

Abingdon and Witney College - Main Study Text

Title: Using assistive software to personalise learning

Background

Abingdon and Witney College serves learners from across South and West Oxfordshire and also recruits from overseas. Learning and teaching takes place in primary schools, workplaces and rural venues such as village halls, in addition to the traditional campus. The College offers a range of academic and vocational courses, from age 16 to adult returners, both full and part-time.

Challenge

Like any institution with a diverse learner population, some learning difficulties exist. These range from poor language skills, note-taking or comprehension skills to dyslexia. Some learning difficulties may not have been previously diagnosed, or are deliberately hidden by learners to avoid their being stigmatised. It is therefore vital to identify the learning problems and to provide support that is appropriate to learning ability and preferred learning style.

Ellen Lessner, ILT Development Co-ordinator at the College, has been interested in helping learners realise their potential through e-learning for several years. Ellen's recent work includes embedding assistive software into the learning environment to help learners address some of the everyday challenges that they face.

Assistive software can help overcome some of the obstacles encountered by students with learning difficulties, recognised or hidden. Often, however, such software is applied as a specialist solution aimed at a particular disability, and is available only in limited locations.

In contrast, Abingdon and Witney College has embedded assistive software as a mainstream application to aid learning for all. This has helped to provide individualised solutions to learning problems across the whole College population.

What e-learning offers

The approach followed at Abingdon and Witney is that "e-learning starts with the tools to actually learn how to learn", and this is making a difference for a number of learners in the College. The tools are introduced to tutors to help enhance learning in a wide variety of contexts. This approach is driven by individual learners, and their needs, leading to a rich variety of examples of individual e-learning. In contrast to some organisationally-driven e-learning approaches, the focus is on the individual, leading to highly effective results for learning overall.

textHELP Read & Write software assists learners with learning or literacy difficulties to improve both their writing and reading. Facilities include speech feedback, phonetic spell-checking, and word prediction, which assist learners in identifying and correcting problems. One dyslexic learner used the tools to proof-read his own work, a task he previously relied on others to perform for him. He felt that this had given him confidence and enabled him to take greater responsibility for his work.

Inspiration® mind-mapping software provides a means of using information and ideas graphically. Diagrams are used to visually highlight relationships and dependencies. This helps learners, regardless of level, to make abstract ideas visible and concrete, and stimulates creative thinking. It assists them in building up relationships and associations to support an understanding of written structures and mental concepts.

One example of learning activity at the College is in preparing for essays, where brainstorming activities are visually mapped to link ideas and help structure the

essay. This has been of particular use to learners who find written text difficult. An added benefit is that regular users of the software are introducing it to other learners who may not have specific learning difficulties, but who are enthused by the techniques and find general benefits to their work. Whilst the activities are often initiated for or by an individual, peer encouragement and support promotes good practice to a wider audience across different curriculum areas.

The software is available in many parts of the College and is used at the beginning of each academic year, as part of induction activities. It is introduced through subject tutorials, one-to-one sessions for assessed dyslexic students and staff development sessions. These tutorials can highlight problems not previously recognised and introduce learners to the concept of personal learning styles. This offers an opportunity for learning to be enhanced by customising the software around personal needs whilst also offering useful diagnostic assessment of learners.

Benefits for learners

When e-learning software is used as a common learning aid for all it becomes neutral in terms of application, rather than a specialist activity for the few, leading to increased achievement and confidence building.

Many learners are comfortable with predictive text because of the widespread use of mobile phones for text messaging. The ability to select text read-back in a variety of voice types, speed and pitch allows the individual to set their own preferences. Using headphones, learners can select a document such as a web page, see words highlighted, and hear them read back. The learner can adjust the speed of highlighting and read-back to suit their own needs or preference.

The visual approach of mind-mapping helps to provide structure for thinking, writing, discussing, planning and reporting. The learner can control elements such as colour, font and graphics for themselves. Pauline Gardner, Basic Skills Tutor, has remarked upon the usefulness of mind-mapping across widely diverse subject groups, ranging from motor vehicle maintenance to performing arts.

The defining lesson for one learner was the realisation that "to go at my own pace was acceptable, and I coped"; another, with severe dyslexia, saw an improvement in spelling, acquired through the use of the software, transfer to written work.

Key points for effective practice

A key element of the successful approach at Abingdon and Witney College is that the software is embedded as a common learning aid for all. Making the software easily available can make its usage commonplace for learners at any level.

Identifying learning difficulties or problems early allows dominant learning styles to be identified. This enables learners to be directed towards appropriate software aids to enhance their learning.

Linking use of the software to individual learning styles encourages wider take-up and allows learners to customise the software to suit their own needs.

Ensuring the software is embedded and ready for use at the start of the academic year will avoid problems of poor uptake caused by later introduction.

Barriers

Learners who already have difficulties may find new software an additional obstacle. Some learners may not be comfortable initially, and sufficient time should be planned to allow them to become familiar with the tools and recognise the benefits. Being aware of the potential for difficulties that may arise is important, as is ensuring that help is readily available when needed.

Final word

While many institutions have similar software, it is often used as a specialist solution to specific learning problems. At Abingdon and Witney College, imaginative use of the software has demonstrated the potential for wider application, particularly in linking to individual learning styles to allow personalised learning. As Ellen Lessner says *“Embedding the assistive software as a common learning aid for all has been the key to its success in improving learning”*.

Further details

Ellen Lessner is happy to discuss the approach taken at Abingdon and Witney and can be contacted in the first instance via email at: ellen.lessner@abingdon-witney.ac.uk

For details of the software used at Abingdon and Witney: www.texthelp.com
www.inspiration.com