

## AN OVERVIEW OF SUMMER INSTITUTE 2001 CONT'D

### Moving to the visual: Technology and new literacy possibilities for the learning disabled by Chris Abbott, King's College London

Literacy, images and symbols For the past few years I have been researching the move towards multimedia rather than solely text-based communication. I have tracked with interest the uses that young people have developed for their web sites, and the ways in which the texts that are found there have become ever more reliant on the use of sound, images and movement.

During the same period, my other research into the use of symbols within special educational needs settings has also shown an increasing use of pictorial or symbolic tools for communication or literacy. How might these two developments be connected? Can we really see a genuine shift here towards iconic communication? Some writers and researchers would say this is the case – and I am increasingly convinced by their arguments.



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and that, surely, is our aim for all learners.*

I am now middle-aged by almost any definition, and that means I remember an educational world filled with inkwells and blackboards, rather than computers and technology. It would be easy to see the differences in my lifetime as being about the different devices and technologies that have become available to learners of all ages, but to focus on the computer would be to fall into the trap of technological determinism. The fundamental change brought about by these technologies has been related to the way in which people have responded to them by changing the ways in which society controls the ownership of the means of production. Learners of all ages no longer need to be passive recipients; they can be active producers and transmitters of messages as well, and it is often through symbolic and other imagebased approaches that they choose to do so.

Defining literacy is a good way of filling a few hours on a wet afternoon, but closure is rarely reachable; it's too slippery a concept. For politicians, of course, it's all very simple: literacy is reading and writing. We know that it is far more complex than that, of course, and that there are close links between literacy, culture and power: not a point that needs to be made perhaps to an audience in a bilingual city. An education officer at the British Film Institute suggests that to be literate is to “fully inhabit a culture,” and that, surely, is

our aim for all learners.

Other theorists, particularly a group of linguists who met in New England in 1996, have developed alternative theories of multiple literacies or literacy practices, and it is within the latter framework, based on the work of Brian Street, that my research has developed. A theoretical framework based on the notion of literacy practices can more readily accept the range of communicative styles and strategies that people with learning difficulties might adopt. For that reason, my work focusing on young people and their web sites, personal homepages in most cases, has focussed on their motivations and intentions, as shown by the practices in which they engage.

More recently, the opportunity to edit Symbols Now, a book of case studies of how learners of all ages are using symbols, has enabled me to think more deeply about the issues that are raised by the ever-increasing importance of the image in communication. Whether the symbols involved be Rebus, Makaton, PCS, Pictogram or something else, the process involved is one of interpreting a pictorial or symbolic representation.

My thesis, then, is that communication and literacy are becoming more closely connected with the visual image as well as the textual word. This is an opportunity, not a threat, for people with learning disabilities. We have seen many human responses to technology in the past which have enabled people with disabilities to become more included, and ICT – Information and Communications Technology – is ever more able to provide the same support for literacy.

## New options for learners

How, then, can technology assist in the process of helping all learners become literate? Or, to be more accurate, how can we use technology to assist all our learners in their efforts?

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I think we must firstly recognise the changes in our own lifetimes, and the differences in the communicative and literacy practices in today's world. If we are still trying to help learners achieve the same kinds of literacy as we were twenty years ago, we are failing them. People with learning disabilities have as much right of access to the Internet as everyone else, and they can be offered exciting new possibilities of access to multimedia texts through online technology.

We also need to recognise that symbolic communication has entered all our lives, whether through the signs at the airport, the logo on our company notepaper or the small symbol in the corner of the screen which tells us which TV channel we are watching. Symbolic communication is not just a part of life in 2001; it can also be extremely supportive for people with learning disabilities. We need to embrace this development and use the software tools available to ensure that the world in which our learners function becomes

ever more symbolic and communicative.

Most of all, however, we need to recognise the rights of all the people we work with to be writers as well as readers, to make their opinions known as well as respond to direction, and to disagree or dissent where they wish to do so. Those people whose disabilities interfered with their capability to function in this way in the past can now be offered the opportunity to increase their literacy and to fully inhabit their own - our own - culture.

Dr. Chris Abbott is a researcher and Lecturer in Education at King's College School of Education, University of London. With many years of classroom experience as a special needs teacher and strong interest in uses of ICT, Chris brings a practice-based understanding to his research. He has published articles and books on IT, Literacy and the Internet, ICT and Teacher Education, and Special Education and the Internet, as well on the use of symbols. A list of his publications is available at <http://atschool.eduweb.co.uk/cabbott/pub.html>.