SAIT Podcast: Applied UX Design Episode 2

Lora: Hi, my name is Lora Bucsis, and I'm with continuing education and professional studies at SAIT, and I'm here with my friend, Zach Novak.

Zach: Hi, I'm Zach, and I'm the founder of Careers in Technology and Innovation.

Lora: Today we're talking about user experience design because we're thinking that it's a great role in Alberta's economy right now and impacting a lot of organizations.

Zach: Yeah, I feel like in Alberta we haven't put a lot of thought into design. We're very engineering based, but it's great to see such growth in the profession. And today we have a special guest. Emily Mazurek, who I got to meet a couple months ago at a UX meet up. She is a UX designer who has a lot to say about UX, has inspired probably hundreds, maybe thousands of potential UX designers through her content and through LinkedIn. It's really exciting to have her today, and we're excited for you to enjoy this conversation.

ANNCR: Now, here's a career you never knew existed.

Emilie: Hi, my name is Emily Mazurek, and I work as a user experience designer.

Zach: Welcome, Emily, to the podcast. I am really excited that you're here. We got to meet a couple months ago, and I feel like I've learned so much about UX. We are so excited to have you here. Welcome.

Emilie: Thank you so much for having me. It is great to be here.

Lora: So, Emily, can you tell us, what is UX?

Emilie: I feel like that's already a loaded question. We are off to the races here. UX stands for user experience, so that is something that people often don't know when I say I'm a UX designer. My role is to make sure that I understand what the user or the customer is experiencing so that I can design something that works for them. Not only is it good for the customer, but it's actually good for the business too, because then we're not wasting money building something that doesn't work. So, the whole premise behind UX is to understand what works for the user, try to empathize with them, and build something that can be helpful to them and ultimately helpful for the business.

Lora: So, this feels like a new role, especially in Alberta. And what is the value that organizations are seeing come out of UX design?

Emilie: There's actually a huge amount of return on investment that you get if you're investing in user experience designers, because, like I mentioned earlier, if you make sure that you're tackling the right problems from the start, you're going to actually build something that

resonates with your customers, that actually works for them, and that they find easy and intuitive to use. They're going to get their money back because they've solved the right problem the first time around, and they don't have to go back later, restart at the drawing board, and try to find what the problem is when they've already basically sorted it out the first time.

Zach: When you do UX design, or user experience design, is there a break between the user experience work that you do and the design work, or do you see it as just one large body?

Emilie: It's best if it can all work together. It should always be UX before UI, and that's probably not intuitive to many people listening. But the user experience encompasses the user interface, which stands for UI, and that's basically the visual side of things. So, if people think, "Oh, I'm a designer in tech, I design websites to make them look great." And yes, that's part of it, but it really needs to encompass the research and what actually helps the user or the customer, because if it's just purely visual, you're not actually getting to the root of the problem. So it's best if they can work in tandem with each other, starting with the research, actually understanding the problem space, talking to people that use the product, or are intending to use the product, getting their perspective, and zeroing in on the problem. And then, once you have all that information, you're dialling in on the visual side of things for the solution and ultimately testing that again. So, it comes full circle in making sure every single time that you're solving the right problem.

Zach: Can you provide some examples of where UX has gone really well and where it has gone not so well?

Emilie: Like in my personal life?

Zach: Personal life, things you've observed at work.

Emilie: To me, UX always goes really well when you invest the time into actually talking to your customers. And that's almost always the part of the process that employers aren't as excited about spending money on because you don't really see the return visually. You don't really get those tangible results that you can see in your hand but it really impact the final deliverables. So, my favourite projects that I've always worked on are the ones where I actually get to talk to people who are going to use the product. And you're going to learn so much more than what you initially thought you understood, because there are going to be problems that you had no idea people were encountering until you actually talk to them. So those projects generally work out best because you're able to zero in on what you should be solving. The ones that don't go as well are the ones that maybe don't have the time or the resources to invest in the research side of things, and it's more purely from a visual standpoint. And those can still be rewarding, and you can sometimes luck out and solve the right problem, but it's so much better when you can talk to the customer, build something personal for them, and then talk to them afterwards and hear the impact that it's actually had.

