DARREN BRITTEN: Thank you very much, everybody, for joining us for this second session of the UDL Symposium Online Program. Just to let you know closed captions are available for this session and can be enabled by selecting the CC button.

If you have any questions, please put those into chat and we'll ask those of AJ at the end of the session. This session, session number 2, Practical applications of accessible and diverse UDL techniques is presented by AJ Penrose from RMIT. The session will go for around 15 minutes of presentation, with allowing 5 minutes for questions at the end. Without further ado, over to you AJ.

AJ PENROSE: Hi everyone, I am AJ Penrose, Senior Multimedia Developer for the Digital Learning Library Team here at RMIT. My pronouns are she/her. For those listening in, I am wearing pink headphones, glasses with purple frames, a dark green jacket and a froggy necklace.

Before I begin, I'd like to acknowledge the people of the Woiwurrung and Boonwurrung language groups of the Eastern Kulin nation on whose unceded lands we conduct the business of this university. RMIT University respectfully acknowledges their ancestors and Elders past and present. I imagine that everyone here already has an interest in Universal Design for Learning and the key concepts for engagement, representation and action and expression.

I am sure you are also all aware of why these things are important, or there will be other talks in this conference that will convince you. On the assumption that I am already preaching to the choir today, I am just going to be talking about how my team approaches Universal Design for Learning.

First of all, I should tell you about a new strategy that RMIT has developed called the Inclusion, Diversity, Equity and Access or IDEA Framework, with the intention to be inclusive by design for everyone, everywhere, all of the time. You can find out all about the framework in detail online. I encourage you to do so, no matter where you have come here from today. I will provide a link at the end of this presentation.

So RMIT Library has embraced this framework with a pledge to uphold the IDEA Framework principles for inclusion, diversity, equity and access of all services, resources and spaces for all RMIT staff and students. The library plan is contained to really focus in the first instance on a couple of areas within the framework and, likewise, here in the Digital Learning Team, it is most sensible for us to focus on resources rather than spaces.

These considerations aren't actually anything particularly new for our team. We've been committed to creating inclusive learning experiences since we began, especially regarding accessibility and representation. But we've also learnt a lot since then. One way we approach these goals is by treating Universal Design as a journey, not as a destination. We have been embracing agile methods of working.

One part of that approach that works really well for our team is launch before it is ready. It is a modular approach to design and development which embraces continuous improvement. The idea is to deliver what we can, when we can, without waiting for everything to be perfect. In practical terms, what this means is that lots of different users can review our resources, testing that our concepts are sound, and that the message that we want to convey is being received. And if it is not, no sweat. With the expectation that changes are part of the plan, they are never a great shock and can be made with a minimum amount of disruption.

An example of a project that we approached in this way is colour theory, understanding and working with colour by Dr Lisa Cianci from our team. Since its launch last year, colour theory has wrapped up more than 100,000 views by 60,000 users, which makes it the highest used Press Book in RMIT Open Press. Was it ready at launch? No.

So one example of a change that we had to make along the way is we intend to release this book as an Open Educational Resource, or OER, and that meant that we can't use some of the stock images we had initially chosen. They had an education licence which was all above board for using those images in an internal educational resource, but not for redistributing in an open resource. All of those images needed replacing with ones from our sources that were licensed appropriately, and quite a few that we just recreated ourselves from scratch.

So all those viewers, all of those users, is it finished now? Still no. Right now, colour theory is being peer reviewed, which will help refine the content. A detailed bibliography is still in the works, and an RMIT subject guide is also being developed to accompany it. If we had waited until all of this was ready before launch, so many opportunities to have the content seen, reviewed and improved would have been missed.

So that approach is all well and good for new projects, but what about when you inherit something old? Our team creates new learning objects from scratch, like that one, but we are also tasked with managing large collections of legacy resources, and one of those is the Learning Lab. The Learning Lab is a place where students can learn the foundation skills they need to succeed in tertiary education. So these foundation skills include writing, maths, assignment planning, academic integrity and more. Each year this site receives over 1.2 million visits. Right now, we are in the middle of a massive project to migrate and improve all 700 and something pages, as well as more than 200 interactive activities.

Why? Because it is not enough to create something and then just leave it to do its thing forever. Considering the whole lifecycle of any learning object is just so important. So right now, we are in the re develop phase of our lifecycle. This digital learning asset lifecycle idea is a process that we apply to all of our resources, new or old.

There is a diagram here which, when you enter it, it says "identify need", and then goes into a cycle of redevelop, promote, maintain, assess and review, and at some point the object will need to be retired. I could talk about this diagram for hours in fact, I already have elsewhere since I developed it but that's not the focus of today. So let's get back to the Learning Lab and talk about what we are doing in this re development phase.

