



2021 AT Scholar Report

PETE WELLS

Pete Wells is an award winning special needs teacher and senior leader. He is the host of the 'Sensory Stories Podcast' and the author of the forthcoming 'Inclusive Stories.' He has been proud to work in the field of special education for nearly twenty five years.

"The course is great and I've picked up a tonne of new ideas, so truly, thanks again for the opportunity. I've tried to make my review fun to read but with some important messages".

ATIA 2021

I was honoured, grateful and very excited to be offered a British Scholarship for the ATIA. This was quickly followed by embarrassed, shocked and overwhelmed, when I saw the calibre of my fellow scholars - wowzers! I'd like to thank Inclusive Technology (and COVID-19) for this wonderful opportunity!

My first day at my new, virtual school was as almost as daunting and imposing as the real thing! So many rooms! So many lessons to learn! So many imposing and exciting teachers! Where do I start? Being a scholar at ATIA felt like being a scholar at Hogwarts! Strange, a little daunting, but undeniably magic!

Thankfully, the ATIA site was a joy to navigate and was absolutely packed to the virtual rafters with interesting, very tempting content. As someone who will always be a proud classroom practitioner, I was naturally drawn to the Education and Learning Strand, however, I plan to spend a lot of time skulking around the AAC and Communication strand too!

Some of my favourite sessions to date (I still have a hefty list to go through,) in no particular order, have been:

Assistive Technology Supports for Specific Learning Differences with Kelli Suding.

Kelli is my new favourite teacher! She is an absolute ball of fun and enthusiasm with seriously impressive knowledge and palpable passion for assistive tech for all learners. Just as importantly, her bio states that she is obsessed with food, snow cones and laughter, as well as containing an 'Elf' reference, so I knew I was in good company from the off!

Her fun, interactive style grabbed me instantly and the responses to her invite to send gifs summing up everyone's experiences of this tumultuous year so far were both hilarious and strangely cathartic (various dumpster fires and people losing their minds!)

Kelli quickly used fun videos to powerfully get to the meat of her presentation – the importance of firmly putting the needs and wants of learners at the heart of their learning. Her message of focusing on the whole individual, as well as the more invisible individuals in your setting, was very strong and really resonated. Kelli effortlessly explored the subtle and not so subtle differences between 'Accommodations' and 'Modifications' to curricula and pedagogical approaches, with a hearty challenge to think outside the box to empower our learners. Something we special educators are obviously very adept at.

In an hour that absolutely zipped by, Kelli explored various methods to empower and enable Visual, Tactile and Auditory Reading, particularly through the use of free and PRACTICAL applications and extensions to enable this for a range of learners. This included a timely reminder to re-examine the inbuilt accessibility features in our platforms of choice, again with a tonne of practical examples.

There were some inspired, simple and practical ways to support learning for all. Favourite (and quickly stolen) examples include using emojis on folders to help with file navigation (why didn't I think of that!?!), using the free Dockhub website to allow my learners to complete accredited work using speech-to-text, as well as rewordify.com to simplify text – brilliant!



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The use of text summarisers was brand new to me and I am now a huge advocate of using Smmry.com to cut out much of the unnecessary language in websites (if only that worked in staff meetings!) Similarly, the discovery of the 'Simple English' translation in Wikipedia is a revelation, which, when coupled with [rewordify.com](https://www.rewordify.com) (which simplifies the more complex words) can make the most complex passages more accessible to my learners.

Kelli's session was my very favourite type of training! The kind where you come away with a head absolutely spinning with ideas, a list of things to try and a mental note of some fun videos to cram into your next training session.

Remote Learning without Technology... Now What? With Mo Buti.

As a teacher in a deprived area of Hartlepool, access to technology (coupled with low digital literacy of some parents) was often a challenge for my learners. I was keen to watch Mo's session to see how we can help those parents and learners for whom access to technology is impossible.

Mo (and her dogs!) delivered a fine presentation that was bursting with common sense ideas and, to my delight, filled with realistic practical ideas to make learning meaningful and fun. The talk was extremely learner-centric and, whilst affirming many of the practices I'd put in place for my learners in lockdown, gave me quite a few new ideas (and made me kick myself a few times) for things I hadn't thought of.

This fascinating hour looked at the importance of creating bespoke learning spaces in the home, as well as the importance of effective use of visual supports to enhance learning, all of which will benefit parents in the unenviable task of home schooling.

Mo was brilliant at utilising items and activities from around the home to create engaging opportunities to stealthily teach a plethora of literacy and numeracy skills. These included following recipes, functional games, simple craft ideas and even watching TV!

