



# 2021 AT Scholar Report

## HELEN WHITTLE

Helen Whittle is a Speech and Language Therapist working in the Assistive Technology field since 1991. She is currently involved in research dissemination at Manchester Metropolitan University and is Chair of the Board of Trustees of Communication Matters.

*“ATIA has been really valuable in terms of my tenure as the Chair of the Board of Trustees at Communication Matters especially now as we are unable to hold a face to face Conference for the second year running. I have had really useful calls and emails with the ATIA team who have shared their expertise regarding how to hold a successful online event”.*

## ATIA Impressions

This was my first experience of an ATIA conference. The range of talks and presentations was huge and at first overwhelming.

Following on from the Black Lives Matter demonstrations around the World it was great to see some of the AAC suppliers discuss the work they are currently doing to address issues of diversity by taking part in a panel discussion. This session was an opportunity to gain an insight into the progress these companies were making and also the considerations that need to be made to ensure changes to symbols, voices and languages are done in an appropriate manner.

The panel consisted of representatives from PRC Saltillo, Assistiveware, Tobii Dynavox and Avaz.

Code switching in AAC software for some of the suppliers was a requirement from the very beginning of their design. But for others the ability to keep the language representations in one format but change the language from one environment to another was an additional feature that was added after a piece of software was in regular use. Some suppliers designed packages that could easily move between Spanish and English but not so easily between other pairs of languages. There was an acknowledgment that more languages used in AAC software would be useful to some AAC Users. As the details of the grammar in one language and then another language is complex the idea of code switching is also a complex issue.

The vocabulary used in language packages provided as part of AAC systems was the next topic up for discussion. The companies were looking at the basis of the language used in terms of their approach to cultural, religious, sexuality and identity issues. Some language packages have been around for a while and so will need more updating to make them more broadly appropriate. The ability to add gender neutral pronouns across a whole language package was one change that 1 or 2 of the suppliers had found was useful to their customers. An interface to allow for personalised vocab was also a welcome addition. The use of a Panel of customers who are able to give feedback on the company’s ability to represent their customers in terms of vocabulary and culture was great to hear about, even if it had been uncomfortable at times for the company to listen to the feedback received.

In terms of skin tone used within symbols, the feedback received was “the default should not always be white”. It was interesting then to hear how this feedback is used. So, should skin tone be randomly assigned across all symbols used in symbol sets? If this was the case, then some symbols would have additional meaning added to them that was unintentional. For example, for a symbol of a handshake, if the 2 skin tones were different then does that imply more meaning? i.e., that this handshake was between 2 individuals from different communities whereas if the skin tone was the same then no such meaning would be implied. It is good to explore these issues and was interesting to hear the complex issues that companies are grappling with.

Different and culturally appropriate voices were then considered, which lead on to a wider discussion of diversity and how finding a community to represent but then subgroups within these communities is not always easy in terms of identification. It takes about a year for the companies to develop a new voice. And when is a new “voice” – a “voice” and not a “dialect” – another interesting area to focus on.

It was great to be in the audience of this panel discussion and it gives us lots to think about and a realisation that the area of Diversity in AAC is a wide-ranging topic and with many challenges for our suppliers. A challenge they are investing lots of time and energy right now.



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Having been a Research Assistant on the I-ASC Project (Identifying Appropriate Symbol Communication Aids for Children who are non-speaking: enhancing clinical decision making') I was really interested to hear Kevin Williams deliver the Prentke AAC Distinguished Lecture, as he was talking about his "Evolution of an augmented communicator". As part of the I-ASC project we explored the impact on an AAC User of moving from one AAC system to another and what that impact was. Kevin gave us an in-depth run through of all the systems that he had used from his earliest years. What was clear was that although Kevin used a range of systems throughout his life so far, he acknowledged that "the most effective system is quick and easy and use the right mode in any given situation". This may sound simple, but it implies that AAC Users have a range of methods at their fingers tips and are able to make the decision about which one to use according to the situation they find themselves in. Kevin did not suddenly become a proficient AAC user and acknowledged that he "evolved as an augmented communicator".

Kevin explained that when he was in Kindergarten, he was introduced to Blissymbols, which he took to and eventually had a board with 600 symbols on. He feels that being introduced to these symbols and the way they are used in an abstract way to develop meaning helped his ability to move to other systems. Kevin first tried Blissymbols in 1980, just as speech generating devices were being developed but not widely available in the USA. He also worked on his natural speech to make it as clear as he could. In addition, he practised Sign Exact English (which has the same word order as spoken English, including signs for word endings) which he found supported the use of his natural speech. As speech generating devices (SGD) became more widely available Kevin was introduced to Minspeak in a SGD and Kevin credits being familiar with Blissymbols as helping him become a proficient user of Minspeak.

Now he uses his natural voice and signing with people who are familiar with him. This is his fastest method of communicating. With others he uses his Minspeak system. Kevin is involved in some extreme sports that mean he is unable to use his SGD in all situations and so needs to use other methods.

He finished his talk by making a suggestion for companies to make it easier for older AAC users to cope with technology changes as technology evolves, that is, to release a change before a significant alteration is made so that people who are thinking of upgrading know what changes they can expect before having to commit to a new system. Kevin's talk was a great way to finish the ATIA conference in a really uplifting way and gave some interesting insights from a personal perspective.