Anne Dickinson and Sidney Tyrrell

The Heat is on!

Anne Dickinson
Centre for the Study of Higher Education
Coventry University
a.dickinson@coventry.ac.uk

Sidney Tyrrell
Faculty of Engineering and Computing
Coventry University
s.tyrrell@coventry.ac.uk

Introduction

HEAT is the Higher Education Assistive Technology programme sponsored by TechDis (**http://www.techdis.ac.uk**). Through this programme, anyone working in HE was invited to bid for assistive technology to support accessibility and inclusive practice within their own subject area. In this context 'accessibility' is used in a very wide sense.

Coventry University has been successful in securing two small projects: the evaluation of Mozilla Firefox - Portable Edition and the trialing of an up-market voice recorder.

Mozilla Firefox - Portable Edition

We propose giving to all Mathematical Sciences students a USB stick containing a portable version of the web browser Firefox (**http://portableapps.com**) to see:

- how many of the group adopt Firefox Portable, particularly any students with dyslexia or with other disabilities, despite other browsers being readily available;
- if people have preferences for any add-ons; and,
- how students use it and what browsing preferences they use, in particular, preferences of any disabled students in the group.

The USB sticks will also contain Dspeech, a portable text to speech program that also allows the user to save the output as an MP3 file. It runs from the memory stick in a similar way to Firefox Portable, and is also free to download. More information and the program itself are available from: **http://dimio.altervista.org/eng/**.

Students will be instructed on the use of Firefox and Dspeech in their skills module, which provides a useful context in which to monitor the outcomes.

Podcasts with a top quality recorder

The second project is the trialling of a top quality recorder to produce podcasts. Last year, one author experimented with podcasts and recording lectures using a very cheap (£30) voice recorder. The results were adequate but patchy in quality, and the author was surprised by the number of students who requested more podcasts.

This year the aim is to use a top quality recorder to see if the results warrant the investment in the extra money for the recorder. Both recorders will be used simultaneously to obtain a reasonable comparison. The University's e-Learning Unit is also interested in the outcome of such an experiment, as in the future they would be looking to extend the use of voice recorders.

After last year's experience, the proposal is no longer to record complete lectures, but to break them into fragments corresponding with the naturally occurring breaks in a lecture and deliver them as both podcasts (with RSS feeds via the University system) and as short bite sized audio materials to aid students' understanding of topics.

Watch this space – the HEAT is on and so is the countdown

TechDis are great believers in short projects, so the equipment has to be purchased, used, evaluated and the report written up by 30 November 2007. We will let you know the outcome in 6 months' time.