As an educator of older learners, it was great to see a strong focus on independent living and domestic skills and how these can be adapted to benefit learners in a wide range of areas. Mo also addressed both physical and emotional wellbeing sensitively, looking at the importance of movement activities and therapeutic sessions to promote calmness and relaxation.

Mo spoke well on gross, fine and sensory activities, which, as a teacher of adults with profound and multiple learning difficulties, is very much my wheelhouse. This is a notoriously difficult area to address in the home, so it was great to get some fresh activities from Mo.

Another area where Mo really impressed me, was in her COVID-specific content. It is imperative, yet easily overlooked, that we teach our learners the importance of wearing a mask, social distancing and handwashing. Mo gave some fun, non-scary challenges for this which will be of real, potentially life-saving benefit to my learners. Again, I will be keen to pass these on to the parents of my learners! Speaking of which, the session ended with a reminder on the importance of communication with parents, which I'm sure we can all heartily endorse.

It seemed odd watching a presentation about not using technology at the world's foremost Assistive Technology conference, but it was as useful and inspiring as anything I've seen!

What Users of AT Wish Developers Knew About their Literacy Experiences with Ben Satterfield

As a teacher in a SEND college, I am passionate about both student voice and assistive technology... or so I thought!

Ben's findings were very enlightening, giving an authentic insight into the very real thoughts and feelings of those who use the technology that WE as educators get very passionate and excited about! It



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was a stark look at the challenges those individuals face in terms of organisation, utilisation and maintenance of resources, coupled with the stigma of using them, the difficulties associated with low self-esteem as well as the socio-economic concerns of more high-tech devices.

Two very relatable case studies highlighted some of the difficulties those who rely on AT face. This includes the complex rituals learners sometimes have to go through to access many features of AT. Ironically, when coupled with learning difficulties, the assistive technology can become yet another thing to concentrate on, becoming quite the opposite of 'Assistive!'

Another consideration, especially in this digital age where AT, and AAC devices, can sit nicely on a smartphone, is that users often will not want this. Their phone is their social media hub, or the place to play games, or where they read for pleasure and certainly not the device to help them read for school!

Ben discussed some effective strategies to help learners, opening my eyes to some of the more discreet methods of AT for my more streetwise learners. He made me appreciate that it is okay, even desirable, to use these more discreet methods. This talk shifted MY perspective of AT significantly. Sometimes, in my super-cosy, inclusive setting, where no one is judged or discriminated against, we need to be careful that we don't inadvertently discriminate against those more self-conscious students by enforcing our choice of AT.

I said at the start of this piece how much student voice is important to me, I need to ensure that I listen to it!

Inclusive 365: Building an Inclusive Learning Environment 1 Day at a Time with Mike Marotta, Karen Janowski and Chris Bugaj

When they weren't trying to sell you their new book, this lively session focused on a palpable shift from an 'Assistive' to 'Inclusive' mind set in our educational settings. This really resonated with me, as it very much reflects my own journey in terms of both the curriculum I 'manage' in my day job (my learners manage it now) as well as my approach when being a 'Sensory' Story Writer. For several years, I have actively thought of my stories as 'Inclusive Stories,' while the 'sensory' aspects of stories are important, I am having a ball exploring the many, many ways they can be adapted, foster inclusion and give my learners much more control of their learning.

The session explored some powerful and sometimes challenging questions, such as what inclusion actually means? Should we be grouping by age? How do we put the learner first? Should the teacher be in charge? Do we truly ensure that that message gets to the learners? Are we guilty of putting tech before the needs of learners? What is flipped learning and should we keep referring to it as such, or should we just be calling it learning now? How can we make our environment more inclusive?

The session opened out into a workshop containing eight realistic scenarios to help explore Inclusive practice. This took the form of a Padlet that is now packed with many strategies and tools which learners and educators may find useful (you can see it here: padlet.com)

Finally, the focus rightly shifted to the importance of teaching the skills and strategies needed to allow our learners to take control of learning, as opposed to getting hung up on the newest, whizziest online tools. "Tools come and go, strategies persist!" Something we all need to be mindful of!

In all, a fun and challenging session which held my interest until the end and asked some challenging, sometimes uncomfortable questions!

And that is just the tip of a very exciting iceberg that I continue to enjoy exploring. I love the overriding message of the needs and wants of the learner always come first. As special educators, this is obviously the bread and butter of our work, but the message always gives me goose bumps when I hear it! The



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balance of practical ideas, new and very useful tools and a focus on the need to teach and re-inforce pedagogical strategies is great, making this one of the best courses I have 'attended.'

My sincere thanks again to Inclusive Technology for generously giving me this opportunity. I'm taking a lot away from this diverse set of professionals, and am genuinely feeling the benefits in my work.