Zach: Sometimes, when I think about a designer, I think about someone in a room building

beautiful designs or visual designs, but what you're saying is that it's a lot more about communication, empathy, and collaboration. Is that right?

Emilie: Oh, completely. Yes. It's about the soft skills. Those are so important to highlight as something that's absolutely critical to have if you're going to be in this career.

Lora: So how did you get into it?

Emilie: I actually have an unconventional path to design—I thought I wanted to be a doctor. So I actually studied biochemistry at the university. I worked in a microbiology lab. I wrote the MCAT. I studied abroad. I volunteered. I did all the things that I thought I was supposed to do to get into that career. And then, when it actually came time to applying and getting in, I had more anxiety that I would actually get a spot rather than get rejected. So that was probably not my first sign, but it was the first sign I paid attention to. That was like, okay, this is probably not something that's going to be a great fit for me. So, I actually decided to pursue a round of career counselling, and that was super helpful because I actually got to really hone in on the things that I really need in a career to feel a sense of achievement. And I was spitting out with a couple options at the end that could be good fits. And UX Designer came up as one of them, and I'd heard a little bit about it, but not too much. So, I did a lot more research, come to find out that it plays really well to my strengths as a scientist. There's an analytical data-driven approach that you have to incorporate into that, but also a huge problem-solving aspect. So, I actually worked in hospitality for over a decade, and that was probably my favourite part of the job. Getting to meet new people on a daily basis, interacting with them, solving their problems, and then, ultimately, the whole idea of UX design is advocating for the user. And that's why the majority of people are excited about medicine. They want to help people, right? So it felt like it was all coming together. So I was like, "This seems like an avenue that's definitely worth checking out." So, I did a little bit more research and found out that you can actually get into UX design by doing a Bootcamp or a certificate, which was especially appealing to me since I'd already undergone my undergraduate degree for four years and the idea of going back to school for another four to maybe longer years… Not as exciting. So, I was like, "Wow, I can have a diploma in three months and hit the ground running. That's pretty cool." So, I decided to take that route and I'm definitely oversimplifying it and making it sound a lot easier than it actually is, but I was fortunate enough where that ended up being a good choice for me, and I was able to secure a role shortly after.

Lora: Do you think you need to have design skills to be able to get into UX, or are the elements of empathy and being able to put yourself in the place of the user more important? How important is design?

Emilie: I would say that it's still important, because you do need to have an eye for design, especially if you're going to be working on the visual side of things. But if you don't have an eye for design, I don't want to discourage you and say that you can't do this. Maybe there's just a different part of the process that would be a better fit for you. Maybe you want to go into UX research; I'm what's considered a generalist, so I do a little bit of the entire process. I talk to the

users at the beginning, I do designs and hand them off to developers, and I test with customers again as well. But maybe you're just going to talk to customers and do the testing afterwards, and then there would be a different designer who could do the visual side of things, and that's how a lot of companies actually operate. So, there's many different roles within UX. You don't necessarily have to be the most creative, beautiful artist to be a UX designer.

Lora: So, what does a day look like for you?

Emilie: My day is definitely flexible, and that's something that I love about it. My day is at my disposal to use how I need to get my work done. So, I have a stand-up in the morning with my entire team, and we go over, "What did you work on yesterday? What did you work on today?" That meeting is about 15 minutes long, and then I might have one or two more meetings, but generally, the rest of the day is open at my discretion to use as I see fit. Usually, I'll have some design work that I might need to do. I might be doing some research for a new project. I might have an interview with a customer. I might have to make sure my design file is ready to go for developers and hop on a meeting with them to clarify things. There's a wide variety of things I get to do on a daily basis, and it's never exactly the same day-to-day. So that's one of the things I really enjoy about it as well.

Lora: That's amazing. We get questions all the time from students or potential students that are considering UX, and so we had one from Sophie.

Student: Hey Emily, I am a student here at SAIT. I am just wondering what the difference is between product management and UX design?

