Breaking the Cycle of Homelessness with Assistive Technology

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This case study shows how using principles of universal design for learning, that have been developed in the context of Higher Education, can be transferred to a social context to alleviate poverty and homelessness.

Marginalisation and learning isolation can have a huge collateral impact on life beyond education. Traditionally, Diversity and Ability (DnA), a disabled-led social enterprise, has supported Disabled individuals in Higher Education and the workplace to reach their potential using inclusive practices, tailored strategies and assistive technology. But what about those battling undiagnosed learning differences, that fit into neither category and have somehow slipped through the gap in the middle? Ironically, it's this group with the most urgent need, that benefit the most from using assistive technologies, yet have the least access to it.

DnA has been working with Crisis homelessness charity, delivering a series of workshops to service users exploring free technologies that assist with core literacy and numeracy skills, as well as organisation, wellbeing and memory. This initiative aims to:

- Minimise long term unemployment
- Address confidence issues surrounding neurodiversity and education
- Equip participants with skills to secure stable accommodation
- Enable increased access to support and funding

It is important to recognise that a lot of processes to seek support take place either online or with use of a computer; digital skills are necessary to access mainstream society. For example when applying for benefits through the Job Centre Plus, it's essential to be able to use a computer effectively to not only apply for financial aid in the first place but also to complete job searches, a mandatory condition in order to receive funding. Many people that are eligible for financial support are excluded as they either don't have access to a computer or have problems navigating the systems. Assistive technology supports those with learning differences or disabilities to access such platforms, and it's these tools along with appropriate training, that can transform a person's experience of society.

This initiative has sparked stories of hope and change for some of the most vulnerable individuals in our society. With the explosion of low cost apps and open source software, access to learning and acquiring key life skills is becoming progressively democratised. Creating a safe space for people to access technology and develop learning strategies, has catalysed enormous life shifts, enabling some to move forward to much more positive spaces. Here is a sample of illustrative feedback from the course participants:

Daniel	*Now when I get a letter I type it up and use MyStudyBar to read it out loud to me. Before I had to ask for help or give it to a friend whose reading was better than me!*

Amber	*I love my session with Tim Blunt very much. It gave me hope that I can turnaround my work place failures and shortcomings in bright success finally with a little help of AT. Thank you so much for providing us this opportunity. I really hope I can take a few more sessions to overcome any difficulties arise...*
Bouchra	*I'm grateful for the service. It has opened my eyes to new stuff. The best being the text-to-speech on my phone; I've been able to use google to research a great deal, and learn huge amounts (particularly regarding Universal Income and housing benefits). It's also allowed me to have a bit of privacy – as I had to get my neighbours to read my post – and to be more active on Facebook.*
Geraldine	*Liked the one to one and also just long enough- not overwhelming! Can really use the material on a day to day basis to organise life. Learning about text to speech and Google Keep on phone life changing.*