

GIVING PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES THE TECHNOLOGICAL TOOLS TO SPEAK OUT

DECEMBER 10 | DMS 12102 | UOTTAWA



Speaking Notes

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- First, I would like to extend my thank you to the ISSP and the organizers of this event for facilitating this conversation. I believe it's important to have these discussions outside of an academic context and engage in a public forum such as we're doing today. It provides the opportunity for many different perspectives to come together and learn from each other.
- Today, December 10, is the 70th anniversary of the United Nations International Day of Human Rights. It's very fitting that we're having this conversation at this time, following the United Nations International Day of Persons with Disabilities on December 3. The

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theme of the day was “Empowering persons with disabilities and ensuring inclusiveness and equality”.

- I am honoured to speak here today, not as a scientist or as an academic, but rather as an individual with my own lived experience personally accessing various technologies, and as a professional supporting individuals through various roles in my career to access tools, resources and technologies, to assist in the realization of employment goals. The practical experience of what can be seen as the triumphs and challenges of integrating technology can be unique to every individual.
- I am the first to say, I am not an expert in all things disability, particularly when it comes to the use of assistive technologies. Nor am I an expert in anybody else’s experience around disability. What I will share with you here today is my own experiences, both personally and professionally, and some considerations around technology from that perspective.

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- First, a little bit on my personal experience. As a child growing up in the late 1970s and beyond. I was seen as somewhat of a “test case” around the idea of integration or what came to be known as mainstreaming of disabled children. I was the first child with a disability in my area to attend a local public school and the approach was trial and error to see how this experiment would work. As we entered into a burgeoning world of technology, where if you remember the movie, Back to The Future we would all will be riding hover boards and interacting with holograms.
- Technology was seen as a great intervention to ensure that someone like myself, with limited fine motor skills, could be more “normal”. In school that showed itself in being a slow writer, or difficulty copying things from a board, and using non-traditional classroom tools was the answer.
- The problem is, I did not want to be “normal”, I wanted to be accepted and participate.

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- So instead of participating in gym or going out for recess in the primary years, I was learning to type on an old-fashioned typewriter (the kind we only see in movies nowadays). With the development of personal word processing machines that I was asked to test out and use in my learning, I was relegated to the corner of the classroom and it seemed to fly against the very idea of participation with other children that mainstreaming was to bring me. Though I understand intellectually the need, in my young mind, this seemed more like a punishment than anything else. In fact, it occurred to me at the time, nobody thought of me when they were making this plan, and how to use these tools.
- So that is the one lesson that I carried forward with me as I grew, develop my own agency and began working in the field of human services. - **Always consider the end-user. The best way to do this is to collaborate, get their perspective, understand the needs and listened to their proposed solutions.**

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- As I graduated from the public school system and into University I also became aware that I also processed information differently than others. I was living with learning disabilities as well. This meant developing a number of coping strategies and using technology in a way that work best to meet my needs.
- For me, I would audio record all of my lectures to then go back and make the detailed notes that made more sense for me to integrate concepts etc. This presented a number of philosophical challenges. Some professors were not comfortable with the lectures being recorded and, as such, a few actually discouraged me from participating in the class in the first place, under the guise of academic freedom.
- While I'd like to think we've moved beyond some of these stigmatizing attitudes, there are still a number of people who do not wish to come forward with their accommodation needs for fear of being judged or ostracized, seen as being less productive than their colleagues.

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- I took these understandings into my professional career where over the years through a variety of positions in both the non-profit sector and now the municipal government I have had the opportunity to work with individuals with disabilities and other diversities wishing to engage in the workforce.
- As an employment consultant, I often saw concerns potential employers had over needing to provide accommodations and technologies for potential employees. This acted as a barrier in the employment process.
- Potential jobseekers were aware of this as well and as such, some were very reluctant to disclose the need for supports. Unfortunately, this may result in the individual not being able to do the job to the best of their abilities.
- We must get beyond the idea that to provide appropriate supports is asking for something “special” versus just the need to provide all employees what is required to work at their capacity.

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- Through the various experiences both professionally and personally, I would like to add further consideration to our conversation. While technology can be an excellent tool to give voice to people with disabilities, as stated in our theme today, there are additional considerations.
 - First, access to technology is not equal for all people with disabilities for reasons of cost, functionality of the tools, etc. and as such, there is still work to be done in terms of who gets a voice and who has access to the tools they require to participate.
 - Second, technological advancements cannot and should not, replace the human element and the need for ongoing learning and increased understanding. Technology itself will not alleviate the stigma and isolation that individuals experience.
- Technology can be used as a great tool to broaden our understanding. Rather than removing the disability from the person,

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as some of my fellow panelists have discussed, it can be a resource to expand our knowledge and deepen our engagement with a variety of diverse experiences.

- I would suggest that persons with disabilities by virtue of their lived experience tend to be innovative, creative and overall problem - solvers, by simply living in a world that is not made for us.
- It is that ingenuity which led to some of our greatest mainstream technologies. One such example, the use of texting. Developed as a tool for those who are Deaf or hard of hearing to communicate on a cell phone, has now become a ubiquitous part of our social interactions.
- Seeing adaptive technologies as tools of productivity rather than “a barrier to overcome disability” increases overall social acceptance and usability. Also, when these tools become mainstream and achieve

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mass use, alternatives are developed and affordability increases.

Benefiting us all.

- Today, as a person who uses a variety of technologies (dictation software, smart pens etc.) to participate in the workforce and engage in the community, I have come to see these resources as aids to share my contributions.
- As we move forward, the insight and experience of persons with disabilities must be embedded through the development and integration of technologies. Not as a tool to limit disability, but to embrace it.
- Last week, at the United Nations International Day of Persons with Disabilities, Minister Carla Qualtrough said. “Nothing without us, because everything is about us!” That is particularly true in the world of technology.

Thank you