

Absolutely. Well, before we dive into EmpathEd a little further, I think this conversation is mostly going to be about empathy and understanding and the importance of that for neurodiverse students. So currently, what are some obstacles that can prevent educators from fully understanding these neurodiverse students or students who have a mental health diagnosis?

Kirsten Bronkovic:

Yeah, I'd say a few things. I'd say the increase in the actual number of diagnoses that are happening and that students are in the classroom and, due to the inclusion movement of students with disabilities in the classroom, teachers who might not have had a lot of training in understanding the needs of students with disabilities or neurodiversity are responsible for students. And not that anyone is deliberately uncaring. It's just that there's kind of a lack of information about the background about disabilities, the scientific background, the cognitive background, and without that, sometimes it's hard to understand someone else's perspective. So I'd say that is an obstacle. Just basically a lack of education. And I'd say it's just the diagnoses are more on the rise, so it's more prevalent. So sometimes when you're repeatedly exposed to something that you don't understand, it's harder to develop empathy. So I think that's primarily the obstacles that I've seen personally and that are reported back to me.

Lauren Clouser:

Yeah, and based on that lack of understanding, there can still be some misconceptions about students who are neurodiverse. What are some common misconceptions that you've run into?

Kirsten Bronkovic:

Yeah, I'd probably say the number one misconception is that the students don't work hard, or that maybe they don't want to work hard. Or some people say, like, they're lazy or disconnected from their education, and that's just not true. Probably 99.9% of students are working 10 times as hard.

So I'd say that that's probably the largest misconception. And I'd say other ones are that a lot of people look at disabilities and neurodiversity as deficit based instead of strength based.

So instead of saying, like, the student can't do this worksheet in 10 minutes.

And that's a deficit. That people don't say, you know, what the student is good at like this. So let's really, like, dive into that strength and see how that can be leveraged across the classroom. And then, yeah, I'll give a little bit more help or extended time for this worksheet, but let's look at what, what students are good at. And I'd say if you, you know, not just looking at students with disabilities that way, but I mean, really, we should be looking at every. Every student that way.

Like, let's bring everyone's strength to the game instead of checking off things that students can't do.

Lauren Clouser:

Absolutely. Yeah. I really love those answers. Those are things that we've heard a lot. We've had people with LD who are past students or current students, and that's a lot of what they reported of how frustrating it is to hear that you just need to try harder when you're already trying harder than most of your peers just to keep up. So I think that lack of understanding really

can cause harm in certain school settings for these students. So on that note, can you tell us about EmpathEd? Tell us a little bit about what it is and why did you think it was important to create a program like this?

Kirsten Bronkovic:

Yeah. So EmpathEd is a platform that trains educators and families about their students with learning disabilities, other health impairments, and mental health diagnoses. And right now we've kind of upped our game in the last year or two. It's now a 360 degree navigable platform. So it's kind of a 3D experience. And within that environment, we have the EmpathEd campus. Within that environment, we have courses right now on dyslexia, ADHD, anxiety and depression.

And they are kind of like micro courses about each diagnosis. Each course is anywhere from about 17 minutes to 30 minutes. And besides giving that background, it goes into what is the diagnosis? What is the science behind the diagnosis? How are students presenting, what's going on in the brain, the student strengths, their perhaps their struggles, and some modifications and accommodations that you can provide. Then we have further immersive experiences for our dyslexia course and our ADHD course to literally put you in the seat of that student so you can see how that student might experience the classroom. So in our dyslexia course we have, you're sitting in a class and having to go through a classroom exercise of doing some, some cold reading. And ADHD, you're navigating around a classroom, kind of seeing what it might be like to interact with different components of a classroom to see how someone with ADHD might experience your classroom. So at the end, we also have quizzes and certifications at the end too, so that you can become EmpathEd certified in the different courses.