Emilie: Product management is going to be working very closely with UX designers, and we often work hand in hand. With my PM on many projects, generally, I'm going to be given a document that has a brief of the entire project. Why are we doing this? What data do we have? What is the timeline? Who will be responsible for each part? The product manager is responsible for putting all of that together and basically making sure the project runs smoothly. My job as the designer is to work with them, understand the timelines, ask all the relevant questions, and get the data and all the answers that I need from them to make informed decisions to build the design, and then we work together to basically hand that over to the software developers and just make sure that everything runs seamlessly. So I would say in short, the product manager is more responsible for overseeing the project and understanding the timeline and making sure that everything is accounted for and the data versus the designer, at least in my experience, is more responsible for the visual side of things and making sure that everything with the developer goes smoothly.

Lora: Do you work as part of a team, or is it mostly independent work?

Emilie: So the more senior you get, the more independent it does tend to get. Right now I do work on a team, but we all individually own our own projects. But that's not to say that we don't work together still. So twice a week we have a design sync where we all get together for

about an hour, go over what we're working on, and give feedback to one another. Which is hugely helpful because you almost never have the perfect design the first time around. And people are always going to see things in a different way than you will. So, we usually work collaboratively in the sense of, "How can we make this better?" But we usually take control of our own projects.

Zach: When you're mentioning a team; right now, you're talking about the design team. But in those stand-ups, who's it typically with in those situations?

Emilie: So, I'll work closely with software developers or engineers, both front end and back end, who will also be product managers. So, I work closely with them. They'll generally have a good sense of what's the direction of the project, what's the strategy, and what's the timeline, keeping things organized. And then I'll also sometimes work with the QA, or quality analyst. They're going to check the work after it's been built and make sure that it follows all the specs and that the code doesn't break, anything like that. And I'm also going to be working with a lot of stakeholders as well. They generally won't be in a morning stand-up, but if I'm working on a commerce project, I'm going to have to check in with the commerce team and say, "Hey, we're thinking about this for the website. What do you think? Oh, you do not like this idea. Okay, let's do this instead." So, I have to work closely with a lot of different people, because many different people are going to have an opinion on the design that I'm building usually.

Zach: As a career path, what type of organizations are UX designers working for these days?

Emilie: So, I think there's a misconception that, like, "Oh, it's just in tech", but that's not necessarily the case. Basically, anybody that has a digital product can benefit from having a UX designer. So right now, I work closely with the e-commerce team. There are also people who work in software who are UX designers. There are people in tech from many different places. I'm even seeing companies now where it's like they're solving for things like social media. They need to have UX designers to make sure that their website is designed well. Even more obscure products, like there are companies that are trying to make science more approachable for the everyday person and trying to tell stories and just have different apps and products. So, there are a ton of companies, and it seems to be expanding, from my perspective as well.

Zach: Is there a lot of collaboration among different organizations and different people in design, in the ecosystem, and in the community about best practices and learnings and moving the profession forward?

Emilie: That's one of my favourite things about the UX community: it's so welcoming, inclusive, and collaborative. Even just on LinkedIn or in different Slack groups, so many people are just willing to help with a portfolio review, offer advice, share opinions, or even talk about an experience they had. The information is absolutely available if you're just willing to look, and people are so friendly and helpful.

Lora: What do you think is the hardest thing about being a UX designer?

Emilie: Oh, that's a good question. The hardest thing—and maybe it sounds obvious—is that you can't get too attached to your designs. You might think you have the perfect thing built, and then someone is going to say they don't like that. They might not even have a good reason as to why they don't like that, but we have to make sure that everybody is happy, and we can't take things personally. So, I'm often going to design things probably three, four, or maybe even five times before they actually get sent. So, you definitely can't get too emotionally attached to the things you're building, which is hard because you put a lot of time and investment into them. And it feels like something that you've built, but you have to remember that you're building it for the product and for the company. It is not for you.

Lora: Yes. I suppose you would always have your favourites of what you would want to see, and it's based on your research as well so that makes sense.

