Accessibility Etiquette Panel Discussion Transcript

November 28, 2023

# Introduction and Housekeeping

[Megan] So, thank you so much for joining us today. My name is Megan Sellmer, and I will be the panel moderator today. I am the Web and Usability Assistant, and the amazing tech support will be Riane LaPaire, who is the Braille and Testing Coordinator. And we both work at the National Network for Equitable Library Service, also known as NNELS (the acronym). And we are both part of the PLARC project. So we are really excited to have everyone here today.

Before we start, I'm just going to get, just go over some housekeeping:

* To minimize distractions, we ask you to please keep your microphone muted for the duration of the panel unless you are speaking.
* If you are speaking, please keep background noise to a minimum.
* Just so yeah, please use the chat for questions and other important messages rather than as kind of like a water cooler.
  + Excessive chat and notifications can become quite disruptive for uh participants, especially those using screen readers.
* This panel will be using the built-in Zoom captions, which are available.
* And we would like to note that it will be recorded, and it, the recording of the webinar, will be available on Accessible Libraries in the upcoming weeks.
  + There will be a question period at the end of the panel, and we're going to stop the recording before the question period.

# Land Acknowledgement

So, I'm going to begin quickly with a Land Acknowledgment.

Our presenters and panellists today come from across this land, living and working in what we know now know as Canada. We respect and affirm the inherent and Treaty Rights of all Indigenous Peoples and will continue to honour commitment to self-determination and sovereignty we have made to Indigenous Nations and peoples. We respectfully ask for you all to take a moment to acknowledge the lands on which you reside.

Thank you.

# Panel Discussion

So we're just going to get quickly started. Today, our panellists, Adam, Jennifer, Ka, Letty and Pikiora, will be talking about accessibility etiquette in the library. And I think so we get to the questions and hear from everyone, let's just kind of dive into the panel discussion.

## Can you tell us about a positive accessibility etiquette experience?

[Megan] All right, so the first question today is: Can you tell us about a positive accessibility etiquette experience? And I am going to start with Adam. Oh, maybe not. I will start with Letty. Can you tell us about a positive accessibility etiquette experience?

[Letty] Yeah, sorry. One of my visits to the library, I went on a mission to get a book that a friend recommended in audio format. Because of my vision I cannot read books, but I listen to them. The friend had read the book and met with the author, and the author had said that it was going to be an audio format so I went to the library to find out if there was any way that the library would have it. They did not have it, but the person at the desk said "But I'm going to put in a request for it." So she took my name and number, and email address and within, oh I think it was about a month and a half, six weeks, eight weeks, I got an email that the library book has been ordered, or the audio format has been ordered. And I had gone into the library after receiving that email and that same staff recognized me and even remembered my name, which really impressed me because my name isn't  a typical name and "said did you read the book yet?" and she could name the book. So I was very impressed with her ability to remember me, a patron, as well as my name, and to remember the name of the book, and she was very helpful.

[Megan] Thank you. Adam, can you tell us about a positive accessibility etiquette experience?

[Adam] The best experiences I have, and I'm gonna be sort of bringing a bunch of them together because there no real the experience that sticks out, but are the ones where they actually actually are very helpful, don't make a big fuss about giving the extra help to me with a disability and actually make you feel like, even if that isn't your normal branch, that you're actually thanked and welcomed. So you know, and yeah that's all I want to say about that.

[Megan] Thank you. Jennifer, would you like to go next?

[Jennifer] Hi, well, I actually used to go to the movie matinees at my local library, and they were always very friendly and very helpful, and they would let me spend hours in there just reading after the movie because sometimes I'd have to book my ride later to accommodate the length of the movie, and sometimes I'd be stuck there for quite a long time. So they've let me, you know, browse around the library and read, which is my favourite thing to do. so yeah.

[Megan] Awesome, thank you. Ka?

[Ka] Hi, so I'd say my positive experience I had at a library has been when a group of my friends and I had an appointment with a few librarians to have them show us around their collection. And so that was a very positive experience because I was able to get there and meet the librarians and when it came to the interactions, they were very friendly, and there weren't any incorrect assumptions made. So for example, sometimes there's individuals out there who would instinctively grab or push to kind of indicate where to go, or they might ask a lot of questions about how do you get around, but in that positive experience the librarian just said "How can I best help you?" and I said "I'll just follow you, you know, by voice" and off we went to the room and had a really great

experience with the rest of the event.

