

## **“At the Coalface of Accessibility”: Delivering an Accessible Curriculum to Visually-Impaired Students**

Date: Tuesday 25 April 2006 (9.30 A.M. to 4.15 P.M.)

Venue: Queen Mary College, University of London, Mile End Road, London, E1 4NS

Course Leader: Paul Jarman

Cost: £130 per delegate

### **Background to the Course**

It was not so very long ago that conferences were being held countrywide by the score in order to impress upon senior managers in Higher Education Institutions that they now had a legal duty to ensure that their particular institution was delivering an accessible curriculum. As this message gradually filtered through, they came back in their droves to tell those of us who were working "at the coalface of accessibility" a number of facts which we already knew. As it happened, we had been trying to tell them the same facts for years. That the message has finally got through is obviously a good thing, but now—it seems to me at least—the nature of the problem confronting those of us who deliver accessibility is not only different but, in many ways, even more challenging; for while the necessity of delivering an accessible curriculum is now old news, that such a delivery is not simply achieved by the purchase of one or two mini-disks, a couple of scanners and a bit of expensive software still appears to be quite a surprising concept to those who are not directly involved in its practical implementation. To judge from comments which I have picked up from both newsgroups and other conference delegates over the last year or so, many of us who are involved in that practical implementation are feeling under ever-increasing pressure as both the level of demand and the culture of expectation among disabled students continues to escalate.

As with all the various constituents of SENDA of course, the "making a curriculum accessible" was obviously going to create infinitely more challenges when applied to some sectors of the disabled student population than others; and this is particularly self-evident in the case of students with visual impairments. By its very nature, the process of education is one which has traditionally had the printed word at its core, whether it be note-taking in the lecture theatre/seminar room or the simple act of reading and digesting material from books/handouts. In other words, no disability is so perfectly guaranteed to create educational exclusivity than one which denies access to print.

The primary aim of this course therefore is to explore ways of turning the inaccessible into the accessible through the use of such media as e-material, audio and Braille. In the course of tackling this most basic of practical questions however, I will also be engaging with a variety of other important issues surrounding the delivery of an efficient, high-quality and, above all, realistic service provision for students with visual impairments. I will be outlining some of those other issues below, but firstly, why me?

## **My Credentials for Delivering this Course**

Having been totally blind myself since infancy, I have obviously experienced all my education through the use of alternative formats to the printed word. I read for my degree in English and Modern Drama at Westfield College, University of London, in the late 1980s, at a time when the visually-impaired student was alone responsible for finding ways to access any curriculum which was on offer. While this is not a state of affairs that I would wish upon any present-day student, I can honestly say that I am still grateful for the experience which facing such challenges gave me. Having completed my degree, I decided to move forward into the field of academic research, firstly as an M.Phil and now Ph.D student—the first totally blind individual to obtain a doctorate in English Literature, as far as I am aware. To the experiences of accessing the curriculum as an undergraduate therefore, I have now added the very different and infinitely more complex experiences of accessing material at research level—and when I say that my chosen thesis revolves primarily around late-eighteenth-century hand-written manuscripts, you will gather that I enjoy a challenge!

While carrying out my Ph.D, I have also gained valuable experience from the other side of the desk, as lecturer for three years in the Department of English and Drama at Queen Mary, and I also continue to pursue a professional academic career, delivering my own conference papers and producing journal and book articles in the field of English Romanticism. In other words, I have experienced education at every possible level, and have been forced to meet the challenges of accessing information in a diverse number of ways dictated by both the demands and the limitations of each of those levels. (One cannot simply scan an eighteenth-century manuscript, for example.) Without such first-hand experience in fact, I question whether it would be possible for anyone to deliver this kind of course.

Finally, for the past three years, I have been putting this experience to the good use (I hope) of assisting others to explore methods of accessing curricula, in my role as Learning Development Officer for Students with Disabilities here at Queen Mary, one of the leading universities in the UK at the last RAE. In creating this course, I wish to share some of my experiences and ideas with you, but I shall also be building in plenty of opportunity for you to share your ideas and concerns with each other and with me. This seems to me especially important, since the actual process of practically delivering accessibility can often seem (A) very divorced from the interminable talk about legislation, and (B) a very isolating and unappreciated experience.

## **Who Should Attend?**

This course is aimed at anyone who has, or is likely to have, the practical, hands-on responsibility for delivering an accessible curriculum to visually-impaired students: learning support service staff, special needs librarians, disability officers, etc. It has been constructed with Higher Education Institutions very much in mind; that is, we will be particularly examining environments such as the lecture theatre, seminar room, library, etc. I would not wish to deter staff in Further Education Institutions from taking part however, if you feel that you could benefit from such a course.

## Course Objectives

Perhaps I should begin with some non-objectives. This course is not concerned with legislation—the exception being that we will inevitably share some discussion of that old SENDA chestnut, the definition of “reasonable”. Neither is it a training course for standard visually-impaired software packages such as Supernova, Jaws or Kurzweil. In fact, I will be presuming a knowledge of these packages on your part—not necessarily a good working knowledge, but simply of their existence and what they do.

The course’s main objective is to explore methods of creating accessibility. The morning session, for example, will be tackling issues surrounding note-taking, and asking questions such as: is a human note-taker essential, and, if not, is it a desirable method to be encouraged? Have you ever even seen portable Braille note-takers (examples on show)? Do you encourage the recording of lectures, and, if so, have you explored software recording programs for recording material directly onto lap-tops? The two afternoon sessions are devoted to making accessible books and/or handouts, in both electronic and audio formats, and will be asking questions such as: What scanner and/or scanning package, and does it matter? Have you ever considered the importance of having a rigid and uniform production method for both electronic and audio books? How many existing external sources of accessible books do you know of and use in order to save you time? What do you know of “Daisy”?

As I have already said above, as a spin-off from my primary objective, I also want this course to be exploring other important questions. Two examples of these would be:

1. Is it always absolutely necessary to spend vast amounts of money on special needs software, or can one cut costs by buying off-the-shelf products which are equally as good and as accessible to the visually-impaired student? Go to either the manufacturers or vendors of special needs software for advice, for example, and you know what the answer will be!
2. The domination of printed material which I have described above is gradually diminishing in an ever-changing HE environment, but can we automatically conclude therefore that such changes must benefit the visually-impaired student?

## Booking

For a full programme and booking form, please e-mail [events@qmul.ac.uk](mailto:events@qmul.ac.uk), or telephone Amy Kobelis on 020 7882-5147. Please note that I have to restrict attendance to twenty persons, and since I have already had some bookings before this circulation, could I ask you to book as soon as possible.

Many thanks, and hope to see you there.

Paul Jarman,  
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