Emilie: Absolutely, yeah. You definitely might build something once and think it looks so great, but then you hear from the customer that it doesn't really function well and is not intuitive for them. Darn, I really thought that was the answer. So yeah, you have to be very flexible and willing to iterate on your existing work for sure.

Lora: So, when you think about UX designers, is there an ideal UX designer, or what kind of skills do you think you would have come into it? So, you mentioned empathy, and you mentioned some of that. Are there other skills that make sense for somebody transitioning into that?

Emilie: Yeah, initially I had this idea that you had to be very technical and understand how to use the tech stack, and while all that's true, arguably the way more important thing from my perspective is actually the soft skills. So being able to communicate, if you have the perfect design built but you can't explain that to your stakeholders, the people that are invested in it, it doesn't matter because they won't buy into it and it won't get built. So being able to communicate clearly with your team, even on deadlines and expectations, and asking the right questions, maybe even with the users or customers that you're interviewing. Probably the most important thing from my perspective is also collaboration. Like I mentioned previously, I collaborate with a ton of different people on every project, so I have to make sure that we're all on the same page. Otherwise, there's going to be friction, and it's not going to work out in anyone's favour. But also, I would say that problem solving is hugely important because sometimes you're going to be given "Hey, we need this to work like this", and you're not given the solution. You have to come up with it, or you have to find it. So being creative in a way where you can problem solve is also really important.

Lora: So, what tools do you need to use, or what tools do you use, and do you need to know how to code? How technical do you actually need to be in design?

Emilie: That's one of the best parts about this, at least for me when I was looking into it, I was like, "You don't have to code. Are you kidding me? That is awesome." I get to do the fun part. Like, I get to talk to people, design something that actually works, and then somebody else

builds it. That is super cool. So that was another misconception I had when getting into the industry, like, "Oh, I need to learn how to code." Not because I necessarily thought that I would be doing a lot of coding, but because it would be helpful. It is really not. If you have a basic idea of how things are built in CSS or HTML, that's pretty good. That is enough of a start. And you can always communicate with your software developers as well. "Hey, I am thinking about this. Do you think that will work?" "Oh, no, we can't do that because when we design for response, if it's going to stretch like this." "Okay, cool." So, if you can just talk to people and ask questions, you definitely don't have to know how to code. On the other hand, I do think it is beneficial to be technical, you are going to be analysing a lot of data, from testing, to make sure that your design is working the way you think it is. So, if you're able to analyse data or if you can be technical with the way you're designing as well. People joke about pixel perfect, and I don't necessarily love that term, but there is some kind of standard you want to adhere to, and grid systems and things like that. So, there is some regulations and some rules, I should say, that you'll definitely need to adhere to as well when you're designing.

Zach: If I am listening to this podcast right now, and I'm like, "Okay, this is really interesting. I might think I might be a good fit as a UX designer." What advice would you give that person to get started?

Emilie: So, I would definitely look at your past experience and start thinking about what might be relevant to UX and how you can frame it in that way. That would be a good place to start, but you're probably going to need some education or schooling as well. There are three main courses that people tend to take. You can actually go to university and get a degree in user experience design or interaction design. That's an accredited way to obviously have a certification and a strong jumping-off point. For me, that wasn't my favourite choice because I'd already been to university and didn't really want to invest that amount of time. And that's another reason why the industry is so great: there's not necessarily a perfect, clear-cut path to being a designer. So, like I mentioned before, I did a three-month boot camp, and that worked great for me. I learned all the fundamentals, or as much as you can learn in 12 weeks. That gave me a really good base for me to jump off, keep learning from, and basically get my foot in the door.

Emilie: So that's another option as well. There are a lot of different certificate programs and boot camps going around, and then the last option is actually to be self-taught, and I know that might sound kind of crazy, but you can totally be self-taught. There are so many great resources available online now that you don't necessarily need a certificate. The number of times I've been asked to see my certificate is zero. That just goes to show that of course I do have a university degree as well, so let's not pretend like that's not beneficial to also have that credibility. You can be self-taught, and if you can build a strong portfolio, that's basically the next step that you'll need to land yourself a job. You can advocate for your past experiences and what you know now, and that can sometimes be enough to get you in the door.