So an interesting part of EmpathEd is also that you can experience the platform on a laptop, a tablet, a smartphone, and you can also use a VR headsets for the experiences to have it be a little bit more of a robust experience if you want a more robust immersive experience. So it's not necessary just because we never want any piece of hardware to be a barrier.

So we build it so you can experience it on any piece of technology. So as I shared, I had a few different types of careers and it was actually when I was working at a school, I was an educator and also working in the administration. And my daughter was diagnosed with dyslexia. And it was there that I saw that teachers really wanted to help her. And I found myself also kind of informing them on what was best for my daughter's needs. It wasn't until I was in the middle of the build that my daughter, then in high school, came home crying one night saying, you know, I'm working so hard and why doesn't anyone understand that? And I mean the school was excellent. So it was actually one teacher. Why doesn't he understand this? And my daughter said if they could just sit in my seat for five minutes.

And I was like, ding. You know, the fact that I saw that there wasn't one place to go for all these resources, that's how I started to build the team.

So I brought in a psychologist, I brought in a disability researcher and professor, and brought in special education teachers who are like on the ground every day. So we know the practical application of the research and the theory and brought in my technical co founders who are actually like cutting edge pioneers in the immersive space. They do some pretty big projects for some movie stars and big national corporations. And my daughter who you know, when I first started going through this journey, she was in fourth grade, she's now going to be a senior in college and she too is a partner in the company. So she's a co-founder. And I think that's really powerful as well to have someone that has dyslexia on the team. That's the co-founding team.

So that's kind of a general overview. So we've also been brought on by school districts to do live events as well. So all day conferences or professional development sessions with our team to kind of bridge the gap, or once you experience EmpathEd, then also to have a live event to have a forum for discussion. So yeah, one of the most, I'd say important things and most unique things about our site is that the immersive experiences are informed by those with the diagnosis and the experiences are voiced by someone with that diagnosis. So that sets us apart from other special education tools and products.

Lauren Clouser:

So how are you able to create accurate portrayals of what a neurodiverse student would experience in the classroom?

Kirsten Bronkovic:

Yeah, so what we do is we talk to a number of students with that diagnosis and we ask them a number of questions and then just anecdotally we say like, what's your experience, or what are some of your frustrations, or tell us stories about things that work for you or things that don't work for you. Where do you experience some type of stress or anxiety or academic difficulty, like social stress? Anything like that. So we just try to kind of hear their stories, and then we build the experiences from that. And then our technical team, my co-founders, will build an experience, and then we have the students review it.

And they will give feedback. They're like, well, not quite like that, or no, that doesn't feel right. Or that's like, you've nailed it. That's perfect.

And then the other piece that we do is all the other components in the classroom besides, like the student voice, even like the teacher voice, the voiceover artist is trying to convey kind of like that vibe of what the students feel or perceive.

So we are very deliberate in our voiceover in the teacher and the dyslexia experience. The teacher sounds, you know, really nice, but some of the things that the teacher's actually saying are kind of like microaggressions. And this is what the biggest pieces of feedback that we got from our students with dyslexia. They said, can you somehow communicate the way teachers say things? Sometimes they are said nicely, but are actually mean, or said nicely, but it doesn't feel good.

So we try to really use voice to make sure that the voices and the tone is appropriate to convey that message. And we have students review and give feedback to the process.

Lauren Clouser:

Yeah, that's a great process. That's so interesting. And I really like, too, that it emphasizes that, especially with something like dyslexia, it's not just a reading challenge. It involves all these senses. It involves anxiety, and it also involves teacher interactions as well. So I think this is really exciting, and I love the review process that you have people with those diagnoses who are giving you constant feedback on how realistic it is.

Kirsten Bronkovic:

Yeah. Thank you. We want to make it authentic. And not preachy, but, like, really make sure the voices of the students are heard.

Lauren Clouser:

What's been some of the reactions from the people who have taken the training?

