
Accessible Learning Objects...

or what does a National Teaching Fellow hope to do?

Contributed by: Sidney Tyrrell, Coventry University Email: s.tyrrell@coventry.ac.uk

I was overwhelmed and delighted to be awarded a National Teaching Fellowship (NTF) last year as I hope it will enable me to do what I enjoy doing, teaching, but at the same time be useful for a wider community, in producing accessible learning objects.

First, the accessible part: At Coventry we have long had a tradition of welcoming students with disabilities, and this is an area in which I have become increasingly interested. Now, with the advent of the Disabilities Discrimination Act Part IV there is a legislation driven requirement on all of us to produce accessible learning materials. My interest is in web based accessible materials, which must be capable of being accessed by anyone using any form of assistive technology.

Learning Objects and PowerPoint: Learning objects are small, self-contained, bits of 'learning'. The first aim of my project is to produce a bank of small, freestanding, reusable, accessible learning objects for Quantitative Methods, using web-deliverable animated multimedia PowerPoint presentations and short videos.

The availability of many small learning objects, rather than a complete module, gives lecturers the freedom to choose just one or two, as appropriate, to embed within their own teaching resources. In the context of widening participation, and the transition into HE, this is particularly useful, offering the opportunity for the construction of small freestanding units to provide specific directed learning at a basic level in order to build the learner's confidence.

Beyond Quantitative Methods: The real benefit and excitement, however, lies in the applicability of the above techniques across all subject areas. There is a huge potential here for producing accessible learning objects with relative ease, building on the existing skills

of many lecturing staff who are familiar with PowerPoint. The second aim of my project is therefore to develop the appropriate skills and disseminate this approach as widely as possible, to my colleagues both within the University and elsewhere.

The Technology

Recent software developments have opened the way for easy development of animated multi-media presentations. The ubiquitous PowerPoint can be used to produce animations with voice over, giving effects similar to Flash but with considerably less effort. The files can be compressed using Impatica [1] producing accessible materials, which can be viewed satisfactorily using a standard 56k modem without the need for any special viewing software.

In addition, products such as Screencorder [2], and Camtasia [3] facilitate the production of videos of on-screen demonstrations (incorporating voice overs). This makes them excellent tools for the development of accessible resources, particularly for focussed software packages (eg. producing a PivotTable in Excel, and doing statistical tests in SPSS).

The exciting potential of this approach is further enhanced by the facts that (a) it relies primarily on IT skills, such as use of PowerPoint, that are already widespread and (b) it is applicable to virtually all HE disciplines.

References

- [1] Impatica www.impatica.com/
- [2] Screencorder www.matchware.net/en/products/screencorder/default.htm
- [3] Camtasia www.techsmith.com/defaultflash.asp



Photo of Sidney Tyrrell with the Minister, Alan Johnson, and a partially sighted student Karina Gregory, explaining to him the challenges in teaching visually impaired students in HE. It was taken on 1 December when the Minister visited Coventry University.