Lora: That's definitely what we heard from employers when we were talking to them. They really reiterated that they just want to see the portfolio and hear about how designers are

solving problems. And that seemed to be the biggest variable in terms of deciding who they hire and looking at that skillset.

Emilie: Absolutely. Yes. Employers tend to be very open-minded when it comes to that which is awesome. Especially for people like me who don't come from a traditional background, so to speak.

Lora: We also found that there were a lot of UX roles across industries as well. In some industries, you wouldn't even think about them. So in energy, healthcare, and agriculture, they're all building apps or applications for their customers and their internal staff as well. So, there's a ton of demand. What are you thinking in terms of the trajectory of the career? Do you see a lot of opportunity for people who are getting into UX?

Emilie: So right now, I'd love to be like, "There are so many opportunities, especially for juniors." That's just not the case. Unfortunately, people have clued in that this is a cool job in tech. You don't have to code. It pays well, and that gets a lot of people excited. There's work-from-home opportunities, so many people have taken interest in it, and I don't want to discourage you or dissuade you, but it is the reality right now that junior roles are few and far between. That's not to say that more can't come up, and I'm hoping that that is the case. I hate to see any gatekeeping in the UX community, but even when I was entering, it was extremely challenging to find junior roles. And that's actually why I applied for an intermediate role and jumped straight into that because there was more availability, especially now with the layoffs that we're seeing in the tech space. Not as many of them are on the UX and software sides of things as those that I've seen so far. But it is impacting the industry. With that said, based on my research, I'm seeing that there's supposed to be a 3% year over year growth for the next five years in UX designers, like we mentioned previously. Any company that has a website or an app should be investing in UX designers. So, it does seem promising to me, and I hold out hope that it's going to be following that path.

Lora: I think you're right.

Zach: Some common advice that we give as well is that the junior roles can sometimes be the most competitive, and you actually may have a better time applying to an intermediate role. I know of someone who's in the UX community here, Emily, I believe you know them as well, but they've landed a job, and I think a big reason for that is their reaching out into the community, doing projects, doing portfolios. So, are there certain pathways or things that you would recommend or suggestions to help people that want to build a portfolio, want to get connected into the ecosystem, and meet other UX designers?

Emilie: Yeah, starting with the portfolio, you're absolutely right, that's usually the biggest piece of advice that I'll give. If you're not getting interviews, it's probably because your portfolio isn't very good, so don't take it personally. A portfolio is going to be a continually evolving thing over the course of your career. It's never perfect, and it's never finished, but what you should be doing is getting as much feedback as you can on your portfolio. Specifically, if you can, from

hiring managers. So, I love to point people to ADPList.org. It's a platform for free mentoring for people interested in UX design. And you can meet with thousands of people available any day of the week. And you can even filter by profession, by company, by title, hiring managers, and they will meet with you for half an hour for free. You can meet with them again if you resonate with them, and they'll give you advice on how to enter the industry and what in your portfolio could use improvement. Mock interview prep, even resume help. Hugely helpful. And that can basically make sure that you're honing in the right areas on your portfolio to make yourself stand out because it's very common. Many people will go to these boot camps like I was talking about; they are very appealing. You can get your diploma, your UX designer's license, and it's not quite that simple. It leads to this formulaic and cookie-cutter approach that many people's portfolios unfortunately fall into. So, make sure that you're really focusing on the storytelling aspect of your project. Why did you design it this way? What made you believe this? Why was this design better than this one? How was that surprising? Those are the kinds of things that are interesting and will resonate with readers, recruiters, and hiring managers. So, focus on the storytelling and ultimately focus on that portfolio. The networking aspect is going to go hand in hand with that as well. Zach, you're talking about your colleague, the person that I know who got their job through UX probably networked with someone. That's going to be the easiest way that you can get a role. I actually got my first job just by applying on LinkedIn, but I don't think that's actually great advice to give because I know how uncommon that is for many people. So, if you can meet people, even though the ADP list, talking about your portfolio, meeting them again, asking them if they can put you in contact with somebody else, and you can start to grow that network, they are going to remember you. And by the time a role comes, hopefully they will think of you, and then they can reach out. So, it's all about building incrementally, and it's like the long game with networking, in my opinion.