Kirsten Bronkovic:

Yeah, so some of the reaction that we get of people that use EmpathEd is, one great example is we were doing a kind of a VR lab professional development day in conjunction with a client in Arkansas actually. And the teacher took off the headset after going through the dyslexia experience and she was in tears and she said, I knew my student had dyslexia and I thought I knew what their day was like. She's like, and I had no idea. And she said, I'm going to do everything differently now. And so actually someone went back and observed in her classroom after she used EmpathEd and apparently the teacher had changed the whole culture of her classroom.

So it totally shifted her perspective. She started to inform her students on how to support their peers. And it altered the whole experience there, I believe it was a fourth grade classroom. So we have experiences like that. And then we also have, you know, she was kind of a younger, newer teacher. And then we have teachers that have been teaching for 25 years, might even be an administrator of special education, and they watch it and they have tears in their eyes.

Just because you academically know something and perhaps you know how to remediate reading or remediate someone in math or whatever it is, but to really understand someone's experience and sit in their seat and feel what they're feeling. It definitely shifts perspective and shifts practice, from our anecdotal feedback and then when we do surveys as well. So at our first go round really early on, after taking the experiencing dyslexia course, 85% of the teachers that took it said that they now feel they are more prepared to enter the classroom. And we've done a recent survey and 97% of the people that experienced EmpathEd said that they feel more empathetic towards their students now. So, survey wise and then anecdotally, we get a very emotional reaction and I'd say that that's kind of our purpose too. Like we're not teaching

you how to teach, right? But we're teaching you how to shift your perspective. And if you shift your perspective, then the student will feel differently, right? And then when they feel differently and more confident, their outcomes will improve, whether it's academic outcomes, their self confidence, their social interactions. And then we've heard from teachers that, as I just said, teachers feel more confident about their work and feel more confident about their interactions with students because a lot of times teachers say that...

It's not that they don't have empathy, but like, they're not sure what to do. So they're kind of lacking confidence. So this gives them confidence to have some language and some background, to have some better conversations and some more understanding.

Lauren Clouser:

Absolutely. It sounds a lot like it's encouraging more than just focusing, like we talked about earlier on a student's deficits, the student's weaknesses, that it's encouraging more of a whole child approach when you're looking at all of these other factors, rather than just going from, they struggle with reading, to there's a whole other amount of factors at play, and here's what I can do to help mitigate some of the negative effects. So that's fantastic.

Kirsten Bronkovic:

Yeah, thanks.

Lauren Clouser:

Well, Kirsten, where do you hope EmpathEd is going to go in the future? This can be short term or long term, but what are your goals?

Kirsten Bronkovic:

Yeah. So hopes for the future for EmpathEd. First of all, I'd like to build out more content.

So we want to cover some more diagnoses. And you know, I always ask teachers, administrators, families, what, what are the next courses that you'd like to see. So definitely building out a more expansive library of different diagnoses. We also are looking to add a social component to the platform. We are actually in process on that right, now we're interviewing a number of people and having like, of avatars of different people so they can share their perspective in a space on our virtual campus. And then, you know, wide adoption really, we want to be a resource for educators. We want to be a resource for parents and siblings, you know, family members and then peers as well.

I mean, we get questions from, from schools saying, like, can we use this for curriculum?

Can we teach our students about their friends? And so I would say, you know, long term, big picture, I would really like this to be something that everyone has access to either through school or, you know, on a personal level, just so that everyone understands someone in their family or in their life. Disability is the highest minoritized population in the United States. You

know someone with a disability, you know someone that has neurodiversity, and that's not even touching the mental health aspect.

So this seems like, you know, this should be the, um, the go to, um, for everyone so that they, um, they can better understand, um, everyone in their, in their life.

Lauren Clouser:

Absolutely. And I think that's such a great note to wrap up on. Kirsten, thank you so much for being on and talking about the power of empathy and understanding and how Empath Ed is working to create that understanding.

Kirsten Bronkovic:

Well, thank you for having me.

Lauren Clouser:

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