2021 AT Scholar Report

IVETA POWER

Iveta Power is a teacher at Chailey Heritage School, a special needs school in East Sussex. She has 18 years of experience of supporting children and young people with complex neurodisabilities with Assistive Technology.

"So many experienced and passionate professionals in one place! Having it virtually definitely has many advantages and I am hoping that this option, or a mixture of both live and virtual presentations, would be available in the future; this way it would allow many people around the world to have this wonderful opportunity. However, I understand that there are many benefits of having a live event where people can have further discussions with professionals, which I would have welcomed after watching some presentations"

ATiA 2021: AT Connected: Summary and Highlights

This year I had the wonderful opportunity to attend the ATiA 2021 conference, usually hosted in the USA. In a normal year this wouldn't have been possible but, owing to Covid restrictions, the 2021 conference was entirely online, meaning many more practitioners like myself had the opportunity to go (virtually of course!). There were virtual lectures and seminars, a huge variety of websites and resources to explore, a multitude of accessible YouTube tutorials, and even the odd online social gathering to discuss our thoughts on what we had learnt.

The organisers went to great lengths to try to replicate the conference proper, and in some cases perhaps even surpassed it (the fact that all sessions are recorded and can be viewed for another few months, for example, is a huge plus). I was initially a little apprehensive about how a conference of this magnitude would translate into a purely online forum, however the ease with which the resources and speakers were made accessible, and the adaptability of being able to access them at any time, made ATiA 2021 a real success; if the conference is primarily online again next year I would absolutely love to attend.

There was so much to learn at the conference it's difficult to distil all my experiences into one piece, however I've tried to outline below those things I know will be useful in my practice in the hope they will be of use to you as well.

So, here are my highlights of ATiA 2021: AT Connected.

DIY AT Resources

One of the areas I was particularly interested in this year was the idea of DIY AT resources. As I'm sure we have all found, the need for flexible and inventive strategies for developing teaching and learning resources has never been greater, and I was amazed at the innovative and creative ways that had been developed to continue to facilitate access to technology when at home and also school.

The DIY AT for the New Normal session was particularly informative. It was run by three Assistive Technologists (each of whom also had additional roles), and contained a plethora of useful resources and tips for DIY products. The DIY AT and AT Resources in wakelet.com for example include a vast number of easily replicable resources for use both in school and at home, all of which are accessible for free (you just need to complete a simple registration process).

One example that particularly stands out for me was the creation of a wireless switch from a box, sponge, and Velcro tape! Another suggestion was using Sugru Glue (something I've already purchased) to make minor adaptations and modifications to objects frequently used by pupils.

Another presentation that was particularly enjoyable was that of Therese Willkomm, AT Makers – Making AT at Home, who I would describe as an OT, AT, and engineer all rolled into one! It was remarkable to see how she had transformed her home into a 'maker space', and she was full of hints and tips about how to adapt devices for use at home, including what to avoid. One tip I found incredibly useful was how to put the plastic segments on Flexzi stands together, something that had previously always flummoxed me - no more asking for help for that one!

ATMakers.org is another interesting site that allows STEM and robotics students to help Assistive Technologists create new AT solutions. I thought it was a great way to get young people involved in assistive technology, and help create affordable AT for those who need it most; the video guides on how to adapt toys and games for switch users were particularly interesting. It's also worth joining the FB group AT Makers - Makers and Users too, where you'll find lively and informative discussion about all matters AT between professionals, students, DIY enthusiasts, AT users, and also parents; often it's in these informal forums where you find answers to those ad hoc issues that don't seem to fit neatly into any particular specialism. I also really enjoyed a presentation by young students who, through Mission to Engineer project (a Penn Robotics initiative), created AT resources for people who are unable to afford them - you can details of some of their projects here.

AT and Remote Teaching

Building on this idea of creating your own DIY AT resources, there were some excellent presentations and sessions on how to approach remote teaching in the context of assistive technology. It was extremely impressive and very inspirational to see how much effort teachers and therapists had put into creating resources that parents and carers could access and use at home during the pandemic. For example, Sarah Gregory, a SaLT, shared some wonderful approaches to developing AAC in a remote teaching context, all of which you can find on her YouTube channel here.

PlaySpark, a green screen therapy site, definitely captured my attention. The creators of this site have developed some wonderful remote learning sessions using a green screen, backgrounds, and printables (downloadable from their website either for free or for a small charge), which open up some magical and imaginative worlds for young people. The site includes video resources on how to set up the screen and use each resource, and I can easily imagine this being used in class with students using the resource themselves to create stories and interactive projects.

CVI and Visual Resources

With so much online and remote learning taking place over the past year the need to ensure screen based resources are accessible for those with CVI is particularly pertinent.

Alissa Desousa, a mother of a child with a visual impairment, shared some simple but effective resources she had created to engage children with CVI with all manner of subjects. The resources themselves were very useful, but they also gave me some great inspiration for how to adapt my own existing activities in a similar style.

One of my personal favourites are the CVI resources from DIY AT and AT resources that incorporate Google slides (a tool I had not previously used before) to create presentations with black backgrounds and 'transparent' images; something hugely beneficial in assisting those with CVI to access content on screens or they can be used as printable resources.

Communication and Literacy

Perhaps my favourite presentations focused on shared reading, modelling language, communication and literacy (and how they are linked together). This has been a focus of my teaching practice for many years, and I was extremely interested in the thoughts of Karen Eriksson, whom I first met at the 2019

Communication Conference in Leeds, on how to promote and develop literacy and shared reading in class.

Karen shared a study entitled 'Shared Reading with e-Books for Students with Significant Communication Disabilities' which is part of a study Tar Heel Shared Reader, (implementation science project), sponsored by a grant by US Department of Education. The study described two approaches to shared reading, how these had changed teachers' understanding and practice of shared reading, and subsequent changes in students' literacy and communication. The website contains professional development materials, including training videos regarding shared reading and a link to the THSR interface, which offers free books (with symbols) for teachers and parents. These are mainly aimed at children but are also very useful for older students who do not yet have a robust communication system and do not yet read connected text.

Teachers can create an account and write their own books for students and publish them on the Tar Heel Reader. It's very quick and easy, and these valuable resources can then be downloaded, printed, and accessed with switches when viewed on screen. Symbols can be formatted directly in the THSR interface; at present THSR only supports PCS symbols, but I'm already trying to find if it's possible to develop a similar interface using Widget symbols (which we use at our school).

I thought this resource was truly outstanding. In my experience, there aren't enough books for students who progress much slower than children in mainstream schools, so to be able to create bespoke texts that meet the specific needs of individual learners is fantastic. The value of this adaptability cannot be overstated as it opens up so many possibilities for teachers and students and it's something I will be encouraging widespread use of at my school. One final tip, to register with THSR you need an access code which you'll find here (it took me a while to work out where to find the information about how to get it!)

Overall the ATiA 2021 conference was an amazing experience packed full of useful advice and information. I'm very grateful to have been invited and look forward to attending again in the future.