

## **2008 NCTI *Technology in the Works* Abstract: Point-and-Chat**

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In today's world, electronic text-based messages such as email and Instant Messaging (IM) are assuming increasing importance. They are increasingly replacing face-to-face and telephone conversations, especially among today's youth. Not only do most young people use IM, but half of the online young people use IM as much as or more than email. The increasing importance of text-based messages can create additional communications barriers for people who use Augmentative/Alternative Communications (AAC) devices – especially if they have difficulty reading or writing.

**Point-and-Chat™** is a new (but not yet commercially available) Instant Messaging program – the first of its kind designed specifically for AAC users who have difficulty reading. Point-and-Chat combines (a) customizable input screens of an AAC device, (b) patented screen-reading technology, and (c) a new easily-understood IM interface.

The value of Point-and-Chat is not only that it provides an easy way for AAC users to learn Instant Messaging, but that it provides an important entryway for non-readers to engage with and communicate via the written word.

Instant Messages are expected to be short, and the rules of grammar, punctuation and spelling are often suspended. IM is the loosest, shortest, most free-form, and most immediately reinforcing form of written communications. The content of an IM conversation is very much like a one-on-one, face-to-face personal chat – proceeding in not just sentences, but exclamations, phrases and fragments of sentences. Point-and-Chat builds upon the conversational skills that AAC users already possess. Importantly, the inherent lag times expected in IM put the AAC user on an equal footing – everyone has to use a keyboard of some sort.

But Point-and-Chat is not just about enabling poor readers and AAC users, it is about motivating them. For many of today's youth, Instant Messaging *is* communication. Point-and-Chat will help motivate AAC users to improve their reading, communicating, and AAC skills, so that they can IM with the rest of their friends.

Point-and-Chat software is being jointly developed by **Saltillo Corporation** (makers of the handheld ChatPCTM AAC device) and **Point-and-Read, Inc.** (makers of the Point-and-Read screen-reader). Their research partner for this collaborative investigation is **Dr. Jeff Higginbotham** of the State University of New York at Buffalo, an acknowledged expert in the field of AAC research and collaborative investigations.

The proposed collaborative research will evaluate the performance and usability of the Point-and-Chat software by documenting the learning and use of the technology by 5 different individuals who use direct selection augmentative communication systems. At least 3 of the participants will display significant text writing difficulties. The research will evaluate and analyze both structured and spontaneous use of Point-and-Chat. This research will move Point-and-Chat towards its goal of allowing anyone who can use an AAC device to also send and receive Instant Messages – even if he or she cannot read or write.