Skill Special Edition: Choose your own adventure – Achieving your dream of learning to drive

**SPEAKERS**

Andrew Gibson (JFA Purple Orange host), Brad Williams (guest from Williams OT), Melanie Merlino (JFA Purple Orange, intro and outro)

**Melanie** 00:09

Welcome to this special edition episode of the Purple Orange Podcast brought to you by the Skill project and hosted by Skill Project Leader, Andrew Gibson. In this episode, Brad Williams from Williams OT joins Andrew for an informative discussion about how to go about achieving your dream of learning, or relearning, to drive if you are a person living with disability. This podcast was recorded on Kaurna land.

**Andrew** 00:33

Welcome to the Purple Orange podcast. My name is Andrew Gibson, and I'm the Skill Project Leader with JFA Purple Orange. In this episode, we'll be talking about ways to use available supports to turn your dreams and goals into plans to achieve the outcomes you need to live life the way you want. Hey, sounds pretty good, right? We're here today with Brad Williams from Williams OT. Hi, Brad, thanks for joining us.

**Brad** 01:01

Yeah, no worries, Andrew, thanks for having me on.

**Andrew** 01:04

You're welcome. We'll be using the framework of the Skill project that I’m the Project Leader of to illustrate this idea of living your life the way you want. And using driving a car as, well, a practical example of this. I'll start with a little background about Skill. It's an individual capacity building project made up of workshops, peer networks, leadership opportunities, and now got a website with the workshops up there for people living with disability, their families and supporters. Skill is for people who are interested in learning about the control they can have over their lives and supports and getting equipped with the knowledge and resources to choose their own adventure. Over the past three years, we have delivered capacity building workshops in southern Adelaide, northern Adelaide, two CALD communities and in regions across South Australia. We’ve got active peer networks in metro and regional areas and they're facilitated by staff with lived experience of disability. People get to connect in these workshops and peer meetings and have access to information, discussions about improving access, inclusion, advocacy, making their own informed choices. People living with disability still all too often don't get the same access to all that life has to offer as other people do. So, like all the work we do here at JFA Purple Orange, we aim to give people living with disability a fair go and access to the same choices and opportunities as the rest of society. As I mentioned, in this podcast, we're going to use the example of supports around driving to illustrate these opportunities. I know when I started driving, many, many years ago, a couple of years after having a brain injury, it was life changing. Confidence, independence, opportunities, socialising, education, employment, it was incredible. But yeah, like I say, this was many, many, many years ago in a different century before there were the current systems and supports. So, Brad, let me ask you, if someone living with a disability today has a dream of driving a car, what are the steps they need to take to achieve this?

**Brad** 03:38

Well, how much time have we got Andrew? There is a lot of steps involved in it, but I'm gonna break it down for you really quickly. First of all, it's about licencing. We've got to make sure that the licence is appropriate. So quite often nowadays, you'll get referred to an occupational therapist. Now, that's not set in concrete, you don't have to be referred to an occupational therapist for the licencing side of things. If your GP or rehab physician is skilled in that area, they may be able to make the recommendations for your licence without any further assessment, but it's not their expert area and quite often, you will be referred to an occupational therapist that has done additional training in driver assessments and rehab, okay? And Andrew, you might not have had that back in the day. It's a developing area where it's recognised that we need more expertise in this area because it's a skilled area of driving and it's part of the reduction in road toll as well to make sure people are safe out on the road. So, you may get a referral to an OT that’s skilled in driver assessments and rehab and that's an additional training that we have to do, and I say we because that's my background. And then we try to figure out what your needs are. So, it's a bit like going to your physio for a first assessment and they're trying to figure out how they can assist you with your mobility, as an example. They might be looking at your muscles and how your body works and then prescribing something, either in a fitness regime, or prescribing a piece of equipment for you. It’s very similar in the car, we're looking at what your muscles can do, what your brain can do, what the vision can do, and then looking at ways to compensate for any areas that are not quite able to drive a car in a standard way. Okay, so two hands on the steering wheel, a foot for the accelerator and the brake, and if you drive a manual, a foot for the clutch. So we're looking at the ability to do those type of things. So that's the licencing. And we may look at rehab programs and then set you up to pass a Department of Transport test. Now, I say Department of Transport. In South Australia, it's DIT or if you're in other states, it's Vic Roads, or Road and Maritime Division in New South Wales. Whatever your local department is will set you up with a test for them, with them, to show that you are in control of the car in your modified way. And that's the licencing side of it all. Then you've got the putting the modifications into a car, which is a whole different area, and takes a lot of understanding and work to work through putting modifications into the car.

