



2021 AT Scholar Report

VICKY HEALY

Vicky Healy is Professional Lead for AT and AAC in Surrey and Deputy Chair of Trustees for Communication Matters.

“Thanks so much to you for this opportunity and to ATIA CEO David Dikter for the outstanding organisation of this event. Enjoying it greatly.. those sessions that I can manage live have been great, but being able to access the recordings with our time difference has been immensely helpful”.

ATIA 2021

The prospect of becoming a British AT scholar and having the chance to attend a conference of such high caliber as ATIA, filled me with both excitement and fear.... The pressure to ensure I was getting the most out of such an opportunity for both my professional development and that of my wider team, knowing how there was so much information from a highly esteemed group of presenters to pass on, was almost overwhelming! This year has been challenging in so many ways for us all, both professionally and personally, but some of the advantages of the global pandemic has been the enhanced access to conferences and online content that we might not have otherwise had.

The UK time difference provided challenges to attending live sessions late into the evening, but with the advantage of being able to watch the recorded sessions for many more months, it has been possible to make specific space in my working calendar to catch up on sessions I missed. Within my immediate remit for supporting school aged students using AAC and AT, there were certainly many presentations of immediate value. With my wider remit being part of a physical and sensory support service, I was also pleased to see so much content to support both the VI and PD aspects of my job. I was lucky to be able to attend a number of live sessions and have since caught up with many of the recorded ones and will continue to do so until the very last possible moment when we lose that access!! Here is a brief snapshot of some of those presentations.

The impact of Covid 19 on the lives of AT users and their families, professionals and technology suppliers cannot be ignored and certainly this was a theme that lent itself to many presentations. It was reassuring to hear the personal experiences of supporting AT / AAC use during a global pandemic were so similar to our own and the challenges of how to adapt our practice are seemingly world-wide. Of particular interest was the paper by Joanne Lambert and Caitlin Connelly who described how difficult it had been to support students and families who were in the early stages of their AAC journey. They found that when you are unable to be in direct contact with your students, quite how challenging it is to hand that role over to friends, carers and family to model and support during those early days. Also, how the best laid plans for so many of our students had had to take a very different turn as a result of lockdown. This is something my team can directly relate to and in some instances, I think we have experienced an improved engagement with families as the necessity to play a greater role in the initial introduction of a new system becomes clear.

Sarah Gregory in her presentation, “AAC Teletherapy – Digital Toolbox of Resources”, addressed the difficulty of engaging students during teletherapy and whether modelling on a device is appropriate in supporting our students in these sessions. Her advice was to keep things simple, otherwise both you and the student are likely to become overwhelmed by trying to keep up. Using a simple static overlay to support language and vocabulary may be far more successful and allowing the student to explore their own device with less distractions from what is happening on the other screen. Using resources which are easily adaptable for a number of students is an important factor to consider and will save time. She offered excellent examples of resources which would support this further using platforms that we all have access to.



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Kelly Sudig's presentation on "AT Supports for students with SLD" was an extremely interactive session which used a number of strategies for the attendees to engage – these alone were great tips to take away to use in presentations and training sessions. The resources and strategies that could be used to support students around literacy and learning tasks were certainly ones which I shall be passing onto my teaching colleagues such as the Simple English tool within Wikipedia. I hope to be able to make some crib sheets for our teams of resources that are readily available within programs that we use within our work and school settings such as highlighting and simplifying text tools that already exist.

The presentation highlighting CVI and Eyegaze by Jennifer Clarke et al. was another that held particular clinical interest for me as I attend many eye gaze assessment visits with members of our VI specialist teaching team. The main message that I took away was not to make assumptions about the most likely access method based on someone's visual needs – and not to rule out others based on what you think you know! They highlighted many adaptations that could be tweaked to provide a more accessible eyegaze experience for some students who have a CVI diagnosis. This is an area that has caused much in depth discussion between our teams, the schools and the families that we work with and these findings have given me fuel for further discussion!

As well as having my clinical practising head on, I was able to take tips from the organization of this event for our virtual Communication Matters conference in September 2021. What struck me about the sessions was that although all the attendees were thousands of miles apart, there was a real sense of participation as people made full use of the chat function for asking questions and making comments. Any technical glitches were seamlessly dealt with and the individual speakers certainly appeared to be incredibly well supported with their presentations. I hope the tardiness of this write up doesn't distract from the utmost respect I have for the organisers of this event. I hope we can utilise some of their skills and experience in our own conference.

This was my first experience of the ATIA conference and I really hope that even when face to face conferences return, that the remote element remains, to ensure it won't be my last.

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(Professional Lead for AT and AAC in Surrey)

(Deputy Chair of Trustees for Communication Matters)