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 Mid Ocean News

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Top US educator to talk on 21st-century brain

 by COLIN O'CONNOR

DISTINGUISHED US educator Dr. Sherelle Walker will tell an audience at the Bermuda Underwater Exploration Institute (BUEI) next week how to improve learning skills, communication and memory.

Dr. Walker is Chief Education Officer for Scientific Learning Inc., a San Francisco-based company that combines the latest advances in brain research and technology to create products and services that help develop learning and communication ability.

Scientific Learning created the Fast ForWord educational system, which was brought to the island by Angela Fubler and her team of educational consultants at Bercon Ltd. in Southampton.

"The decision to invite Dr. Walker followed our visit to Scientific Learning in January," advised Ms Fubler. "She was one of the presenters, and she was so dynamic, and funny, that as the week progressed, the three of us in the team from Bermuda agreed that we had to get her to visit Bermuda.

"She is also very knowledgeable in the area of brain-based learning and neuroscience, but her background in public education and home schooling, and her general expertise, seemed to lend itself to our plan to educate the community on those topics."

Ms Fubler, CEO of Bercon Ltd., is confident that the local audience at BUEI will learn some aspects of the workings of the brain that overturn prior understanding.

"We have focused to a great extent, in the educational community, on external things like physical structures and curriculum, but we have tended to overlook the physical properties of the brain, the sole central educational processor! What science and Scientific Learning have discovered is that all of our behaviour and responses are conditioned by neural activity."

Ms Fubler proposed that the widely-held belief that brain cells atrophied and died over time as an inevitable result of ageing or abuse had been reversed by recent scientific

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research.

"New research on the astonishing plasticity of the brain has proved that the brain has considerable capacity for renewal throughout life, and the idea of irreversible decline no longer holds. We know that we can re-train the brain to perform a variety of new behaviours and to learn new tasks."

"Dr. Walker will be talking to the community about how the Fast ForWord products and technology work not only to develop the cognitive skills which underlie a child's ability to learn, and especially learn how to read, but also the effect they can have on reawakening the cognitive abilities of ageing adults."

Prior to joining Scientific Learning, Dr. Walker was vice-president of curriculum for Pearson National Computer Systems, and established one of the first Internet academies for home schooling, which was featured on *CNN*; she is a recipient of an NAACP Cultural Arts Award.

Speaking to the *Mid-Ocean News* from San Francisco, Dr. Walker said she was looking forward to her visit to Bermuda, and to telling her audience at BUEI next Wednesday that much more has been learned about the functioning of the brain.

"Particularly as it relates to how the brain learns, our research and products have had a considerable impact on how we can help children who have not been successful, and accelerate those who have been successful," she explained. "We now know that we can strengthen areas of the brain that affect reading and learning.

"We used to believe that, at a certain age, we had all of the neural connections and aptitudes that we would ever have, but that view has been refuted. In fact, some of the research that is being used in the Fast ForWord product is being used in research into Alzheimer's disease; it is significant, and deals with what we call brain plasticity. Fast ForWord is just a technological delivery system for this research, and now we can deliver it into schools and clinics.

"We target youngsters who are under-performing, and target the area of reading, because we know that literacy is the key to children developing successfully in other areas. It doesn't take years to see results; within ten to 12 weeks we can see measurable gains in reading that could otherwise take two to three years.

"The research used in Fast ForWord was replicated in 2003 by a Stanford professor, independent from us, who used an MRI scan, magnetic resonance imaging, to test children who were severely dyslexic, and he was able to show areas of the brain with very limited activity; he put these students through a Fast ForWord product for eight weeks, and at the end of that period, he found that the particular areas of the brain were functioning at an exceptionally higher rate, and the only intervention had been Fast ForWord."

q Bercon Ltd's "community presentation" of Dr. Walker is aimed at teachers, parents, college students and ageing adults, and will take place on Wednesday, June 8 at 7 p.m. at the BUEI; tickets are \$70, including session materials, and more information can be got by calling 236-7190 or e-mailing fastforwordbercon.com

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