[Megan] Thank you. Pikiora?

[Pikiora] Hi there, so for me my favourite experience is when someone leaves happy. So when people approach us because they want access to a book that they love, but it's not available in an accessible format, so in a way that they can read. It might be a niche subject or old or quite rare, helping them to check down the book, have it move to a format that they can read it in, and then send them to the download is incredibly fulfilling and makes me really grateful that I get do this work. And yeah, the joy I see from people when they get to reconnect with a beloved story is the reason I became a librarian.

## Can you tell us about a negative accessibility etiquette experience?

[Megan] Thank you. I love it. Okay let's go to the next, so can you tell us about a negative accessibility etiquette experience? And let's start with Jennifer.

[Jennifer] Well, many years ago, I was reading "Memoirs of a Geisha" and I back then, I could hold actual physical books. And so I was reading it and I accidentally had a spasm due to my cerebral palsy. I don't have any practical vision so my arm will tend to spasm, and sometimes I will knock things over or rip them and in this case, I ripped four pages of the book that I was reading. And I felt terrible so I brought it back to the library, and I paid for the book, in case they wanted to get a new one and the librarian said under her

breath, "This is why we don't lend books to you people." And it just kind of broke my heart because I was already devastated over the fact that I had ruined the book. And that experience made it very very difficult for me to go into a library for years because I was terrified that I would ruin other books. And I would just buy books from Indigo or Chapters because I thought, well if they're my books, then if I ruin them, then it's not a big deal I can just replace them. And it wasn't until I got to Toronto that my partner Adam said to me, "Well you you know that you can get ebooks out of the library so you don't have to read a physical book," and that kind of made me feel better because in the back of my mind, I was still a bit traumatized from my experience. So, and again, it just broke my heart because I love libraries. I spent a lot of time in them as a little girl and a young adult. Thank you.

[Megan] Thank you. Ka?

[Ka] So I would say my negative experience was when I, it was several years ago, and I had gone to my local library to get a library card. And I was with someone, you know, because we were sharing a ride. And the person at the counter started addressing them and work through the process, doing their best to communicate with them, rather than to me. And so that was a really frustrating experience because I felt like a second-class citizen, you know, ignored unless I was addressed directly. And so the important lesson here I think, is that regardless of who we come into the library with, whether it's a friend or a family member or for some people, you know, it could be a variety of people. But we definitely want people to interact with us directly even if the person that we bring in is helping to facilitate, whether that's an interpreter or, you know, someone like that. We definitely want to be addressed directly and being treated as an equal.

[Megan] Thank you very much. Letty?

[Letty] Yes, my negative experience was going to the library and looking at the CD collection for audiobooks. And, like I said earlier, I'm visually impaired, so I do wear glasses which look like normal glasses, but when it comes to reading it's all a blur, and it's easiest to take the glasses off. I have a handheld magnifier that I use, but for this particular experience I also had my identity cane because I've done it before, too that I was just looking with the magnifier and nobody came to help me. So I thought, well, this time, I'll also have the identity cane because that would, should, point out to library staff that I have a vision problem. So I was there a good 15 minutes, and even though I saw staff walking around, not one of them came up to me and said, "I see you know you're looking for something, can I help you? Or how can I help you?" Not one came up to me, so then I proceeded to go to a computer because I was looking for a different book that somebody had referred to that they had written, so I wanted to see what it looked like, and the computer wasn't turned on and I was figuring out, trying to figure out how to turn it on, and I couldn't. So I was just opposite the circulation desk and the librarian was helping another patron, so I patiently waited. I was facing her, had my identity came visible, when the patron left I was looking right at her, but she just sat down and didn't say, "Can I help you with anything?" So I waited till she got nice and comfortable and I said, "Excuse me, could you please help me?" and then she came over to assist me. I said "I'm trying to turn this computer on, and I can't seem to do it." So she got it going, and the font was far too small for me to see, for me to check the circulation like the catalogue, whether my book was there. I said, "Do you have any other computers that are more helpful for people with visual problems like I have?" And she said "Well, that's a very good question. I'll go and find out." So I had to wait about four or five minutes for her to come back to say "Yes, there is. I'll take you to where it is." And then she was helpful, and she logged in the computer and whatever. And then, because the monitor was too far back, I still couldn't see it, and I said, "I'm sorry, I still can't read it. Would you be able to help me find this particular book?" And here again, it wasn't in the collection, so she did go through the process of putting in a request to have it ordered, and it was ordered. But yes, I was somewhat disappointed in that I wasn't, even though it was clear that I was struggling to find someone, some particular item that Library staff didn't approach me, I had to approach them.

