

Disabled persons and ICT education

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IN WHAT ways does ICT actually benefit people? What do we really know about the way in which people, particularly those with cognitive difficulties, learn basic skills, be they literacy, ICT or others?

Recent research by Prof. Keri Facer raises many questions. Are different teaching techniques needed for pupils with intellectual impairments to those who are simply marginalised from the education system; and is this marginalisation partly or wholly the result of poor teaching?

The Education Division, the Maltese College for Arts, Science and Technology and ST Microelectronics Ltd are supporting the Foundation for Information Technology Accessibility (FITA) in setting up and running important pilot projects.

These aim to formalise the provision of accessible ICT courses for disabled persons, mainly persons with an intellectual impairment. In the past years, such courses have covered areas from basic ICT skills to ECDL level. With help from the National Statistics Office, we also ran a web design course, intended to increase the advocacy skills of disabled persons.

As part of the United Nations ICT Task Force programme, ST Microelectronics also run free courses. These courses are open to anyone over 18, and cover basic topics and computer applications such as word processing, spreadsheets, presentations, internet browsing and e-mail.

Until only a few years ago, physically disabled persons seeking ICT training found it very hard to get the modifications they needed. Thanks to policy measures put in place by the



National Commission Persons with Disability and the Malta Environment and Planning Authority, physical accessibility has improved. Nowadays, it is more likely that an ICT lab will be accessible to wheelchair users, that desks are at the right height and that there are accessible canteen and toilet facilities.

However, courses for persons with an intellectual impairment require different adjustments – and a more comprehensive approach. If you start by estimating that 10 per cent of the population is classified as disabled, you can add another 40 per cent who have problems with standard PCs and their software. Have you seen the queues at the local computer stores or browsed the online logs of some help desks? Problems may be a simple thing like poor vision or manual dexterity, or something more complex like the inability to navigate a

user interface, and the need for a language other than Maltese and English.

Disabled persons represent just a fifth of those with special needs. The latter include the elderly, people with temporary injuries and anyone not fitting the established norm, at any point in their life. Steps to overcome impairment through adaptive technology will therefore affect a considerable number of people.

FITA has shown that with planning and a little effort, it is possible to provide accessible courses for persons with an intellectual impairment. Adapted training materials and examination conditions are among the obvious requirements. The courses usually involve more sessions, and more practical down to earth examples are needed when presenting new

concepts and ideas. The literacy and language barrier has proven to be significant. The legacy of special schools that pooled disabled persons regardless of the severity of their impairment is still with us.

Not having learnt English or basic literacy skills, the majority are now unable to make headway within an ICT environment, which relies heavily on the English language, and totally on the ability to read and write.

Repetition both in class and at home on their computer is also essential. Students must practise and expand on what they learn in class. As with all of us, disabled persons need to learn at their own pace, and in their own time.

Notwithstanding the recommendations of the National Minimum Curriculum, there is a disproportionate emphasis on examinations. This puts those with intellectual impairments at a disadvantage because it promotes solo achievement at the expense of collaboration.

If industry wants creativity and teamwork, the silent examination hall is not the place to get it. We are all interdependent – but that is particularly true of disabled persons.

TCTC Ltd has recently launched a new set of accessible courses, meant to address the lack of mainstream ICT courses for disabled persons in Malta. FITA is supporting this initiative.

If we can agree on a definition of education around process and on training around outputs, do we need a fundamental re-assessment of when education should give way to training?

Mr Debono is the executive co-ordinator of the Foundation for Information Technology Accessibility. More information at <http://www.knpd.org/mittsfita>