BBRI consultant instrumental in making literacy curriculum broadly accessible

Elizabeth M. ("Betsy") Dalton, PhD, delivers information in a style that is authoritative and patient at the same time, which should not be surprising given her background in both disabilities research and work in special education classrooms. Dalton, the director of development and research at TechACCESS of Rhode Island, has become an invaluable resource for BBRI in tailoring the digital literacy curriculum to meet the needs of individuals with disabilities — and then equipping trainers to work effectively with these students.

TechACCESS was established in 1991 to promote use of assistive technology to support persons with disabilities in their full participation in all aspects of life. Dalton explains that her organization connected with BBRI after BBRI staff members attended presentations on Universal Design for Learning (UDL) concepts at last fall's annual Assistive Technology Conference in Rhode Island.

"We started talking about UDL and asked ourselves if it could be brought into BBRI's digital literacy program to help make the program accessible for all," says Dalton. UDL principles, dating to the early 1990s, are based on neuroscience and emphasize the design of curriculum and learning environments to be readily accessible to a wide audience. The principles call for offering multiple means of representation in instruction, and encourage students to express what they have learned in multiple ways. They also address the need for student engagement in the learning process.

Dalton proceeded to consult with BBRI on the design of the digital literacy curriculum, incorporating UDL principles through use of color and graphics and also by clarifying some terms, introducing learning strategies, and revisiting certain concepts over the course of the instruction.

This design process has contributed greatly to the scalability of the digital literacy program. Dalton also conducts full-day trainings in which BBRI's digital literacy trainers learn in hands-on fashion about working with students with widely varying needs, including disabilities and language challenges.

"We have designed some scenarios of challenging situations that trainers might encounter," says Dalton, who prior to joining TechACCESS was an assistant professor of special education at Rhode Island College and coordinator of assistive technology at the Paul V. Sherlock Center on Disabilities. The scenarios run the gamut from assisting a visually or hearing-impaired person to reaching a student with learning disabilities to addressing the needs of ESL students. These situations can leave a volunteer trainer uncertain about how to approach such a person and how much assistance to offer, Dalton says.

She explains that each trainer receives a specific module to learn and practice in the instructor training session. During this exercise they will be thrown a curveball in terms of an unforeseen scenario that could come up in a class, although they are told in advance what the scenario will be. "We want it to happen in the training before it happens to them in the field," Dalton says.

She also emphasizes in her work with trainers some important perspectives on the learning needs of adults. "Adults need to see relevance and connection to their lives, they need to be able to participate in their instruction, and they need to see the various steps happen relatively quickly," she points out.

Digital literacy instructors, as well as teachers in public schools and others who work with disabled populations in the state, can borrow materials from TechACCESS, ranging from assistive listening devices to switch mechanisms for people who cannot operate electronics without assistance. TechACCESS's Warwick headquarters houses a lending library with numerous assistive technology tools.

The partnership between BBRI and TechACCESS has enhanced a digital literacy curriculum that Dalton calls "exceptional" in its breadth of resources and its applicability to diverse populations. "BBRI has done an excellent job of establishing a structure for digital literacy to be available to the public," she says. For more information about TechACCESS Rhode Island, visit www.techaccess-ri.org.