[Megan] Thank you very much. Pikiora?

[Pikiora] So although I try my best, I have had  many of these experiences, and I can say on reflection that the majority of the time it's because I've not listened long enough or asked enough questions and really drilled down on what the patron wants. It can feel a bit uncomfortable asking question, after question, but you kind of need to make sure that you understand. Only with a thorough understanding can you be sure you're offering the best solution. So, I try to remember that my role in the interaction is to get enough information to paint a picture for them, to show different pathways, different options, and then allow them to choose. So I don't need to know everything, that's okay I don't like it, that's okay and listening is key. Listening is the thing that I am always working on. Taking my time to listen before I jump in with a solution is a really big thing for me.

[Megan] Thank you, thank you. Adam?

[Adam] Again, I'm gonna take a bunch of my worst experience and put them together. Some of the worst experiences I've had, are ones where, where, I get that you want to sanitize your hand, but do it quickly, don't turn it in, before you touch my stuff, but don't make it into like a ceremonial, religious right, where you slowly open the container and make it a big like your, you're scrubbing in to do surgery. The next thing that can be a turn-off, a type of micro-aggression, is asking me where my help is or why I don't bring help with me when I'm out running errands. I am independent and can do it myself, so dropping hints like maybe you should bring somebody with you, instead of just giving me the extra help. It's just a sign you want to be, you want to belazy. End of thought.

## What could the library have done to make this accessibility etiquette experience a good one?

[Megan] Thank you, Adam. Okay, let's go to the next question. So building off your, the negative experiences you've just shared. What could the library have done to make that accessibility etiquette experience a good one for you? Ka?

[Ka] Sure, so for me, I just say that think as long as Librarians know to address me directly, and if I do have someone with me to directly communicate with me, I think that's the key here. And it's a pretty easy thing to do. If it might be a little bit different than what you expect, but it's, I think, it's it's a mental shift in terms of just thinking about you communicating directly with that individual. And, you know, they might have

different supports, but that your ultimate communication is with them directly and

so that's going to help I think tail your communications style. I think, as I mentioned,

so with my positive experience actually I mentioned that you know it was great and nobody grabbed me or pushed me so that's definitely another thing to keep in mind. So as someone who's totally blind, I travel independently, and sometimes, it means asking for directions; it means following someone: it means using wayfinding tools and relying on my travel skills. And so having a polite interaction in the library where the library, a librarian, just stops and asks "Hey do you need any help?" And if I say yes, "How can I help you?" then that will make a big difference and then we can go from there. So, yeah there's, there's really not much to it. But, yeah these things, I think, would definitely make a good experience going to the library.

[Megan] Thank you. Jennifer?

[Jennifer] In my bad experience or negative, sorry negative experience, I was actually trying to pay for the book that that I ripped and I think they could have done better in recognizing that yes I, unfortunately, I did rip the library's property, but I was taking steps to make them whole by offering them some money to pay for the book. And I think that they could have done better in their understanding of what I was experiencing. And if you see somebody with different, with a different disability, there there are different levels of disability, so you have to be cognizant of that. Thank you.

[Megan] Thank you. Letty?

[Letty] Yes, in my situation which was already been mentioned if library staff could approach me, or anyone else that is using a hand magnifier, identity cane, in a wheelchair, or had trouble standing, has some kind of visible disability, just approach them and say, "Can I help you with anything?" If I don't need help, I would politely say, "Oh, thank you for asking, but I'm okay." If I do need help then I would say, "Yes, I'm looking for this book or books by this author," and I think it would make the experience much more pleasurable being in the library. And also, the staff not knowing that there was a computer for someone with visual difficulties, you, maybe it was her first day on the job, I don't know, but I think it's important that if you're hiring staff in your library that they are properly trained so that they should know that type of question without having to go and ask someone. And that would have been, you know, nice to have that comfort level, that they are trained on how to help people with disabilities. Thank you.

[Megan] Thank you, thank you very much. Adam?

[Adam] I would say if you want to use gloves or sanitizer, that's fine just don't make a big ceremony out of it. And also, you know, like don't and, you know, generally just don't hint at why can somebody else help you? You know, if you're really uncomfortable helping me and there's another staff member and you want to say can I have this person help you and that's different, but just don't make a big fuss out of needing to give me a little bit of extra help. That's my advice.

