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How did the Adaptech Research Network get started?

I've been doing research at Dawson College on people with disabilities since 1982 when some brave soul in government decided to give research grants to a few deserving cegep people. For the first time a cegep teacher could apply for grants from a major Quebec funding organization.

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Adaptech Gives Back To Its Community

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I hold a doctorate in psychology and research for me is a fundamental requirement. With a grant, I could hire research assistants. And along with the grants came release time!

For many students with a disability, a diskette or a website which has course notes or PowerPoints can make the difference between failure and success! Researching attitudes towards students with disabilities revealed truly poignant information. In one interview a teacher told of a student who tried to get to a seat in class but couldn't navigate between the desks because he was blind. The prof didn't know what to say or do. Could he say, "I see you are having trouble, can I help?" Could one use words like *see* with a student who is blind? Would he be offended? Other dilemmas included talking about *walking* with a student in a wheelchair. Such situations prompted one student with a disability to remark, "Haven't they heard of a metaphor?" Students, too, had problems talking to professors. So as a way of "giving back" to the community that was the subject of my research in 1989 we prepared award winning guides for faculty and students about how to relate to one another.

I came to know students with disabilities at Dawson who were particularly savvy. Two former Dawson students, Maria Barile and Jennison Asuncion, became professionally involved in my research. Maria now has a master's degree in social work, and Jennison has a master's degree in educational technology. In 1996 we constructed a website with the intent of publicizing our research and serving as a resource to the community. In those days the maximum length of a website name was 8 letters. So we called the site - and our group - Adaptech. The Adaptech Research Network evolved from these humble beginnings into a cross-Canada network of academics, students and consumers working to create a useful resource.

Videos from the Adaptech Site

What is the Adaptech Research Network like now?

One part of our website I am really proud of is the "Free and Inexpensive Downloads" collection. A Canada-wide study by our team in 1998 showed that students with disabilities had trouble obtaining the expensive adaptive computer technologies they needed. Students didn't know what technologies were available to assist them. If they knew, they didn't know where to buy it. And finally, even when they knew where to buy it, cost - with price tags in the thousands - became a major obstacle. They also told us about inexpensive general use information and communication technologies that they used as adaptive aids. For example, students with learning disabilities and those with visual impairments can use free and inexpensive OCR (optical character recognition) and text-to-speech software to read their assignments and textbooks, avoiding the need to have someone read these to them.



People continue to send us suggestions for our Free and Inexpensive Downloads collection. We try them out. If they work and cost under \$200.00 we categorize them so students can find them. Some of the most frequent visitors to our website are students from France, because they have very few resources of their own. There are a lot more resources in English, courtesy of our neighbour to the south. Yet, everything on our site is completely bilingual.

I learned that if you are a good teacher to students with disabilities, you're a better teacher to all your students. Ten to eleven percent of Canadian college students have a disability. Most do not identify themselves to campus disability service providers. Cegep teachers Laura King and Zohra Mimouni showed that a large proportion of francophone cegep students have difficulties

with reading that resembles a learning disability: dyslexia. Many of these students simply don't know that they have a *trouble d'apprentissage*. This situation is less serious among anglophones.

How has the research of the Adaptech Research Network affected you?

I learned that if you are a good teacher to students with disabilities, you're a better teacher to all your students. From a student who was hard of hearing and needed to read my lips I learned not to teach to the blackboard, but to face the class. This can be a real problem in computer labs. Does the student look at your lips or the screen? And although some students readily tell you about their disability and the accommodations they need, others do not. So I learned to invite all my students to see me if they have special needs or concerns related to my course. This includes issues such as conflicts with a job, a death in the family and, of course, a disability. For many students with a disability, a diskette or a website which has course notes or PowerPoints can make the difference between failure and success! ☺

COMMENTS BY READERS

Convergence of accessibility and business needs

Thanks for this article. I think many organisations have paid lip-service only to accessibility for long enough, but finally there is a convergence of business needs with accessibility that is happening. As an example, those institutions which are offering or starting to offer on-line educational resources are beginning to understand that there is a vast array of different learning styles and needs amongst their students (and let's not forget Generation Y here), and that one size does not necessarily fit all. This means that we need to design our material with multiple needs in mind from the start. = In the IT world, and more specifically in networks, there is talk of 'layers' such as the data layer, the presentation layer, etc. These layers combine to form something useful that we call a network. Knowledge can have a similar treatment by removing the presentation layer (menus/formatting/file types, etc.) from the content. By doing this, that knowledge/content can be repurposed for different audiences. As a concrete example, the information in a textbook can be stripped down to a series of data (Plain text/XML, jpegs, etc.) in a database that can be exported to pdfs, text-to-speech/podcasts, power point/openoffice impress presentations, course companion web sites, and other potential formats in the future. It's happening, but a bit too slowly for my taste! ;-) = Keep fighting the good fight Catherine!