Some obvious improvements that we could make to the older content leapt out at us. Take accessibility, for example. We started by retrofitting improvements, like changing the colours throughout the site to meet WCAG accessible contrast requirements. We made the transcripts for videos and diagrams easier to access. A shoutout here to the Academic Skills Advisors team here in the library who worked with our team to convert hundreds of PDFs into accessible HTML.

We've created a bunch of accessible activities in H5P, and there is a lot more work to do to make all of the old activities more accessible. So whether you are improving an existing project or designing one from scratch, it is vital to keep up to date with developments in the field. Reading articles, following news, attending workshops, attending conferences. Hey, you are here, right?

We realised our small team had expertise in learning design, graphic design and accessibility a particular passion of mine but sometimes the way to improve a team's knowledge is with a whole fresh brain. We identified a gap in our team's experience, and that was in the field of user experience. Bringing in a UX designer, Sandy Houston, added the most current knowledge and experience to the team all in one go; someone who was out there doing the work right now.

So what else can you do about what you don't know that you don't know? You probably already know this one, testing. There is only so much testing that you can do yourself. And we do do basic tests all of the time. But you do really need to test with your end users, and for us that's students. Remember the point I made back with launch before it is ready, about getting the work out there and being used so you can find out how it is going to go?

To this end, Kelly Ann Smith in our team proposed the need for a student advisory board who could contribute to library decision making by representing student need and preferences, and by providing feedback and suggestions on library services and offerings.

So the intention here was to gather an academically and demographically diverse group; about half domestic, half international students from across all four colleges here at RMIT. They are mostly undergraduates, but we also have a couple in higher degree programs. There are students who came straight from high school and students who have returned to uni after being out in the workforce. It is also a group with significant language and cultural diversity, students who identify as neurodiverse, or are living with a disability, LGBTQIA+ students, and there is also a range of socioeconomic backgrounds.

So at the end of last year, 13 feedback sessions on the new learning lab were conducted with members of this new board. The first method we employed was an open card sort, categorising 103 topic cards with no predefined categories. Remember, we have a lot of content to organise in this site. This was followed by usability testing centred around searching for specific topics on a test website, and a closed card sort was then built out of the first open card sort so that we could validate the data that we had and ensure that we were on the right track with the changes we'd made to the site's information architecture based on those results.

This approach aligns with those agile ways of working which emphasise iteration based on feedback. Because the Learning Lab deals with foundation skills, the students were also asked to reflect on their experiences back when they had been new to the university. What academic areas had been challenging for them? Where they had gone looking for help and where they'd found support with their assessments?

The feedback we received will inform the way we approach our content and information architecture, from page design, search functionality, navigation, use of keywords, and more. And even that fabulously diverse group didn't cover all the testing that we wanted. So our team is currently researching external sources for in depth accessibility testing with, for example, experienced users of screen readers.

Another project that was specifically created with a diverse audience in mind was the Learning Lab Contextualised Content Project (LLCC), which was supported by the Higher Education Participation and Partnership Program (HEPPP). The plan was to put that huge resource, the Learning Lab, into a context that makes sense, to show learners how absorbing the information would be beneficial to them and answer that all important question: what's in it for me? Why should I, as a student, spend time using this resource?

So this project was inclusive by design from the very beginning, from the text content and graphics, to the information architecture. First the team set some goals for the project. Representation learners should be able to see themselves represented in the content. Relevance the content must be realistic and relevant to the audience in their lives. Reassurance content created should reassure the learners that higher education is a valid choice for them and that they'll be given support when they are there. And reliability the resource should demonstrate that it is a source that they can trust.

So the next step was understanding the audience's needs and requirements. Barriers for the HEPPP audience might include technological ones, like slow unreliable Internet connections, and limited access to devices. So those problems have technical things, like keeping file sizes low.

But other barriers require more creative solutions. Learners in HEPPP cohorts can feel that higher education isn't a place where they belong. They might be the first person from their community who has been to university, and this is where representation in our material helps, not just via how our characters looked, but the language they used.

We also recruited HEPPP students for focus groups to give us feedback, which we acted on, like making these more realistic images of the characters to improve the students' connection with the content.

Following the experiences of current students through a practical story showed our audience how and when the skills and knowledge that they had learned could be applied in practical and rewarding ways. It could also help them feel more comfortable by knowing a bit more about what they might expect university to be like. All of these considerations improved the learning experience for everyone and we all know that this is what universal design is all about.

It is also important to remember that successful, accessible resources can also be aesthetically pleasing. If you incorporate all of these concepts into your process from the beginning, then the visual design, the usability, the accessibility and diversity requirements, they are not going to be at odds with each other. So this is the approach we are taking with the new design for the Learning Lab.

