Hadley Presents

Braille for Everyday Use

Presented by Ricky Enger

Ricky Enger: Welcome to Hadley Presents. I'm your host, Ricky Enger, inviting you to sit back, relax, and enjoy a conversation with the experts. In this episode, Hadley learner, Mark Andrews, and co-director of research and development, Kim Walker, join to discuss braille for everyday use. Welcome to the show, both of you.

Kim Walker: Thanks, Ricky.

Mark Andrews: Thank you.

Ricky Enger: It is so good to have you here and I am delighted to have the chance to talk about this project, which I think literally every person at Hadley has had a hand in, in some way or another, which is pretty appropriate considering where we came from and why we're here in the first place. So yeah, looking forward to talking about that. But before we do, why don't we just get a quick intro from each of you. Kim, we'll have you go first.

Kim Walker: I'm Kim Walker. And as Ricky mentioned, I am part of the research and development team at Hadley. I've been in the field of vision for over 30 years now, taught children braille, adults braille, and love braille. My whole being and whole career is about braille.

Ricky Enger: Love it. Anyone who has a passion for braille is certainly welcome on this show anytime. Mark, how about you? Tell us a bit about yourself.

Mark Andrews: I used to teach photography and I used to drive a truck. Let's see, undergraduate, I would read for the blind.

Ricky Enger: Wow. So, you had a connection with the blind well before you had a more personal experience with that?

Mark Andrews: That's true. I'm not fully dark. I have low vision. I am unable to drive any longer. I am however able to navigate for example, I can walk into town and do grocery shopping. It's a little different for me. I use my earbuds and Seeing AI and it reads me the prices of things and I can get home.

Ricky Enger: Fantastic. It's great to have you here and thanks so much for that intro, and thanks for being here. As I sort of alluded to in the introduction here, we're going to be talking about Hadley's Braille for Everyday Use. It's interesting because Hadley has always been known, I mean, literally for 100 years, we've been known for teaching braille. So, it's been at the core of what Hadley does. Taking a look at how we deliver braille and how we teach braille, making any changes to that is not a decision that would be made lightly, I think. So, what was the thought process behind reexamining that?

Kim Walker: Hadley, truly, has been known for teaching braille for over 100 years. And you know, when William Hadley started braille at the time, braille by mail, that had to be very revolutionary and unheard of. And I'm sure there were some skeptics. So, we feel like this new approach to teaching braille is just as revolutionary. We were having some dropout rates. I'm wondering, why weren't people completing our courses? We were seeing people come in, sometimes they would start the course, maybe get a few lessons in and stop. Sometimes they would get the material and never even start. We went directly to our learners and said, "Hey, what's going on? What did you feel about these courses?" And we heard some very distinctive things. And we heard something like, "Well, I'm overwhelmed. There's so much here. I don't know where to start. I feel like I'm learning alone." And then when they found out that they were going to need to take a test, and they would need to turn an assignment in, they just simply said, "That just does not fit into my life at this time."

And another component was sometimes they would have an NLS player to play the cartridge on. And sometimes they had one and had no clue about how to work it. And they felt like they were just alone. Thinking about that, that's certainly not the way we wanted to be presenting our braille courses. That really started our research, looking at, "How does the adult population learn to read braille?"

Ricky Enger: Yeah. Because I would imagine it's a lot different for somebody who's an adult, than it is for a school-aged child learning the literacy for the first time. If you're an adult, maybe that's not where you're starting, right?

Kim Walker: Absolutely. And I taught children for years, we're building those reading skills. But when we were looking at our adult learner, they already know how to read. They have that prior knowledge of reading, they know the letters, they know the sounds of letters, they know words. How could we approach it from that prior knowledge of our adult learners? Of course, our content is always based on sound research-based methodology. What is the best practice in teaching? What is this adult learner want? I want it quickly. I want small chunks of learning. I want to be able to use it as soon as I do it. I don't want it to feel like I'm reading a book and I'm having to learn on my own and it's boring. So, we looked at those things and took a truly different approach.