**Andrew** 06:35

Yeah, very specialised. So, there’s a whole bunch of different steps that people have to take to go through the process when consider from starting lessons, licencing, assessments, car modifications, it's all about giving those opportunities.

**Brad** 06:53

Absolutely, it's a really complex area. There's so many different areas of driving, it's a complex environment. You've got to do a lot of things inside of a car, a lot of multitasking, both physically and decision making. And we've got to make sure that we get it right, because it's not just you that it impacts, it could be somebody else driving in front of you, could be a pedestrian on the road, it could be somebody's front yard that is impacted. So, we've got to make sure that we are working at a really high level, and making sure that safety is first.

**Andrew** 07:33

Very much so. So different people with different disabilities have different needs.

**Brad** 07:40

Yeah.

**Andrew** 07:40

How do you tailor supports to assist them?

**Brad** 07:44

Well, it starts with that initial assessment, Andrew. Yeah, it really starts with that initial assessment and getting to know the person. So, it is completely varied. And you know, we could be working one day with somebody with autism, with no physical disabilities whatsoever. And the next day, we could be working with somebody with a high level, spinal cord injury, and no cognitive issues, but affected all four limbs. So, controlling the car in a standard format, doesn't work, we could be looking at driving from wheelchair. So how do we get the wheelchair in the car? How do we get the wheelchair into the driving position? And then how do they drive the car, from that position? What controls do they need? So, it's extremely varied so we need to make sure that we really get to understand the person to start off with. What can they do? What functions are we going to maximise to be able to make this successful? And then, what areas are not going to be working so well? And what do we need to compensate for? So, yeah, you're right, completely different. It's about getting to know the individual, where they want to drive, how they're going to be able to drive, and then maximising that to its full advantage.

**Andrew** 09:04

Yeah, that sounds that really aligns with like the Skill framework. You know, people having a vision, you know, planning for that getting supports they need in place, and then the outcomes. How does Williams OT and Mobility Engineering, unfortunately Ali is not with us, what role the two of you play in this?

**Brad** 09:27

Well, I'll talk about Mobility Engineering really quickly. Mobility Engineering is fantastic for this industry. They're one of the companies that bring in modifications from overseas, so a really strong advocate for European products and American products and bringing them into Australia. Because before that, it was very mechanical, very, very farm-like machinery where it was a metal bar that attached to the brake pedal, and some kind of way that it attached to the accelerator. There was different various variants on that with a motorbike grip or pulling mechanism, which pulled the accelerator or a radial, which is like pushing down towards your knee, and control. So very, very mechanical, but with Mobility Engineering, and some other companies that are out there, they've really started to import these high-end controls to make it really comfortable for people to drive. Electronic controls and things like that.

**Andrew** 10:36

Yeah, with the development of the technology, people now have options for giving things that suit them a lot better.

10:46

**Brad** 09:27

Yeah, absolutely. And they come from an engineering background so they are looking at all these products and going, yes, that's going to meet the Australian Standards when they're looking at them when they are bringing these products into Australia. So really high end products, engineering background, great company, and so glad to be associated with them.

**Andrew** 11:08

But it's good that people can get armed with the knowledge, what the possibilities are, you know, whether it's high end, whether they still want mechanical, or somebody living with autism who needs a different approach. And not so much modifications, but a different learning style, a different way to get their licence?

**Brad** 11:32

Yeah, yeah, absolutely. Just talking about the autism side of it all as well. You know, sometimes we've got escape artists in the car. So, you might be a mum or a dad listening to this, and you've got a kid who doesn't understand the importance of wearing a seatbelt in the car, and staying in your seat when you're in the car. Or maybe you're a support worker, and you've got adults with the same type of thing in the community bus taking people around to day options and things like that. There are, and Mobility Engineering would be able to help you, there are products to be able to help keep people in their car seat and maintain a safe driving environment for the people driving the vans or cars. So yeah, look out for that kind of thing as well. So, you know, with autism, you don't think about that in regards to driving as such, but it's those other elements about a safe driving environment as well as being a safe passenger in the car.

**Andrew** 12:29

Yeah, also, I guess if people are using wheelchairs being staying in the chair, being a passenger.