So what else do we do? What do we do with everything that this team has learned about universal design apart from applying it to projects that we work on ourselves? Well, we document it. So that we know it is repeatable and shareable with others, we create a knowledge base. Internally, we have an informally written WCAG for team knowledge sharing, and for sharing with other teams we have a SharePoint comms site to answer any questions that we are commonly asked and to share the progress of our ongoing projects.

Part of our team's mission is to act as advisors and to assist others to create digital media content to these high standards. We showcase our best practice examples, and we share new techniques and procedures via online presentations. Just the other day I ran an online Premier Pro workshop for everybody in the library who wanted to attend.

I hope I haven't rushed through too much. That's it from me today. I believe that we should have a little bit of time left for questions. There is a slide at the end for the resources that I have mentioned, so everybody can go and have a look and have a read.

DARREN: Excellent. Thank you very much, AJ. Certainly a lot of interest, and there is several questions that have come through as well. You weren't too fast. We are just on time, but we do have extra time available leading up to the break, so hopefully we can get through all of these questions. Carla asks: AJ, do you have benchmarks to meet before publishing? And if so, how do you handle those challenges when you wish to meet deadlines?

AJ: It is possibly a dangerous thing for me to say here, not as the manager of the team and not as a project manager. I think that we are really lucky in this team that we often don't have deadlines because we set our own projects, because we come up with blue sky ideas in this team, "Hey, there is a thing that we really want to create." We get approval for that, obviously, from higher up, but I think because of the nature of our projects, they are often reasonably open ended. Setting benchmarks, of course and this is where I was saying we do research, we attend conferences, we keep up with current knowledge, and we will set benchmarks against things that already exist. Part of that lifecycle diagram actually in that first assessment phase is to check that something out there doesn't already exist that does the job that we need it to do. That is always the first thing, because there is no point creating just a second version of something that's already doing the job.

DARREN: And extra work on top of

AJ: And extra work even if it's fun.

DARREN: Ray has asked: wondering about how the student advisory board was formed and are the students paid or otherwise rewarded for their participation?

AJ: I actually don't know about the payment. It is Kelly Ann's baby, and I am sure that she would be perfectly happy for you to contact her through her RMIT email address, or I imagine that you can find her on LinkedIn and she can tell you more about the student advisory board.

I had the absolute honour today to be presenting a lot of things that were actually other people in my team's project, so I was selling a lot of things that the team does together, and we do work very, very closely, so thank you everybody for letting me spruik your wonderful projects.

DARREN: It is lovely to see the lived experience being central and core. Tanya has asked: love to know more about the card sorting exercise?

AJ: Again, Kelly Ann and Sandy in our team, so our usability experts, worked on the card sorting. It sounded very cool to me and I have seen the results, but I was not involved in the testing myself.

DARREN: Andrew has asked a question, which I also had, but Andrew gets credit for this one: as a screen reader user, Andrew is constantly being presented with products that are launched before they are ready. How are your processes for fixing these issues? Is there some kind of prioritisation?

AJ: Screen reading is actually one of the tests that we do do ourselves, and I wouldn't launch something that I couldn't navigate through with a keyboard that didn't have proper alt text of everything. So there is a lot of accessibility standards that would not be ignored before that launch before you are ready. Launch before you are ready is maybe doing some testing afterwards but, of course, we wouldn't put out a completely unfinished project.

And accessibility, there are some very, very simple things you can do and simple things you can test yourself. Alt text is a darn obvious one. Colour contrast, and there is a wonderful colour contrast checker out there. I am sure everybody is already aware of it, but just do a quick Google and you'll find it. These are easy things to put out there before you need to test for them. They are no brainers.

DARREN: There is a minimum set of standards to reach before it comes out?

AJ: Of course. Absolutely. For sure, for sure.

DARREN: Brilliant. Good to know, because it was the first thing and one of my questions and, as Andrew said, having it launch before

AJ: Yeah, no, don't launch it when its half-finished. I think the idea of launch before it is ready is launch before it is perfect. Don't try and get every tiny little bit done. But of course, take readability, navigation, accessibility, colour contrast, these things are going to be

DARREN: Don't let perfect be the enemy of good. Get it out there and then get the feedback. One of my questions for that, do you have a central way of collecting feedback? So all of those things may still need to be done, or is there a centralised point where people can contact so it is all collated?

AJ: Right now all of our projects are very dispersed from each other. We have a team email that we normally put on the bottom of projects, but because the projects are particularly the legacy ones are out there in different environments, no there is nothing really central, apart from the team email at the moment.

DARREN: But there is a way for people to contact. Just looking at the time, I will say thank you very much for your presentation. Very inspiring work going on there at RMIT. So thank you very much, AJ, for that.

AJ: Thank you.