Ricky Enger: That makes a lot of sense, and you just made me think about something actually when you mentioned reading a book or looking at a book to try and get through how to learn braille. But that got me thinking about why adults might learn braille. I would imagine that reading a book or a magazine is part of it, but maybe that's not the motivation factor for everybody at least initially. Mark, what was it for you? What made you even consider taking a look at braille?

Mark Andrews: I am not stationary. I'm not stuck in the house. I go to doctor's offices, I go to various places, and frequently I can't read the signs. But there is braille there, like in an elevator. In an elevator, there doesn't seem to be a standard. The numbers don't always go left to right. Sometimes they go vertically. So, I can't get the little color numeral every time. So, if I can feel it, it's helpful. Doctors' offices have placards outside with the name, but again, sometimes it's not really without shoving my face into the wall. I can't really be sure of where I'm going. And braille would be a big help for that.

Ricky Enger: That's an awesome practical example of something that you would do. It doesn't have anything to do with reading literature, is wonderful that as that is, it's something that you could find use for immediately in your daily life. Kim, you do a lot of communication with our learners as well. Are there some other practical examples of why somebody might choose to learn braille?

Kim Walker: We heard exactly what Mark was saying. We heard that from other testers also, they're like, "Well, I really don't want to read a book. I want to be able to use the elevator, I want to be able to read a menu. I want to be able to read room signs." We had some learners that that was their end goal. We did look at what is the end goal for this learner? Not that it's going to be, "I'm going to teach you to read a book or a magazine," but you're going to be able to be very practical with this braille. So, Mark hit it spot on. We heard that so many times, "I just would really like to read the elevator," and we actually built it into our books, teaching an elevator panel. Of course, exactly what Mark said, they're not always the same, but we have all of the components there, so that someone will be able to feel that, learn how to scan that panel, and then of course learn the braille that's on that. So, we heard lots of reasons for braille, as far as practical use. Everyday usage that I can immediately use.

Ricky Enger: What does that design look like? What's the delivery method? What is somebody going to get when they start with this?

Kim Walker: You mentioned that we do have the adult learners. Something that we did find out is that we had over 80% of our learners had usable vision. So, we decided to take a multimedia approach to it. We decided to do a large print on the top of the workbook, so that if someone had vision and they wanted to look how the braille cell is set up, how the letters are set up, what's the dot configuration. And then, there's a middle line on the pages. And below the line, it's only braille.

So, we wanted to give that person a chance if they wanted to look at it, but then go below that middle line and have that experience of taking what you saw and putting it to your fingers, and what are your fingers telling you? Now we also in the design, it is designed for someone who has no vision. Some of our testers had no vision. They didn't use the large print. It didn't matter.

They still had the braille, there's always a braille component in the top left corner of the page. So, we made it very easy to navigate. We decided to deliver some of the audio on the computer for those who have access. You can go on the computer, it will have the same page, it will show how you're scanning. And then we have telephone access for those who are offline and don't use the computer.

The really cool thing about this audio delivery is, "Hey, you're on a page." And you're like, "Oh my gosh, I really can't tell that D from that F. What do I do with that?" Or, "I have a question about something." If you're online, you select the help button. It immediately connects you to one of those braille experts that can help you answer any question, and if you you're on the phone, you'll just press the zero and that will automatically take you to a braille expert that's there to help you at any time to answer any question.

We really thought what a cool way to get immediate help because in our research, we knew that when an adult learner is learning something new, if they have a question, they don't want to wait a week. They want their questions answered immediately. So, we really like those features being built in.

Ricky Enger: Knowing that you're developing braille, not necessarily for school-aged kids, and not necessarily for someone who is totally blind, did that alter how you approached developing the program that that we're using now?