**Brad** 12:35

Oh absolutely, the tie downs for your seat belt positioning and making sure that the wheelchair becomes a safe car seat. And that's really, really important. Really important that the wheelchair doesn't become a projectile in the case of an accident. And yeah, Mobility Engineering are right up there in advocacy for the Australian road standards and that safety mechanism that's required.

**Andrew** 13:02

Yeah, I'm lucky I get out of my wheelchair to drive and put it in the back of the car. And I’ve got to look at securing it more in the boot of my station wagon.

**Brad** 13:11

Yeah, and that's a really good point you make Andrew is that not everybody drives from a wheelchair. And those transfers are a really important part to play as well. How do we actually get the person into the car and into the driver's seat, if they can? Yeah, a really big part of the assessment. So, if you want me to, I can expand on the Williams OT role, and how that fits with Mobility Engineering. So, we do the assessment side of it all as well, our company here in South Australia has also a driving instruction part of it as well. So, we don't do all of the lessons at Williams OT, it is a focus on the OT part of it all. But we do the kickstarting part of the driving lesson so if you're trying to get your licence back after an accident, we can help you with that bit. Or we can get you kick started with your learner program, figure out what you need, figure out what areas are going to be the biggest issue and then hand you over to a driving instructor to be able to hopefully be successful with gaining your piece later on down the track. And then we keep in touch to make sure there's no issues there. So that's how Williams OT fits into it all as well. Then we also assist people with putting in the modifications to their car if it is a physical disability as well. So, we try to have the solutions the across the board in South Australia for driving.

**Andrew** 14:38

No, that's great. And yeah, as I keep going back to that Skill framework, people have the vision, the drive, come and see an OT for assessment, get the plan, work out what supports and then they get that long term outcome that reputable organisations check back in and see how they're going because, as with my situation, things change as life goes on so you got to adapt to it and work out what you do need and what you need to change.

**Brad** 15:07

Yeah, absolutely. And you touched on it beautifully in the, in the podcast episode, I'm gonna do a bit of a cross promotion here, a shameless cross promotion. Andrew’s come on to our podcast, the Drive Able podcast, you can find it anywhere if you just search Drive Able podcast, and search for Andrew. And you can actually listen to Andrew’s story and his background and how it's changed from when he first got his licence to now upgrading cars. And he's getting famous. He's getting known by physios. They want to know whether he's upgraded his car yet and all those type of things. So yeah, have a listen. And there's lots of different episodes on there as well. So you can understand how it works and how that process is different for individuals. Like you're saying, Andrew, using that Skill mindset to try and achieve people's goals.

**Andrew** 15:58

Having a long-term vision and a plan to get what supports you need. Do you have advice about how people could get the right types and levels of funding in their plans to achieve driving goals?

**Brad** 16:13

Well, really good question. Because it varies so much, depending on your individual needs. So if you're, it starts with that initial assessment. So we can actually figure out what we need to try and achieve for you. Is it getting a licence back or we started from scratch? Are we coming up with a lesson plan, or are we coming up with a lesson plan plus licencing plus modifications? So it varies a lot. So, there's not, there's not one price for your NDIS plan.

**Andrew** 16:49

No.

**Brad** 16:49

Unfortunately. There just isn't. Williams OT, we provide a very rough guide for the initial assessment process. Now, the initial assessment can be varied as well. Okay, so we can talk to Joe Blow, who doesn't have much impact and we might be prescribing a couple of lessons as a refresher to get back on the road through to lots of lessons, really high-end modifications, and lots and lots of input. So, it's going to vary significantly and the best thing you can do is get in for an initial assessment before your plan review so that your next plan has an outline of what might actually be involved. That's, that's my biggest takeaway for this.

**Andrew** 17:37

Any advice for what people need to request in their planning discussions? Think ahead, plan ahead.

**Brad** 17:44

Yeah, it's really good if you're going to get modifications, like you just you just know that you need modifications, because you know that you can't steer the steering wheel on the normal way, or you can't use the pedals, you got spinal cord injury and your legs are non-functional. You know that you're going to, it might be really good to get out and get some estimates, start talking to some people before you plan review. But one of the best things to do is go through the assessment process. But then also be understanding that everything after the OT assessment has to be approved, it has to be approved by NDIS. You just can't keep drawing down from your budget. After the OT assessment, you actually have to get it approved. So that includes driving lessons, that has to be approved by NDIS and put into your budget. Car modifications has to be approved by NDIS. They have to figure out whether it's value for money. They're going to spend a lot of money, they have to make sure that your car is roadworthy, that it meets a criteria that NDIS have put out to make sure it's value for money. And then it gets approved thereafter. Now that, it's like a plan review at any stage, it doesn't have to wait for your plan review. But if your plan review’s coming up, they will wait till then and look at it in a whole picture. But if you've just had your plan review and you've got a three-year plan it this money can be added back into your plan but after that initial review, but just be aware that it can be varying for different people.

