Carol Doyle:
Disability student assessors succeeding with Dragon NaturallySpeaking.

Carol Doyle is a Disability Needs Assessor carrying out assessments for students who have been granted a Disabled Student Allowance (DSA). She is also an Assistive Software Trainer. Carol divides her time assessing students at Cardiff, Swansea and Open University (OU) and training OU students on assistive technology. The students she has assessed range in age from her youngest - 17 - to her oldest - 74 - with a wide range of conditions ranging from specific learning difficulties (eg dyspraxia and dyslexia) to medical conditions and mental health. In her role as Needs Assessor and Assistive Software Trainer Carol estimates that she assesses up to 120 students a year and trains approximately 50 students a year.

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Equality for all in education
Carol's role has evolved during her long career in the higher education/disability sector. In 2000 she was employed by Cardiff Metropolitan University as Accessible Curriculum Development Adviser. As part of this role, Carol had to write a guide for academic staff on ensuring that their curriculum was accessible to all disabled students. This was as a result of the impending disability legislation; prior to 2001, there was no legislation in place to protect students in post-16 education. A UK-wide organisation for academic excellence contacted Cardiff Metropolitan University with a view to making the guide available to all academics in the UK with a learning and teaching responsibility. This guide was then re-edited and distributed nationally. Following the successful launch of her guide, Carol became involved in other projects. These included working with the senior software engineer of Blackboard, virtual learning environment to ensure that its format was accessible for disabled students and writing a guide for academic staff to ensure that materials posted in Blackboard were accessible. She also set up a Support Worker Scheme for disabled students. During this time, she was also assessing students at Cardiff University, which she has continued to do for the last ten years. In 2010 Carol left Cardiff Metropolitan University in order to complete assessments with more universities and to carry out assistive technology training for the Open University.

Carol explains how Dragon NaturallySpeaking continues to help many of the students she assesses and trains: "Of the students I assess at the brick-built universities, about 80 or 90% have a specific learning difficulty such as dyslexia or dyspraxia. With Open University, the cohort of students is very different; some students I assess and train can have up to five or six conditions including a mental health condition and several physical conditions such as arthritis, fibro-myalgia, disc degeneration and so on. The students I assess can range from an anxious 17 year old who had not attended school for many years due to his condition to a 74 year old studying law because it was something he always wanted to do!

Painting a picture
At assessment, if a student has not heard of Dragon or seen it in operation, before demonstrating it I often introduce them to its benefits by creating a personal scenario for them so that they can visualise how Dragon will aid them. For instance, if a student has a back problem and has difficulty sitting at a workstation for too long before having to get up and move around due to pain, I explain that with the wireless version of Dragon he can stand up, walk around and still dictate. By creating this kind of scenario and outlining some of the basic principles of Dragon before demonstrating it gives students a good idea on how easy it is to use and how it will benefit them.

Training for speech success
To ensure that students fully understand Dragon, I always allow three hours for training. Many other pieces of software can take less training time, depending on how computer savvy a student is, but with Dragon I always feel that it requires the full three hours, with sufficient rest breaks. This is in order for the student to feel comfortable with the concept of talking to the PC as much as it is to direct them how to use it. Once the training has been completed, I always stress that the more Dragon is utilised the more accurate it will become particularly as the user becomes proficient in the use of commands. I always tell the students to continue to give Dragon love and attention post-training!

Life after training
I do not see students post-training so I do not always know to what extent Dragon has benefitted them. However, I do often hear success stories! I once assessed a 70 year old student who had pain in his wrists due to dystonia and this impacted on the amount of work he could produce using a keyboard/mouse input method. I recommended Dragon as a strategy for him. Once my recommendation had been approved by the finance body I re-visited him and carried out the training. Some months later I received an email from the student thanking me for my support and telling me how much Dragon had changed his life. In his email he told me that not only had he submitted his first essay to the Open University but had done it all via Dragon! He even created the email using Dragon.

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The route to independence
Dragon can benefit students with complex conditions. I assessed a quadriplegic student (he had had an accident that broke his neck and left him paralysed) and determined not to let this stop him being challenged (he played wheelchair basketball and had returned to work part-time), he commenced a part-time degree in Spanish with Open University. I introduced him to the idea of using Dragon to aid him to produce written work more easily; he was using his knuckles to access the keyboard. Understandably, the suggestion of this greatly improved strategy for producing work excited the student. We agreed on him using the Spanish version of Dragon. When I went to his home to commence training on all the software that was recommended, it was Dragon he wanted to try first. During training – and even with the student's very strong Welsh accent – he was able to dictate a large paragraph in Spanish without one recognition error. It was amazing! Dragon has changed this student's life and has given him back some independence and enabled him to become more proficient in producing essays as part of his studies.

Speech today challenges yesterday's perceptions
I still hear occasional negative comments about Dragon. There is the perception that it doesn't work effectively but this is often based on experiences from years ago or hearsay. Years back, some Needs Assessors were reluctant to use or recommend Dragon. I tell students that Dragon has been on a long road to improvement and it has come a long way in the last five years. I explain that it has improved greatly and state, "please don't think that it doesn't work...as I have a long list of happy students that can prove that it does."

The Needs Assessor's guide to succeeding with Dragon:
– Deliver the whole training session
– Explain to the student where and how Dragon can benefit them
– Let them feel their way around Dragon naturally and let their intuition guide them
– Stress the need for continued use and perseverance to achieve the best results

About Dragon NaturallySpeaking
Dragon NaturallySpeaking is part of Nuance's broad portfolio of voice innovations that continues to define a new generation of intelligent systems and personal assistant technologies, it includes Dragon NaturallySpeaking for PC, Dragon Dictate for Mac, Dragon Assistant for Intel-inspired Ultrabooks, Dragon Dictation and Dragon Search for iOS, Dragon Drive, Dragon TV, Dragon ID, Dragon Voicemail to Text, Nuance Voice Ads and Swype. With Nuance technology, people experience more humanized interactions with the world's best phones, tablets, computers, cars, TVs, apps and services from leading manufacturers and operators. For more information on Nuance please visit: www.nuance.co.uk.

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