Kim Walker: Absolutely. Of course, we looked at those bite size pieces of learning. What we decided to do is to teach three or four letters or numbers at a time, and then give the learner a chance to engage with those few letters or numbers and have fun sort of a game-like. We knew we needed to keep it simple, and to build their confidence in, because we heard some people say, "I'm afraid, I can't learn it. I'm just so afraid it's going to be so hard. I've looked at braille on buildings. I just truly can't figure out what it is and how it works."

We wanted to keep it simple, we wanted to build that success in, and I can remember one tester started into the book and she got to page five, and she said, "Oh my gosh. I already know how to read some braille and I'm only on page five." She was just so excited that she was successful from the very beginning.

We really wanted to build that in, make it very conversational. Some people said, "I felt like I was all alone, no one called me. I didn't have any support." So, we wanted to build an in that conversational tone to make it feel like someone is sitting beside of the learner, where they're with you, we're teaching you the braille. Those were some very specific components that we built into this new design.

Ricky Enger: When you built it, and you're kind of all patting yourselves on the back and going, "Wow, we did great." I don't think it made its way out into the world just yet. What happened once that initial prototype was built?

Kim Walker: We had our best guesstimate. We tested it on spouses, our neighbors, just say, "Does this make some sense? Can someone navigate this?" We put it together. We built a prototype. We were like, "Okay, we have the prototype, we have the audio, and now we need people to test this." And that's where Mark came in and many others, and it was such valuable information we received from the testers, because we would test it, we would take notes, we would go back, we would redesign, we would push it back out with the new design.

We would test it; we would push it back. Even the audio parts, we felt like we had a nice booklet with the braille and the presentation, but then how are we going to deliver that audio? So, we tested that. Those are all of the components, many, many months, many, many testers going in and having that experience and saying, "I like this, I don't understand this. Don't like this." And we will always go back to the table and do a redesign. So that was our approach to this new design.

Ricky Enger: Yeah. And I think it helps a lot with that feeling of aloneness that a lot of people had, trying to learn braille on their own when you can reach out to somebody and get that help, then you're not doing it all by yourself. So, Mark, after there were a couple of prototypes, you were able to get a sneak peek at this project before it was available to everyone else. What did you think when you first got your braille book and kind of started diving into the testing?

Mark Andrews: I thought it was amazing. I never used anything like this, it's accessible. I was never stymied by any part of it. I had received a letter from the IRS asking me if I wanted my 1040 in braille and they sent me a braille form, and it was really intimidating. And so that was my introduction to braille, but the book took away all of that intimidation and in conjunction with the narrator, was very calming and very soothing, nothing was rushed, you could move at your own pace. It was a tremendous learning experience. It's not a one and done. Learning takes time and especially something like this where it's multisensory, but I found it to be wonderful. I can't say enough good about it.

Ricky Enger: What was it like emotionally making that step and deciding to learn braille? It was certainly, you mentioned intimidating. Did you have other hesitancy besides, "Oh gosh, I'll never be able to do this." And kind of what changed initially? How were you feeling about whether braille was for you or not and did that change at all?

Mark Andrews: Braille is extremely helpful for me in a practical sense. The elevator, the room placards, the finding a hotel room. That's a very practical use for me. The National Library System is so great with books and everything else, and with the assistive technology of my equipment, I get along very well. But there are times when I really need something different, and braille is that something different. I looked at it as intimidating, but more of a challenge. It wasn't necessarily scary. It was just a challenge.

Ricky Enger: And it sounds like once you dived in, it became a lot less about, "Oh yeah, here are these bumps that I'll never figure out." And now it's going to be another tool in the toolbox for you, right?

Mark Andrews: Absolutely. Again, it lines up with all the assistive technology that I have. And it's just one more thing to help me get through my life. I can't say enough good about it. It was a wonderful experience to learn it. The learning process in it was great. I like to learn. And this was so well done, polished, that I was so impressed. I was disappointed when I ran through the book. I don't need a lot of braille I need some. But I wanted to keep learning. It was such a positive experience. Again, the voiceover was great, didn't sound ever impatient or pushing you, warm and accepting and worked with you it seemed. It was great.

