

THE OPEN VOICE FACTORY

2016 Nominet Trust 100 Winner

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2016

FREE AND OPEN VOICE COMMUNICATION AID

By AzuleJoe

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Joe Reddington's little brother Richard has communication disabilities, which means that he has never been able to speak. When Richard was 19, his family managed to get him a Voice Communication Aid (VOCA), and the device changed their lives. Richard was now able to find a picture of what he wanted to express, and the VOCA would say the words out loud.

Unfortunately, there are many children and adults with similar disabilities to Richard – 32,000 in the UK alone – where only 8,900 (28%) of them can access a VOCA. The main barrier is cost, which averages at £2,000, followed by high breakage rates. About 40% of VOCA devices require repairs in the first year of use, and the NHS and local authorities spent an estimated £40 million on VOCA equipment between 2006 and 2012.

Thankfully, there is a community of people working on solutions. When Joe met Kate McCallum, an AAC Speech and Language Therapy Technician who also had a brother with speech disabilities, they combined forces to put together Kate's Creative Commons page set called CommuniKate, with an online demo built by Joe, which became hugely popular.

The pair then developed the demo into The Open Voice Factory, the first open source assistive communication software that is free at the point of delivery. The Open Voice Factory uses open code available on GitHub, so volunteers around the world can contribute to its development, and it can run on a variety of platforms from iPads to laptops to Kindles, both online and offline.

The Open Voice Factory also allows care staff to adapt VOCA content using PowerPoint, which means that the software can be easily customised with personal vocabulary, stories and even in-jokes.

Joe now hopes that this project will bring better communication to the 32,000 people in the UK with speech disabilities, like his brother. To find out more visit <http://equalitytime.co.uk/portfolio/azulejoe>

Image courtesy of The Open Voice Factory

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