

# Sandra Thistlethwaite

## Assistive Technology Consultant



### Personal Profile

I am a highly experienced practitioner and presenter in the field of special educational needs and assistive technology. I am also a multi-award-winning software designer and developer and have led commercial Research and Development teams to produce new and innovative technology solutions to meet the needs of people with complex learning difficulties and disabilities. My initial role as a Speech and Language Therapist has continuously driven and informed my career; from assessment and training consultant for both the ACE Centre and Inclusive Technology to being on the Board of Directors of successful companies in the field. In recent research roles I have gained specialist knowledge and experience of working with students with highly complex needs, VI and CVI, and the use of eye gaze technology. This has led to best-selling products and authorship of popular and internationally used information sources on this subject. In all my roles, I value and continuously learn from the relationships with individuals, schools and companies I work with and remain passionate about helping to achieve the best possible technology solutions to enhance the quality of life of people of all abilities.

### Professional Qualifications

1987 - 1990 Manchester Metropolitan University - BSc Speech and Language Pathology and Therapy

### Training Provided

- A wide variety of special needs software titles including all IT titles, Clicker, Boardmaker, The Grid, Communicator
- A wide variety of presentations on the application and use of technology in special education including:
  - Supporting students with PLMD and Communication Difficulties
  - Communication and Learning Through Technology
  - From iPads to Eye Gaze – Access to Technology for students with complex needs
  - The Eye Gaze Learning Curve
  - Eye Gaze in the Classroom

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- Eye Gaze – From Cause and Effect to Communication
- Eye Gaze – From Assessment to Empowerment
- Access and Engagement in the Special Needs Classroom
- Learning to Choose: Choosing to Learn – Choice making with students with CLDD
- Switch Skills Progression
- Inclusive Classrooms – Supporting Struggling Readers and Writers
- Introduction to Assistive Technology for students with Complex Needs
- iPads and Tablets for Special Needs
- Access to Technology for students with complex needs
- Exhibited and presented at most national and international conferences in the field including, BETT, CM, ISAAC, Spectronics, ATIA, CSUN, Closing The Gap, AAC in the Desert and ASHA
- Authored, designed and delivered the majority of the IT Information Day training, launch Events and webinar programs over the past 12 years.
- Delivered units developed by ACE Centre and accredited by MMU – AAC and AT
- Local training of parents and other professionals in AT and AAC
- Makaton Regional Tutor
- Derbyshire Language Scheme Tutor

### Training Received

- I have had the privilege of attending most major national and international conferences and many courses led by leaders in the field such as Dr Caroline Musselwhite, Dr Gretchen Hanson, Dr Carol Goossens, Linda Burkhart, Prof Carole Zangari. Recent US courses include;
- AAC in the Desert
- Setting the Stage for AAC: Literacy and MORE
- Emergent Writing: Scribbling and Beyond
- Emergent Reading for Students who use AAC
- Relevant courses from UK experts include:
- Recent advances in assessment for children with communication difficulties – UCL
- Vision for Communication – CM Study Day
- Attendance at various Roadshows, SIGs, Network Days in the field
- Attendance at all CM conferences from 1995 - 2017
- Training from various companies e.g. Tobii, Smartbox, Widgit, Crick, Pretorian on hardware and software products

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## Work experience

Inclusive Technology: July 2007 – February 2018

*Specialist Speech and Language Therapist + ICT Consultant*

My main duties included creating and delivering a SEN/ ICT training and information service, working alongside well respected professionals. This included regular 'Information Day' events, bespoke consultancy and training to individuals, schools and services, exhibiting and presenting at conferences and developing on-line support and training, such as webinars, to reach a global audience. I also introduced, created and edited the annual "Communication Handbook" from IT, specifically selecting and developing the best communication technology products from around the globe and providing practical advice and information on their use.

*Product Development Director/ Board of Directors for Inclusive Technology, HelpKidzLearn and Special World*

In this role I was responsible for the development and delivery of key Inclusive products such as HelpKidzLearn and ChooseIt!Maker 3 which received the highly acclaimed Queen's Awards for International Trade and Innovation in 2016 and 2017. I represented the company at the Queen's reception at Buckingham Palace and on live TV.

I designed and developed the very successful Inclusive Eye Gaze Learning Curve – a set of 3 CDs of software to assess and develop early eye gaze skills. This was a finalist for the BETT Award in 2015 and went on to win the ERA Award in 2016. It is the first IT product to be translated into other languages and its success continues globally.

I also significantly contributed to the design and development of other popular products such as EyeMousePlay – the interface for the myGaze eye tracker and Matrix Maker – an easy to use symbol printing programme. I also helped to design many of the well known IT software series such as Counting Songs and SwitchIt! and lots of student's favourite HKL games and activities.

Most recently, I directed the Research and Development Team and successfully completed two research grant projects that involved the use of innovative data analysis, algorithm development and machine learning. From the first project I designed and led the development of 'Insight' – an intelligent, individualised learning system to assess and develop early visual learning skills.

The ACE Centre: January 2002 – July 2007

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### *Specialist Speech and Language Therapist*

Here I worked as a member of a specialist multi-disciplinary Assessment and Training Team delivering services to children and adults with complex access and communication needs and had additional responsibilities as Assessment Coordinator, Resource Manager and acting Deputy Manager of the Centre. During this time I also helped to manage, coordinate and deliver the Communication Aids Project – a precursor to the present NHS England model for communication aids funding.

### Blackburn, Hyndburn and Ribble Valley Health Authority -1990-2002

#### *Speech and Language Therapist*

I worked in a range of clinical and educational settings delivering therapy services to adults and children, including;

- Mainstream clinic caseload
- Language Unit in mainstream school
- Special schools for children with PD, SLD and Autism
- Adults with Learning Disabilities Service
- Adult neurology – hospitals and home visits

#### *Specialist Speech and Language Therapist*

I specialised in working mainly with children and young adults with complex physical, learning and communication needs and autism. I set up and delivered the local AAC / AT service for the region and was one of the original members of the NW SIG in Computers and Communication Technology, producing the 'Catalogos' newsletter.

### Additional skills

I have also had significant experience with marketing; writing and designing many of the leaflets, brochures and newsletter campaigns for IT's key products. I also filmed, scripted, directed and edited many of the more recent Inclusive Technology product and information videos.

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