

TOWARDS THE INCLUSIVE FUTURE CLASSROOM

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Report by Sal McKeown

The aims of the day were to:

- Raise awareness of issues in accessibility to information and learning
- Demonstrate practical applications of accessibility guidelines
- Support self- and peer-review in learning organisations

In Jan de Craemer's opening talk he used the example of David aged 35 who lived at home with his mother and who had an interest in technology. His mother did not share his passion was unable to support him and the day centre he attended had very restricted facilities. As a result David was only able to enjoy his hobby at special sessions at weekends. This seemed to be a key image for what the group is trying to achieve. If we talk about lowering the barriers to access we need to think about training, changing attitudes and extending knowledge out to families and communities and not leaving it in the hands of the few specialists or professionals.

In the past I have worked in adult literacy and at Becta, a government organisation in the UK specialising in the use of technology in schools, colleges and other settings. These days I work as a journalist and have become aware of changes in the political climate regarding disability. While the public is very committed to helping disabled children and will often enter enthusiastically into high-profile charity events, they are less enthusiastic about adult disabled people en masse.

Recently I have been looking at hate crime in the UK and attacks on disabled people. Many commentators feel that politicians have fanned the flames of hatred depicting disabled people as 'scroungers', taking money from a central pot of benefits, leaving less for other people and as 'skivers', lazy people who should be working.

There are many economic barriers at present throughout Europe. Like Candide we may believe that: 'In this best of all possible worlds, everything is for the best' but realists may think that current attitudes are likely to become entrenched and permanent. This is one of the key factors which we must bear in mind when thinking about accessibility for all and how to improve the lot of disabled people in Europe. There is not necessarily the economic or political will that there was 10 years ago.

There is also the question of technology. In the last two years there has been a proliferation of tablets throughout schools colleges and indeed in the home. Last year I attended a conference called Communication Matters where many AAC

users – people who use augmentative and assistive communication to give them a voice - were talking about their attitudes to the changes in technology. Many of them are very much in favour of iPads and apps. They like the fact that these offer quick, cheap and easy access and, if anything goes wrong or the device is stolen, they are not going to lose their ability to communicate. They can simply buy a replacement and download a new copy of the app which they had previously purchased. This contrasts with the system so often in use where people are dependent on specialist devices which cost several thousand Euros, which need to be programmed by specialists and necessitate training.

We need to consider whether people with degenerative conditions are better off with something specialist and expensive or something which is cheaper and more readily available. Many users like the fact that they can use one device for communication, email and for social media and that the device is something attractive which would be readily used by nondisabled friends and family.

If the first issue is political, and the second is technical, the third one centres on people. Are we looking for consumers or producers? Do we want people who consume technology to play games, to read text or do we want a generation of producers - people who write blogs, people who create games, people who make their own apps? Again this comes down to society's attitude. Do we see the skills that people have or do we just see their disabilities and the barriers they face?

Access to information is obviously vital and David Sabaté from TOTHOM showed us that for all the fine words, many organisations do not have fully accessible websites. Many of us need to go home and re-evaluate our sites and the information that we provide.

While the day provided many insights, what we have not resolved as yet is how we transmit information. So much of the time we PUSH data; we post information about our projects, about websites, about plans, about policies. Perhaps what we need to do is to begin to look at PULL technologies and find ways to make better use of social media and other routes which encourage the disabled community to engage with us and shape what we have to offer.