[Megan] Thank you. Pikiora?

[Pikiora] So, I think that when you're working in a library, you have a lot of groups that visit the library that need, need a little bit more time. People who haven't visited the library before or patrons that need help physically navigating the library, and patients with a print disability are the same. It may take a wee bit longer to gauge their comfort within the library, what they know about the library, and what the library offers. But it just means that we need to ask the right questions, so we understand what they're looking

for and most of all, listen, you know, make sure you really understand before you leap into action. And speaking of leaping into action, one thing that I did that, I looked back on with great embarrassment, was that someone came into the library looking for something and after listening to what they were looking for in great excitement I wandered off to the area in the shelves where their book was and completely forgot that they had no idea where I'd gone. So I still look back and I'm so embarrassed because then I had to go back to the front desk and go, "Oh would you like to follow me? I can show you where that is" and make sure I stayed with them instead of just wandering off. So yeah, that's something that you don't necessarily think about, and you can have that for free, so you don't have to repeat my mistake.

## What do you want library staff to know or advice to take away about accessibility etiquette?

[Megan] Thank you very much. Thank you. Okay, last question: What do you want Library staff to know about or advice to take away about accessibility etiquette? Jennifer, I'll start with you if that works.

[Jennifer] Okay, thank you. I just want people to take away from the experience is that, as I, as I said there all, there are all different levels of disability. They are all, we're all unique and we all have specific needs and it doesn't, it doesn't take a lot to say, "What can I do to help you? Or do you need help?" Or because, like Letty said, if I don't need help I can certainly tell you. I, you know, that I don't need help, but, you know, don't be shy and to just recognize that just because I have CP, doesn't mean that the next person coming in will necessarily be, may, maybe they're maybe they're blind, or they walk with the cane, you you don't know. So it's best to just ask rather assume. Thank you.

[Megan] Thank you. Letty?

[Letty] Yes, Jennifer kind of said what I was going to say, but yes offering assistance is greatly appreciated. That's a big thing, I look upon it as customer service, like when I go in a store as well. I often get people, they could see, you know, I'm in a grocery store, and I'm looking high up on the top shelf. I'm only 4' 6, so obviously I can't reach the top shelf, and they'll say, "Oh are you trying to get something up there?" and I said "Yes, would you be able to get me whatever that is?" So, it's just a customer service etiquette I would call it. And to have that in a library would be greatly appreciated as well.

[Megan] Thank you. Adam?

[Adam] The old adage, treat people like you want to be treated. You know, think about think about your best experience and just try to do your best to treat us that way. And just use common sense. Also, do your best to try and stay in the moment. I think, I think you will provide better service to everyone that way.

[Megan] Thank you. Pikiora?

[Pikiora] I remember when, back in my day, libraries didn't have a whole lot for people with print disabilities, like maybe a few cassette tape stories on dusty shelves or laser nice shiny CD cases, but with the move to digital collections there are now vast number of books being published that wouldn't have been previously, and in accessible formats. So libraries have more now than we've ever had for people with print disabilities. And as people realize what libraries have for them and as our population ages and there's more people that need it, it's more important than ever that we're aware of the unique needs of people with print disabilities. And some of those queries can be quite complex, but don't be put off by scary terminology or subjects you don't feel confident, in the myriad of formats, the devices, and the software to use them and how they interact can be super complex but no one expects you to be an expert. I'm not even an expert and it's 90% of what I do. But just try your best with good intentions and open willingness, because that's enough and of course, I am always just an email way [support@nnels.ca](mailto:support@nnels.ca). And I might not know the answer, but as you all do, I will do my best for you and your patent and no question is a dumb question. So you know times are changing, let's just try our best.

[Megan] Thank you so much. Ka?

[Ka] Goodness, how do I follow up after that?

[Megan] I know it's so good.

[Ka] Yeah, so I just echo what everyone has said, and remember that you're here to provide great service to everyone, which, of course, includes persons with disabilities. And we know there's a lot to learn and that you're not going to have all the information and it's okay to say, "Sorry, I'm not sure how to help." Or that "I don't know this information," but as long as you're willing to learn and willing to find out then we're very appreciative. So just remember if, you don't remember anything else from this panel, remember that we're all patrons, and we all love to read, and love using the library, and that it only takes a simple question of, "Hi, how can I help you?" to make the experience a great one.

[Megan] Thank you so much, everybody. This has been so great.