

Media Release

For Immediate Release

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It's time to liberate the universe

Saint Mary's University, the host institution for the Liberated Learning Consortium, has recently launched a new project called Universal Liberated Learning.

Liberated Learning is a new approach to fostering greater access to information using a specially designed speech recognition technology. The technology enables real time captioning of lecture and presentation material and simultaneously produces web accessible multimedia transcripts. This technology, originally developed for the university classroom has already seen use in the public and corporate domains and is now poised to benefit the disabled community at large.

Liberated Learning began at the Atlantic Centre for Research, Support and Access for Students with Disabilities, at Saint Mary's in 1998 and has since grown to encompass 13 universities in a global consortium dedicated to enabling barrier free access to learning for persons with disabilities.

Saint Mary's is working in partnership with Trent University and IBM Research to engage national Canadian disability organizations in the development process for IBM ViaScribe™ speech recognition technology; the cornerstone of the Liberated Learning concept. Working with these organizations and the Government of Canada through the Office for Disability Issues (Human Resources and Social Development Canada) is the beginning of an exciting new era for Liberated Learning.

The project team has initiated this key phase of community involvement by demonstrating the technology to national organizations such as The Canadian Hard of Hearing Association, The Canadian Hearing Society, Easter Seals Canada, the Neil Squire Society, and the Learning Disabilities Association of Canada to name just a few. All are enthusiastic about the potential of this leading edge technology to support and further the aspirations of disabled Canadians.

"The Canadian Hard of Hearing Association is absolutely thrilled to be a part of this exciting new technology. Hard of hearing persons rely on the printed word to ensure they are correctly receiving the right information," says Janice McNamara, Executive Director, Canadian Hard of Hearing Association.

She adds, "This new technology will make it easier for our community to access print technology in many areas where we have not been able to access the spoken word effectively. Venues such as meetings, classrooms and public forums will now be accessible to our community. We are pleased to partner with the Liberated Learning Consortium and look forward to working with this group to advance this technology."

Once past the introductory phase, the project will progress to developing a national strategy for barrier free access to learning, fuelled by the collaborative input of partner disability organizations. This proactive approach is enabled by funding support for core Liberated Learning activities, and funding for a dedicated employee to coordinate outreach activities with the disability organizations.

Funding of \$192,760 for this project was provided from the Social Development Partnerships Program, Human Resources and Social Development Canada.

A redesigned and updated Liberated Learning website has been launched, complemented by new print materials reflecting this step onto the national stage.

The International Manager of the Consortium, Keith Bain, sees this as an exciting opportunity for Saint Mary's University, a recognized leader in providing services for students with disabilities, to participate in a collaborative partnership that will empower the disabled community nationwide.

He states, "Although Liberated Learning has evolved significantly through partnerships between academia and industry, we need the creative inputs from a wider variety of organizations and individuals, especially those representing Canadians with disabilities. This collaboration with the Office for Disability Issues creates a platform for new research and development, but more importantly actively engages persons with disabilities in this project. "