Kim Walker: So, Mark, listening to you and listening to what you're saying about the program, I can't tell you how we, as the research team, we were holding our breath. We did our research, we felt like we had a really good design, but as we were pushing it out to our testers, we would be so nervous. We were truly almost holding our breath to hear how a person interacted with it. It's just so wonderful to hear how you interacted with it and how pleased you were. That really kept us going, we took your information, we took the other tester information and we moved forward. We really appreciate you taking your time and it did take a bit of time and looking at this and letting us know, are you on the right track, you could do better here, I like this, improve this. We really want to thank you.

Mark Andrews: There are so many places where people have tried their best and really fallen short. There was a library thing, and they were trying to give you the help section. And I'm trying to read it and it's a blur, just so frustrating. And it was clearly put together by someone who was not vision-impaired and had no experience in teaching it. And then you compare something like that, to the braille learning system that Hadley has. And it's night and day, there's no comparison. One, you're just struggling to select the text and then get it to read it. And as opposed to sitting down with the book and the online portion of it and working through - so simple, so easy. I've only looked at the Hadley experience as being positive and I wanted to do more.

Ricky Enger: Wow. This is such a great testimonial and just hearing from each of you, Kim, you along with the research and development team, really working hard to try and build what was going to be a successful project, and then to have someone giving feedback. And it's just this continuous loop of you learning from each other and ultimately created what is going to be a very successful project. And I'm looking forward to hearing from so many people like Mark, who are able to just dive in and learning braille is not a chore. It's nothing to dread. It's fun. If somebody is interested in doing that, because for sure, this sounds like amazing and positive news for somebody who's looking to read braille, how do they get access to this?

Kim Walker: They certainly can call our Hadley 800 number, 800-323-4238 for our help desk. They will totally get you set up, they'll go over the program, they will get your book mailed out to you and tell you, you as the adult learner, you decide. Do you want to do it on the computer? Do you want to do it online? And they'll totally get you set up. You can also go to this really long address.

Ricky Enger: We'll have that at our show notes.

Kim Walker: Okay. We encourage everyone who wants to learn braille in a tactile manner. Please contact us.

Ricky Enger: This is so exciting. Any final thoughts that we did cover from either of you? Just things that you would leave someone with, who's thinking about learning braille, still maybe a little bit on the fence, because "I'm not sure if this is for me or I'm not sure I can do it."

Mark Andrews: I would only recommend it. There should be no hesitance about this. It improves your life. There's a lot more to having vision impairment than just being vision impaired. There's a huge emotional impact in this. You don't need to be feeling like you've been sidelined. Learning this, with this system, brings you back to a more full life.

Ricky Enger: It's very well said. Kim, anything from you?

Kim Walker: Exactly what Mark said. We had people that were a little hesitant. They thought maybe it's not for me, but some of the comments we heard is, "It made me want to learn braille." And then another person said, "I'm beginning to accept the fact that this is for me," there's a use for braille even for those with low vision. Our feedback, as we were testing and redefining our product, it was overwhelmingly positive. We encourage everyone to give it a try.

Ricky Enger: Thank you both so much for stopping by and discussing braille. It really is an exciting time having just this way to learn braille is an excellent tool in the toolbox. Thank you both so much for dropping by.

Kim Walker: Thanks, Ricky. Thanks a bunch, Mark, for everything you've done for us.

Mark Andrews: I can't thank you enough for what you've done.

Ricky Enger: Got something to say? Share your thoughts about this episode of Hadley Presents or make suggestions for future episodes. We'd love to hear from you. Send us an email at podcast@hadley.edu. That's P-O-D-C-A-S-T@hadley.edu. Or leave us a message at 847-784-2870. Thanks for listening.