A Borrowing Library of Technology

by Sally James

When Jon Howe lectures his students in psychology class, he’s using technology from the Washington Assistive Technology Act Program or WATAP. Howe uses a device called a ChatterVox, which amplifies his voice by microphone because his vocal cords have weakened due to a neuromuscular condition. Howe was referred by his vocational rehabilitation counselor to WATAP, which operates as part of the Center for Technology and Disability Studies (CTDS). CTDS is one of the eight programs of the University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities based at the Center on Human Development and Disability. Through WATAP, people of all ages with disabilities and rehabilitation professionals may receive hands-on demonstrations and short-term loans of assistive technology (AT) devices to help make informed decisions about using such devices and related services.

“We wouldn't have known about the correct device without the variety that WATAP had available,” Howe said during an interview. Kurt Johnson, Professor of Rehabilitation Medicine and Director of the CTDS explained, “We give people the opportunity to make informed choices about technology.” Through hands-on guidance by experienced assistive technology specialists, consumers receive demonstrations of product features that will help accomplish tasks at school, work, home, and in the community. This free service is offered by appointment by calling 1-800-214-8731. The WATAP website provides a category list of available devices for individuals to explore.

WATAP lends approximately 500 devices each year to people through its Device Demo and Lending Library system, shipping devices anywhere in Washington State. The library system contains more than 200 different devices which can be viewed on their website and range from simple daily living aids such as a jar opener to specialized software that allows one to control a computer by moving their eye gaze instead of using a mouse. Specialists at WATAP help people learn about the available technology and for a small fee allow potential users to borrow pieces for home use for a three-week period.

WATAP outreach to every corner of Washington is enhanced through a partnership with the Timberland Regional Library System in southwest Washington. This system has 27 libraries in five Washington counties and makes a small collection of devices available directly from local library branches. Johnson hopes to sign an agreement with a large library system on the east side of the Cascades to raise awareness of the availability of AT devices and to provide similar services to their...
members. Because librarians are experts at helping people find information, it is second-nature to them to include AT devices among their resources. “We put technology where people are already going to get help,” Johnson said.

In addition to helping families identify and locate appropriate technology, WATAP also has resources that help pay for AT devices. Through collaboration with the Washington Access Fund, individuals with disabilities and their families can obtain flexible financing opportunities. Free or low-cost devices may also be available from WATAP’s device reuse partners within the Evergreen Reuse Coalition, including Bridge Disability Ministries-Meyer Mobility Center and the Hearing, Speech, and Deafness Center. During 2012, WATAP partnered with reuse organizations to help deliver 205 used devices for an estimated savings to recipients of more than $117,000.

For Jon Howe, his ChatterVox has made a significant difference in his pursuit of a doctoral degree in neuroscience from the University of Washington. When he is tired, the strain of projecting his voice throughout his classroom can further weaken his voice. However, using his amplifier relieves the strain and makes it easier for him to teach. Jon is now using it on the bus and for ordering lunch in the cafeteria because it helps him project more clearly from his wheelchair.

Howe’s successful experience translates into feedback for future users of the same device. Howe and other users collaborate with WATAP to select, preview, and use devices creatively and the knowledge gained from using various devices comes back to WATAP and helps inform the next borrower. This collaboration also extends to employers and vocational counselors, Johnson from CTDS explained, with WATAP serving as a nexus for brainstorming about the best mix of devices for a given challenge. Counselors from the state Department of Vocational Rehabilitation, as well as personnel from school districts, come to WATAP to see new technology or receive training. More brainstorming and ideas can come from the Department of Rehabilitation Medicine, where Johnson teaches. “We have a large and interdisciplinary faculty. People there have experience with all sorts of new technology,” Johnson said.

WATAP provides many paths for a wide variety of people. Some only use devices for a short time, for example, after a surgery to bridge a temporary gap, while others may require a series of different devices to continue functioning as their ability changes. “Organizations like WATAP are essential for helping people like me to achieve,” Howe said. “I could not lecture without a microphone.” After he receives his doctorate, Howe hopes to work with people in chronic pain, and assist in developing new understandings of how behavior can change perception.

For more information, WATAP is at www.watap.org