**Andrew** 19:28

Yeah, I can confirm with the NDIS, it is a process.

**Brad** 19:33

It is a process.

**Andrew** 19:34

Some really good touch points. People, do your research, find out what's available, make sure you've ticked all the boxes and done all the steps so you know achieve what you set out to do.

**Brad** 19:44

Yeah, look, you talk about a process. I'll just put it out there because this comes up a lot and people don't realise that it can be more than a two-year process to go from injury to driving from a van in your wheelchair with hand controls. It could be more than a two-year process to get it all ticked off and get the van modified. And just as an example, some of the van modifiers right now have an 18-month waiting list.

**Andrew** 20:16

Wow.

**Brad** 20:17

Okay, and that's just waiting for the car to be sitting in a garage just waiting for it to happen. That's a big chunk.

**Andrew** 20:23

Yeah, and that's high-end modifications. Could be different if somebody just needs in-depth, driving lessons.

**Brad** 20:31

Yeah, driving is, unfortunately, right now there seems to be waits across the board. Driving instructors are in short supply in South Australia. I'm not really sure how it is in other states, but driving instructors are in short supply, in general, whether you got a disability or not, but the ones with disability background, they're in even more high demand. So, getting in to see a driving instructor with background in disability, whether it's physical or cognitive or vision, can be a long wait as well. And just even to see an OT as well, it's a complex area. It takes a lot of time to get people through the system. So that sees us working intently with people, and that sees us with longer wait times, unfortunately.

**Andrew** 21:22

Yeah, but it’s that vision, get the steps that you need to plan to achieve your goals.

**Brad** 21:28

Would you say it's worth the wait, Andrew? The ability to be able to drive.

**Andrew** 21:32

Incredibly so. I mentioned the benefits I found when I started driving, still have them today. That's amazing. What are some of the positive outcomes you've seen people achieve?

**Brad** 21:43

I don't know where this podcast goes out, but right now we're, we're doing a video and right behind me is a guy called Bruno. Bruno is standing there with his P plate behind me in the background photo. Bruno is the intro to our podcast, he does the intro to our Drive Able podcast. Bruno has given me permission to use him as a client so I'm talking about him with permission. He went through a big journey, a really big journey. He had 70 odd hours’ worth of lessons. That's just with a driving instructor plus the training with his family, with anxiety related to his autism. Big hurdles to overcome with him. So, Bruno with autism is one of those great outcomes. And now he's able to do courses and then get employment as well. So, a massive step for him and his family and about moving on with life after school. So, that was a real hurdle for him.

**Andrew** 22:38

Self-esteem, confidence opportunities.

**Brad** 22:42

Huge. And then we've got the other end of the spectrum where drive from wheelchair. We've mentioned that a couple of times where people just had no idea that they were actually able to drive. So we interviewed Trent on our podcast, and Trent was tackled at football and broke his neck. And we talk about the journey that he has gone through with a really high-level car. So, he pushes buttons to open his car doors on his wheelchair with the butt of his hand, not his fingers because his fingers don't tend to work. He wears hand braces to be able to get some function out of it. Most of what he's got in his mobility is his shoulder function. That's the main function that he's got. And a bit of elbow as well. So, some tricep extension that comes with a level of spinal cord injury that he's got, but able to drive. Able to drive and living in a rural town there wasn't many options for him. He could go as far as his power wheelchair would go.

**Andrew** 23:40

We do the Skill project in a lot of regional areas. So, people will relate to that because transport…

**Brad** 23:48

There's no taxis, there's no buses. So, it's limited to the weather, and how far that power wheelchair will go.

**Andrew** 23:56

Yeah, so the independence that brings out changes, well, Trent's life, his family's life, it looks amazing.

**Brad** 24:02

And sometimes we do assessments for people and we touch on this in our very recent podcast with the Total Ability team. It's just good to know that you could do it. You mightn’t decide to go through the entire process because of how much it impacts on your life to do the process. But just to tick off in your head, yeah, I could do it if it came to it, or no, actually, I can't do it. This is something that is beyond my capacity. We see that sometimes with vision assessments, it is actually something that you need to have a good amount of vision for. So, foot steering as an example with one of our other podcast episodes. We know that you can do it by moving through with the process in regards to how much of a journey it's going to be driving from wheelchair all of those type of things. The decision has been to utilise family and friends and be a passenger in a car until, until she is ready.

