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Personal Statement

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Application for PhD in Education, Learning Technologies Design Research

What should instructional design look like for neurodivergent learners? I repeatedly asked myself and others this question over the past four years while working as a program director of education for a STEM-focused education technology non-profit. Being responsible for leading a curriculum development team, creating the professional development for the organization's staff, and setting the instructional design direction for the entire organization left me with many concerns about how to best meet the needs of our neurodivergent learners and staff from the beginning of the design process. Although I considered the learner's engagement needs, the educator's curriculum needs, and the instructional designer's engagement needs, I had trouble finding a reference, tool, or product that could assist me in easily understanding how to apply theory to my practice and how to use the academic knowledge in the real-life situations I encountered in both personal and professional settings. As a result of having more questions than answers, guidance, or resources, I am now left with the desire to create a tool that will aid learning design technology professionals, educators, and others working towards the goal of producing neuro-inclusive instructional designs for today's learners.

So, after four years, I am left asking myself another question – *To foster design equity, what tool is needed or would work best to address digital accessibility for neurodivergent learners?*

Honestly, while this is a very exciting question for me, I am not entirely sure at this time and am a bit perplexed by this complex question. While grappling with this question and trying to find answers, solutions, or guidelines, I have encountered contextual gaps between what can be used to address this need and what is being experienced by those with this need. As an instructional designer, I professionally know there are considerations that may assist me as I attempt to make my designs more inclusive. On the other hand, I personally know I have not yet encountered any of these considerations in my own learning environments as a neurodivergent learner. As a result, this gap is always on my mind, drives my personal research, and guides my selection of professional learning network connections and engagements. I can see potential solutions being found through the creation of a technology tool using AI to tailor the experiences of neurodivergent learners, a physical tool assisting

instructional designers crafting a neurodivergent accessible experience, or a professional tool exposing educators and designers to the digital accessibility needs of neurodivergent learners. Regardless of the specific outcomes for my future research, I am compelled to enter the conversation now and seek those answers instead of continuing to be a consumer of answers provided by others.

While the answers to my question and the solutions for my contextual gaps are important for both professional and personal reasons, I am excited to see where the research leads me.

While my position at this moment is the creation of a product born of research, I am open to the very real possibility that the process of research and the direction it dictates may wholly or in-part change my currently plotted azimuth. Given my very focused direction at this moment, I see the potential of creating confusion with my assertion that I am open to a change and possess the ability to grow bigger than my initial position. If so, clarity is found in how I approach situations, define problems, determine solutions, and manage change in my life:

- Academically, I am a flexible thinker who possesses a creative, open-ended mindset about answers to complex questions. By this, I mean I explore all options, resist the temptation to confine potential solutions to validate predetermined outcomes, and select constraints that appropriately guide a project to its natural conclusion without limiting it to meet my desired end-states. With great curiosity, I actively seek to engage in and listen to a variety of conversations that both validate and challenge my thinking to ensure I am not restricting considerations to only those that support any potential confirmation bias.
- Professionally, I am a diligent crafter who uses empathy as a cornerstone of my designs to influence the context and motivation of my work. Using human-centered design as an integral part of formulating my thoughts, I thrive in environments where I can identify and define a problem, seek to understand the causes and implications of the issues, and then work to design a solution that is tangible, practical, and easy to use. I enjoy digging into the richness of the dilemma and the data in order to determine what considerations, qualities, and guidelines need to be included. It is by this process that I see a path towards understanding the issues and crafting solutions for all participating stakeholders.
- Personally, I am a creative problem solver who possesses perseverance, curiosity, and a keen sense of observation. Although I am focused on addressing the contextual gap I have experienced, I accept my current goal is the entry point for my studies and the destination will be determined by the research. Due to a lifetime of interesting,

character-forming, and challenging situations, I am resilient in the face of challenges.

Because I view challenging situations as learning opportunities, I approach them with a positive mindset based in adaptability, awe, and appreciation.

While attending a flexible, student-centered institution with a solid reputation of working well with veterans is extremely high on my list, you captured my attention with the ability to conduct design-based research in pursuit of my doctoral degree with your Learning Technologies Design Research Specialization. Having the opportunity to attend GMU and the opportunity to use the design-based research methodology, participating in this program would foster and promote my desire to close the contextual gaps of my lived experiences. What I learn with you will guide my research and influence the answer — not just for me, but for all learners like me who face digital accessibility challenges.

I believe instructional design practices for neurodivergent learners can be improved by examining the relationship between those who hold potential solutions, those who design for the neurodivergent learner, and those of the learners themselves. While I realize there is no single solution, my desire is to build new educational theories, highlight current theories, and present both in a useful way for today's educators and learning design professionals. Having the opportunities to nurture research, understand learners' needs, and create solutions are why I want to attend GMU. With you, I want to examine the nexus of instructional design and neurodiversity, determine if there is a contextual gap past my anecdotal evidence, and contribute to the practice of delivering neuro-inclusive digital education.