



## Disabled Students Across Canada Excel via The Neil Squire Society and Wimba Classroom's Accessibility

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*-Chad Leaman, Distance Learning Coordinator, The Neil Squire Society*

In January 2008 a major snowstorm hit British Columbia (BC). While only half of The Neil Squire Society's participants – all of whom are people with disabilities – were able to make it to their face-to-face course sites throughout the province, all remaining participants made it to their class, and participated in the class, via Wimba Classroom.

A member of the Liberated Learning Consortium, – an international group dedicated to advancing speech recognition technology and techniques to improve accessibility to information - the Neil Squire Society is headquartered in Burnaby British Columbia with five offices across Canada. The Society is the only national not-for-profit organization that has for over two decades, used technology, knowledge, and passion to empower Canadians with physical disabilities. Through their work, they help their clients remove barriers so that they can live independent lives and become active members of the workplace and our society. The Society's vision is to lead Canada in creating an environment where every person with a physical disability has access to make the most of his/her abilities and contribute to society.

Since it was founded, the Society has offered a variety of programs tailored to facilitate social and economic independence for people with physical disabilities. The Society's beginnings saw them support their clients utilizing assistive technologies and teaching computing skills through programs face-to-face. It relied on technology which minimized or eliminated barriers faced by a person with a disability. Today the Society has a fully equipped assistive technology lab with over 200 devices.

The Society's flagship program is Employ-Ability whose aim is to prepare clients for future employment opportunities. The program consists of four course modules; Career Development, Wellness for Work, Assistive Technology, and Employment Liaison & Work Experience. The majority of the course utilizes computer technology for assignments and all clients leave the program with a vocational direction, marketing materials, and a plan of action.



The Neil Squire Society  
Burnaby, BC, Canada  
[www.neilsquire.ca](http://www.neilsquire.ca)

### WIMBA PRODUCTS AND SERVICES

- Wimba Classroom

### KEY BENEFITS

- Accessible for disabled students
- Increased enrollments
- Increased retention rates
- More accessible than some face-to-face classes

### **Chad Leaman**

*Distance Learning Coordinator,  
The Neil Squire Society*





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### **MORE ACCESSIBLE THAN FACE-TO-FACE CLASSES, IN SOME CASES**

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In the Employ-Ability program, the Society's facilitators assess what skills their clients have used in the past. The facilitators aid clients through a self-evaluation process to realize what their skills are, have them research careers matching their preferences and strengths, finding what careers best suit them. They help them develop resumes, marketing materials and prepare for job interviews. A key to their success is enabling their clients take ownership of their career development.

Participants also take computer lessons. They learn basic computer skills that teach them to use the Internet, Windows, Email, Word, and Excel. At the end of the course, each student prepares a PowerPoint presentation to tell their classmates where they're headed in their careers and in their lives.

In early 2006, the Society began making its Employ-Ability program available to partners in other communities throughout Canada. As its program grew, it needed a reliable tool to deliver its classes effectively online; it needed Wimba.

Before Wimba, the Society's ability to deliver via distance was dependant on its participants being in one central location. That is no longer the case. Participants have joined sessions from classrooms, home, hospitals, community centers, and colleges. Wimba has also allowed the Society's facilitators to deliver class while traveling. One facilitator has taught live online from his classroom, home, office, distance learning sites, other offices, airports, hotel rooms and lobbies, libraries, coffee shops, parking lots and even a washroom. This would not have previously been possible without Wimba.

Since adopting Wimba in May 2007, the Neil Squire Society has "greatly increased" its effectiveness in delivering real-time classes to people

with disabilities across Canada, according to Chad Leaman, Distance Learning Coordinator of the Neil Squire Society.

It's new anytime, anywhere program, powered by Wimba, allows its students to take a two-hour class four-days a week. They also take online accessible technology training and assessments with community partners. And while participants can even have their desktops accessed remotely by their facilitators, the most innovative aspect of the online program is that all courses are closed captioned through speech recognition software.

With Wimba, the Society reaches students across Canada at training sites in Pembroke and Sudbury, Ontario, Penticton and Vernon, British Columbia, plus Saskatoon, Saskatchewan and even in participants' homes.

"Students with disabilities have a 20% higher likelihood of having less computer skills. Our students get a great sense of accomplishment by using Wimba," says Leaman. "Some of our students come in with no computer skills at all. Wimba is very easy to use. The learning curve isn't as steep as some other programs out there. There aren't 50 million icons to use."

To help its facilitators feel comfortable when delivering via distance, Leaman's team provides a technical staff member (who is knowledgeable of Wimba) to sit-in on classes to provide assistance. This staff member helps ease any fear of the unknown for facilitators as they build their comfort level using Wimba.

After only limited training, the Society's facilitators quickly realize the value of delivering collaborative courses online. "Our Regina office began



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### LIVELY INSTRUCTION WITH WIMBA

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-Chad Leaman

### ABOUT WIMBA

Wimba develops web-based collaboration software designed for online education, language learning and live interactive communications. Our collaborative applications enable learning professionals to fully embrace the new wave of teaching and learning opportunities afforded by the Internet; regardless of geographic location, bandwidth or operating system. Our classroom collaboration solutions enable educators to conduct live, online classes, meetings, office hours and other collaborations, and our language learning tools add oral interaction directly into course content, web-pages, study groups and assessments. With simplicity and power, Wimba adds new dimensions to online, accessible education, enhancing the learning experience for both students and instructors.

with one staff member immediately, and now all of their staff uses Wimba to deliver classes," says Leaman. "Our Eastern regions are even using Wimba for staff meetings, staff training, and client review meetings. This has allowed them to get comfortable using the tool before going 'live' in a classroom environment."

After using Wimba for only one year, the Society has increased the number of participants 50%. And most importantly, its students' return-to-work-rate is just as high as that of its students who meet face-to-face.

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Most importantly, Leaman has led the charge at the Society in terms of making Wimba accessible for their hearing-impaired participants. Using a technique called Liberated Learning, a unique application of speech recognition technology that began as a method for enhancing accessibility for students with disabilities in the university classroom, Leaman reaches students who previously had a difficult or impossible time accessing learning technologies.

Having a distance tool that is accessible from any computer workstation with an internet connection has greatly increased the value of our program for our partners and participants," says Leaman. "Some of our participants are unable to

come in on a daily basis due to issues surrounding their disabilities, but with Wimba they are able to log in from home or watch one of the archives. These features have greatly increased our accessibility – making our sessions available anytime, anywhere, for any Canadian with a disability."

Leaman uses IBM's ViaScribe speech recognition software to closed-caption the audio of its facilitators. The captioning is read in the chat box within the Wimba interface, thereby allowing hard-of-hearing students to read what the facilitator says. This ultimately creates a series of accessible lessons that can be accessed by past or future students.

"Speech-to-text increases all learners' retention rates," reports Leaman, proudly. "We are currently using this feature with a deaf participant, and she has commented how this has greatly increased her ability to learn and participate in class." People with disabilities are just as willing and able to be effective members in society, be that in work, education, or other settings, says Leaman. Appropriate accommodations and the effective use of technology can allow them a better opportunity to make a contribution and participate.

And though the Society primarily uses Wimba Classroom for class delivery, it now uses it for staff meetings with colleagues throughout Canada on topics such as funding and budget issues.

But again, it's the accessibility which makes the Society and its participants so happy. "Our deaf student is a bright, smart, young girl," says Leaman. "Most other technologies exclude her, but Wimba utilizing ViaScribe allows her to participate, move forward, improve her skills and get on with her career."