**Andrew** 25:05

Yeah, that's exactly what we try and arm people with, with Skill. That information about options, possibilities, opportunities, then they can make informed decisions. And that can quite often be, you know what, that's not for me, but it could be.

**Brad** 25:23

Yeah, there's a benefit in that. There is a benefit in knowing what the options are.

**Andrew** 25:28

Very much so. What final advice do you have for people driving as they goal, thinking about exploring this?

**Brad** 25:36

Google was amazing. Get on there and start exploring what's out there in the world and, and see if any of those things match your function. Okay, have a look at what other people are doing in other countries. Listen to the Drive Able podcast, listen to Andrew on his episode, listen to all of our other guests on the episodes and get a feel for what other people are achieving in their life, what the pros and cons are. We speak to John and he just wants to go through the drive through at Maccas. And he utilises his car for that.

**Andrew** 26:11

I remember when I first started driving and they first started, it was like, hey! You know, and now I wouldn’t eat that stuff if you paid me.

**Brad** 26:22

There's another guy who just loves to be Nick. He just loves to be the designated driver. Doesn't care about the drinking side of it all. But he's got the party bus. And he takes all these drunk people home. But that's, he loves it.

**Andrew** 26:39

I did a lot of that, too. I was like, okay guys, look, I've got my licence, where are we going this weekend? You know, Byron Bay, Wollongong, I was living in Sydney. So, yeah.

**Brad** 26:48

Don't be afraid of what possibilities are out there. Some people are just, I don't know, and they hold themselves back. Get out there and explore, have a look at what's going on, put yourself through an assessment process, have an explorative mindset to see what's out there. And I think a shout out to the NDIS and the governments for implementing the NDIS. Yes, there's some teething problems still after ten years. Yes, there's some changes that are going to happen through the process as they figure out how much it actually costs. Yes, they've got to put in more hurdles for people, I think, to actually get on the NDIS program to make sure that the budget remains under control. I mean, you've got the more lived experience, Andrew. I think, from a supplier point of view, it's opened so many more options for people and they're able to achieve more in life. I feel as an outsider looking in, I don't have a disability, but I feel like it's been wonderful in a big picture mindset.

**Andrew** 27:57

I agree there are individual teething problems, but it's an individualised scheme. So not everyone is having a bad outcome, too many are, but we're working on fixing it. Look, thank you for joining us today, Brad. I think you've given people a lot of food for thought. Go out and do the research, find out what's there and whether it could be a possibility.

**Brad** 28:20

I couldn't agree more and I apologise that Ali couldn't be with us today. I'm wishing him all the best in getting well, but yeah, look Mobility Engineering as well. So go and have an explore of their website and look at the products that they're bringing in. They do lots of education, they’re at all the trade shows as well. So ATSA, which is coming to Australia, South Australia, in March next year 2024. And then will be a regular visitor back to the state. But the Aged and Disability Lifestyle Expo, the DAL Expo, they come over for all of those and they're a great place to go and explore as well, physically explore, not just Google.

**Andrew** 29:01

Yeah, the fact people can find out so much these days

**Brad** 29:05

Touch and feel, as well. You get to actually touch and feel stuff which, it’s great.

**Andrew** 29:10

Thank you for sharing your vast experience and knowledge, Brad, I think people have got a lot to go on with.

**Brad** 29:19

My pleasure. Yeah, no worries. A bit of a passion field for me. I probably spoke for too long. Yeah, I get a bit excited about talking about driving.

**Andrew** 29:27

I do too, when I start talking about sports. Suddenly, ooh, three hours gone by. Thank you. We'll speak again soon, Brad.

**Brad** 29:36

Good on you, Andrew. Thanks very much.

**Melanie** 29:38

Thank you for joining Andrew and Brad for this special edition episode from the Skill project. We hope that it has provided some useful information if you are embarking, or thinking of embarking, on the journey of learning to drive. For more information about Skill and its capacity building workshops, peer networks and leadership development for people living with disability visit Skill dot org dot au. Or if you have a story that you would like to share or have feedback on the podcast, please get in touch with us through Facebook, by emailing us at stories at purple orange dot org dot au or by calling 08 8373 8388.