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## Liberated Learning - A Global Initiative

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*By Keith Bain, International Manager, Liberated Learning*

What began as a pilot project in three classrooms in McNally East in 1998, has blossomed into an international movement. Today, institutions in Canada, the United States, Australia, the United Kingdom and Japan are following Saint Mary's lead. Little did we know that we would not only become the first university in the world to use speech recognition technology in a mainstream university classroom, but that our initiative would become recognized as a worldwide leader in using technology to create greater access for persons with disabilities.

The concept of using speech recognition technology to display spoken words as text and produce multimedia notes has become widely known as the Liberated Learning concept. In 1999, the Atlantic Centre of Research Access and Support for Students with Disabilities received a multi-million dollar grant from the J.W. McConnell Family Foundation to test and develop this concept further. A key expected outcome from this research grant, one of the largest in Saint Mary's University's 200 year history, was the creation of university and industry partnerships in Canada and abroad. Over the course of the next three years, the Atlantic Centre set out to create a consortium of like-minded institutions who shared our vision of creating a more accessible learning environment. Unexpectedly, interest came from



Keith Bain, International Manager of the Liberated Learning Project, Saint Mary's and Di Paez, the Australian Liberated Learning Manager at the University of the Sunshine Coast in Queensland, Australia.

the four corners of the earth. Our first institutional partner was a new university on the other side of the world in Queensland Australia, the University of the Sunshine Coast. Others soon joined our team. Our work attracted international academics and other passionate advocates who believed that speech recognition's time had come. Individuals from the University of Southampton, UK, University of Texas, and the National Technical Institute for the Deaf in New York have participated in Liberated Learning activities since the project began.

As the project team began to better understand the technology and how it impacted on students and faculty, global interest grew. Emails, letters, and invitations poured in from countries as far away as China, Singapore, Spain and South Africa. The Liberated Learning team embraced the challenge of stimulating global awareness and actively provided information for curious and even skeptical onlookers -people who were intrigued by the possibilities of this new approach to teaching and learning. Audiences in Scotland, England, Southeast Asia, New Zealand, and Australia have attended Liberated Learning presentations. With the generous support of IBM, we also produced a multimedia CD-Rom video which showcased the project and provided a glimpse into a "liberated" classroom. This video continues to make its way around the world, reinforcing Saint Mary's innovative leadership and commitment to public accessibility.

The global ramifications of Liberated Learning are apparent to our partner institutions, including our largest and most recognizable collaborator. IBM Research has been working with the Atlantic Centre on this initiative since the beginning. Some of the world's most famous speech recognition scientists have visited Halifax numerous times. They have conducted world first tests of an exciting network based application at Saint Mary's. This technology has the potential to reduce the complexity and cost of the concept exponentially. Scientists from IBM Israel and IBM France have been dialoguing with the Liberated Learning team about our discoveries. Resulting from these tests, two power house engineering schools, Purdue University and the Australian National University joined our team to further develop this new technical direction.

Recently, members of IBM's Global Accessibility team from Tokyo, Japan visited Saint Mary's to learn more about Liberated Learning. They believed this technological solution could be tested in Japanese universities. Since the visit to Saint Mary's, IBM Japan invited us to speak at a Global Accessibility Symposium to provide a keynote address about the possibilities of using this technology in cross cultural and language settings.

Closer to home at the Atlantic Centre, a team under the leadership of Dr. David Leitch, guides this international initiative with an unwavering mission. He says, "We are committed to developing the Liberated Learning method, so institutions around the world will be in a position to improve access for students with disabilities."

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