



2021 AT Scholar Report

KIM LAWATHER

Kim Lawther is a teacher who specialises in AAC and Assistive Technology for students with Additional Learning Needs. Kim is the Assistive Technology Lead at Bridgend College in South Wales.

“The more I watched, the more I wanted to watch! I really enjoyed accessing the sessions via the ATIA. Thank you for the opportunity”.

ATIA 2021 Impressions

This year, the 2021 conference of the Assistive Technology Industry Association was held virtually from January 25th to February 4th. The conference offered a rich and well-structured programme with participants from across the United States, Europe and the UK.

There were two particular areas that I was interested in - the way in which various different practicing therapists, teachers, and other industry professionals have adapted their provision during Covid-19 and new, emerging educational technologies that may be of use to the young learners I work with.

Covid 19: Changes to provision

Around 19 sessions focused specifically on how professionals have adapted during Covid 19, which gave plenty of different perspectives to choose from - I was particularly interested in the following session:

[Embrace the Pivot! Implementing an AT Service Delivery COVID Preparedness Plan](#)

Mike Marotta and Barbara Welsford presented this particular session. The presentation was an overview of the development of a virtual community of practice, comprised of AT Specialists worldwide.

It was a fantastic example of collaboration - individually many assistive technology professionals were looking at ways in which their services could adapt to the challenges of a global pandemic and together this particular group developed an AT Service COVID Preparedness Plan focusing on three areas; Traditional learning environment, dual learning environment and virtual learning environment. The group have very kindly shared their resources via Google Drive which you can view and download for free.

Other notable sessions covering Covid

[Communication, Access, Parent Coaching, and...COVID? How We Did It](#)

[Tales from the field of Visual Disabilities: What I wish I knew before COVID-19](#)

New educational technologies

Educational technology offers unique opportunities for learner development, so I was keen to see what leading companies such as Google and Microsoft were showcasing at ATIA following CES2021.

[Project Euphonia at Google AI: Researching Speech Recognition for all](#)

[Google Home and Assistant Features for Diverse Learners](#)

Google in particular highlighted the work they have been doing to improve the use of voice assistants and smart home technologies to transform the lives of people with disabilities.

With Project Euphonia Google are exploring ways to improve speech recognition for people who are deaf or have neurological conditions such as MND, Parkinson's, multiple sclerosis or traumatic brain injury.



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The team at Google are actively recruiting people with a range of dysarthria to participate in their efforts to improve speech recognition in the hope that the underlying system will be trained to understand inarticulate commands with the goal of creating technology that is more accessible. You can find out more here.

[Smells Like Teen Spirit: Using gaming and social media to increase access](#) presented by Jennifer Stylianos and Elonna Falk from Gray Consulting and Therapy showcased some ways in which they had used technology with their learners, such as voice assistants as I mentioned above and most interestingly NFC (Near Field Communication) tags.

As most smart phones now have NFC readers, Jennifer and Elonna have used NFC tags to enable their learners to interact with the real environment by touching tangible objects that have been augmented by the tags. This allowed learners to perform such tasks as watching a tutorial video on how to independently make instant porridge or a short cut to directly call a close friend. A technology that I haven't used before, but will definitely be exploring.

Other notable sessions covering Educational Tech

[Increasing accessibility and fostering inclusive classrooms with free tools from Microsoft Education](#)

[Inclusive 365: Building an Inclusive Learning Environment 1 Day at a Time](#)

As my experience within Assistive Technology is primarily based within the UK, these sessions provided a great opportunity for learning, knowledge sharing and professional networking with assistive technology specialists in the US and Europe.

I am looking forward to taking the inspiring ideas learnt at ATIA 2021 and putting them into actionable strategies to improve the Assistive Technology provision we provide at Bridgend College.

Final thoughts

Whilst it is difficult to replicate the networking prospects that often take place at a conference, I found the opportunities to interact online in the live sessions I was able to attend very beneficial.

Many of the presenters used the chat feature or online platforms such as Padlet and Wakelet. This allowed participants to interact in a way that they may not feel comfortable or confident enough to do in person and created a safe environment for participation. I hope that feature will be something ATIA incorporates into future conferences, as giving the online audience a chance to ask speakers additional questions allowed open discussion and enabled participants to learn a lot more during each session.

I also engaged in the twitter hashtag #ATIA2021 – which allowed me to connect with other professionals in a more familiar way and informed some of my choices when selecting which sessions to watch based on the feedback about different subjects via the hashtag.

The online platform allowed for a relaxed nature in which I could participate from home. I have over the last few weeks been attending both live events and then viewing recorded sessions in my own time - I have revisited a number of sessions and unlike a physical conference I have been able to view as many sessions as I like without having to miss others that I would like to attend. Missing a session due to conflicting schedules has always been something I disliked in conferences, but the online platform has completely erased that problem.

This year many people have been able to engage from their own homes. The benefits of this are manifold, that accessibility has allowed ATIA to become an even more inclusive conference which was seen throughout the sessions.