Myerscough College
Using technology to support learners

Myerscough College is a specialist land-based and sports college located near Preston in Lancashire. The main campus includes a farm, horticultural production, ornamental gardens, a sports centre, a golf academy, animal care and equine units, a rural business unit and residential accommodation for 700 learners. The college has several urban centres located in Blackburn, Burnley, Liverpool and Manchester and offers veterinary nursing in Dorset and Wirral. The college's vision is that, '*Myerscough will be the college of choice in the land-based and sports sector - providing opportunities for all to succeed*'.

The college provides courses from foundation level to higher education. In 2010/11 the college enrolled 2,173 further education learners. Around 1,486 of the learners were aged 16 to 18; 60% were male. In addition 1,042 learners were enrolled on work-based courses and there were 1,176 students on higher education courses. (Ofsted 2011)

Inclusive Learning

The Inclusive Learning Department was re-named in 2011 to reflect their wider ranging cross curricular role within the college. Staff from the department provide support within sessions for learners with a declared learning difficulty or disability as well as one to one tutorials for those needing more individual support. They also run drop in sessions within each curriculum area that are open to all learners who may need some advice, guidance or support for their studies. The department is organised with coordinators, tutors, mentors and advisors who work across all centres and curriculum areas of the college.

The department has an Inclusive Learning Manager with two dedicated tutors; each faculty has a dedicated Inclusive Learning Mentor who co-ordinates support within the department. There are also mentors with specific responsibility for outreach campuses in East Lancashire and Manchester and Merseyside.

The Enhancement of Learning Support (ELS) project

This project was undertaken as part of the ELS project with the aim of further promoting the use of technology across the lifelong learning sector. It has been supported by JISC TechDis, a leading advisory service on technologies for inclusion and accessibility.

Initial Plans

The aim of the project was to develop a model for delivery of professional development support for a cohort of college Inclusive Learning Staff who were learning to use free and open source software.

Proposed outcomes

For the Inclusive Learning staff to gain in confidence using Free and Open Source Software (College's MyApps) in order to be able to demonstrate their use to students and staff as appropriate. The model chosen was that of 'Supported Experiments' (Petty 2006).

Existing provision and planning

The initial meeting was with the senior manager, Vice Principal and JISC TechDis.The college stated they wished to use the idea of supported experiments where staff provide peer support for each other in small groups.

The college had already implemented the use of free and open source software as part of their MyApps programme. There was however enthusiasm to extend its influence, as it was recognised that not all the learning support staff had engaged with it. Myerscough use the 'My' prefix to denote a college led initiative, so the distribution of software applications that can be run from a usb memory stick was called MyApps.

MyApps Package

The MyApps package has the following free software

- Xmind -mind mapping application Xmind
- DSpeech - Text to Speech
- T-Bar - isolates a small area of the screen to allow easier tracking of lines of text
- SSOverlay- changes the background colour of the screen for those who find reading black text on a white screen confusing or difficult.
- Rapidset -changes both the background colour and the font colour for all programs
- Magnifier- magnifies the area around the mouse pointer
- Hot Notes- attach small reminders to the screen which look and act like post-it notes
- Sonar - places a ring around the cursor – ideal for both those with visual difficulties but also for demonstrating and teaching purposes.

These offer additional functionality which is not present in traditional software installations on college or home PCs. They include, mind mapping, the ability to convert text on the screen to audio files, applications to view different parts of the screen in more detail or change the background colour, magnify areas of the screen or add quick notes.

Supported Experiments

A term originally used by Geoff Petty in 2006 supported experiments is a form of action research which

"*provides an opportunity to try out new approaches to teaching and learning with the support of a peer or 'expert' colleague who takes on a coaching role, aids reflection and, if appropriate, provides feedback. "* (Petty 2006)

Staff Involvement

There was a good initial take up of the MyApps initiative among the Inclusive Learning tutors and some mentors but its use among Inclusive Learning support staff who work within sessions with learners was intermittent. The Supported Experiments model was chosen to enable the staff to support each other in trialling the use of the different software both with each other and with learners. Staff were put into groups of three and asked to work together to test the use of individual applications. The groups were carefully populated to ensure there was a range of skills within each group of three so they could support and encourage each other. The initial plan was to follow a regular programme of trials and meetings to discuss the outcomes. This quickly proved to be unnecessary as the staff were enthusiastic to both test out the applications and to support each other. It became clear that the staff who may have been reluctant to ask for help and support from tutors were readily engaging with their own peers and supporting each other. One unexpected outcome was that on days when the Inclusive Learning support staff were not due in to sessions until 9.30 they came in early so they could meet with others also taking part in the trial.

Outcomes

Learner led

There were many instances of learners showing their peers how to use the applications and other learners coming along to the Inclusive Learning staff and asking for copies of the software for themselves.

Other learners have shown their tutor groups how to use the software with one dyslexic student demonstrating how to covert text to audio files which can then be listened to on a mobile device at a time convenient for the learner.

Increased confidence for Inclusive Learning Support staff

Staff who were self-declared ‘technophobes’ took part in the project willingly. They found the chance to share their experiences and challenges with each other was more productive than being in a more structured programme, as they would have been too busy or reluctant to ask a tutor or technical member of staff or were based at a remote campus. As a direct result of this staff had more confidence to suggest and demonstrate the use of the applications to the learners.

Use of Moodle

An additional unexpected outcome of the project was the Inclusive Learning advisory staff using the College Moodle installation. There had been little opportunity for staff to engage with the college Moodle VLE (Virtual Learning Environment) in the past. For this project a forum was set specifically for them to ask questions and pose problems and to encourage them to support each other. Many of the staff had never used the Moodle platform before and the peer support model meant they felt comfortable in posting their problems or suggestions on the forum. This had the knock on effect of increasing staff liaison between those working at the main campus and those working in the outreach campuses across the North West of England.

Moodle Forum or Meetings

The initial plan to hold regular meetings proved to be unnecessary as the staff embraced the use of the Moodle forum to ask questions and share experiences. This happened with staff across all campuses not just those in the main Preston site. Similarly, the staff held their own impromptu meetings before the start of the college day.

Increased adoption

The use of the applications has had additional outcomes in the adoption of some of the applications by subject tutors within their teaching areas. Teaching staff have been using mind mapping techniques for planning and explanations within teaching sessions as well as suggesting the students use them for their assignments.

Other staff have used the basic magnifier and the Sonar application with an interactive white board for teaching in the classroom.

Further plans

The project has been a success and the college plan to build on this success by increasing the cohort of staff who are likely to benefit from this supported model. They are planning to use the same successful model to enable staff with the Work Based Learning departments to be able to use and access the software.

The college are planning to increase the overall skill set of their Inclusive Learning Staff by enrolling them on the JISC TechDis ITQ support programme in accessible practice. This consists of a training support programme with the option to move towards an accredited qualification with City and Guilds.

References

http://www.geoffpetty.com/experiments.html

http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/inspection-reports