Zach: What about personal branding? You've obviously built a really great brand, particularly on LinkedIn, but on other avenues or channels as well. What are your thoughts about building a personal brand as someone who's trying to transition into UX?

Emilie: To be completely honest with you, my whole idea behind building a personal brand, which has totally exploded beyond whatever I thought it would be, was basically to make myself feel confident. It was a fake it 'til you make it type thing. I had done my three-month bootcamp. I had landed a role four months later, and I just felt like, "what do I know? Are people going to take me seriously? Do I belong here?" It was to squash that imposter syndrome, and the more that I posted, and people said that it was helpful, it just encouraged me to keep posting. So, I did that even after landing my first role. So, it built my confidence and gave me some kind of expertise or credibility in the industry, and now it's come full circle to the point where recruiters are approaching me for roles that I didn't even know were posted and wasn't even going to apply to. So, it's threefold: it's done me so many favours, paid back to the community because people find my advice helpful, and it's given me this job security in a sense where I probably have a much easier chance finding a job than somebody who didn't have a brand or a network to fall back on.

Lora: What do you wish you would've known when you started?

Emilie: I guess when I started, I wish I would've known that my past experience would be beneficial and relevant to what it would be like as a UX designer. I was in bootcamp, and there were graphic designers in the program. I was looking at what they were designing, and I was just thinking, "Holy crap. How can I compete with this? This is beautiful. There is no way that I'm going to get picked over somebody who has this ability to design something so perfect." Come to find out, the reason that I actually got hired for my first role was because of my background as a scientist and researcher. They wanted someone analytical, and they actually picked me over someone with five years of experience because they saw that potential in me. So, I'm not saying that's a guarantee, but that was really exciting, and I wish I would've had more confidence that my past experience was valuable.

Zach: Thank you, Emily, for being here. I really appreciate this conversation. I think there's lot of great takeaways and if anyone wants to get a hold of you or be inspired by you, where should they find you?

Emilie: Yeah, you can definitely find me on LinkedIn. Pretty active on there. You can also find my portfolio at www.dandydesign.ca. You can send me a message through there as well.

Zach: Thanks so much for being here.

Emilie: Yes, thank you for having me. This was fun.

Lora: We had a lot of fun with Emily. We brought her into the studios at SAIT, and I feel like I've known her for a long time. What an amazing, energetic, empathetic, and interesting person to talk to!

Zach: Yeah, I totally agree. What sets Emilie apart in my mind is that she's very thoughtful about the way she presents herself to the world and what she's learning, but she shares it in such an authentic way that it brings people into her story, and she wants to share her learnings with others. She's just built a really strong brand around being specific about her journey, her craft, and empowering others to think about and pursue a career in UX.

Lora: I love that you called it a craft, because I get the sense that it really is a craft for her. What struck me is that her generosity plays a role in making her so good at what she does. Because I feel like UX is really a role where empathy, generosity, and understanding the users or your customers is critical to success. There's a ton of that job satisfaction that shines through when you talk to her about how rewarding she finds what she does.

Zach: We need more Emilie's in the Alberta workforce. This is more of an opinion, but our deep engineering roots have us think about solving problems that are more physical or mechanical, and if it works, that's the solution. We're trying to get something that works, with less focus on whether it's a really elegant, usable solution for users. And we haven't had to think a lot in the Alberta marketplace because we have a lot of resources and commodities that we're using

without much thought about the impact that our products and services have on people. But it is great to see Emily and others create community. I think the UX Calgary community is really strong. They're really bringing design to the forefront of how we think about doing business in the province.

Lora: And I love how strong the UX community is, and I will definitely list some of those resources for folks on the website. So check that out, and please do reach out if you're interested in UX or you want to learn more about UX, because there are a lot of great resources out there. There are a lot of great training options and a lot of great people to connect with to learn more about the role and figure out the best way to get into it if that's something that interests you.

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