Weston College: QR codes providing severely disabled learners with independent living skills

Summary

Weston College have developed an innovative approach to helping learners with severe learning needs by creating a series of highly informative demonstration videos on everyday living skills. Learners can access video content through their mobile devices by using QR codes, so they can scan everyday objects, like a kettle to see how to make a cup of tea. This technology has really helped to provide learners with vital independent living skills.

About Weston College

Weston College is a further education college, located in Weston-Super-Mare. It has an A-Level pass rate of 97% and a 99% pass rate for degree courses, which is well above the national average. Vocational programmes are just as successful, with 99% pass rates across levels 1, 2 and 3.

90% of all their apprentices on work-based learning
programmes are offered permanent jobs at the end of their program.

There are approximately over 7,500 students at the college, studying a range of courses; including BTEC, ECDL, A-Levels and degree programmes.

The college also has a pupil referral until for learners excluded from mainstream secondary schools for ages 15 to 16.

**The challenge**

Learners with severe learning needs can find everyday tasks such as washing up or cleaning very difficult. These learners often need 24 hour care and support to help them with their daily lives.

A big challenge for the college has been about developing the learners’ everyday living skills and providing a real progression in terms of giving them something that they can relate to and use to develop the skills they need.

Weston College already provide excellent support services for their learners with severe learning needs, but one of the real challenges has been to provide their learners with the continual skills to be able to live independently when they leave the college.

In terms of the project, one of the biggest challenges was making the video content available on multiple devices, for a variety of screen sizes and formats. As more and more new devices are released, it is important that the college monitor technology advancements to make sure that their learners’ mobile devices can access the content. The quality of the videos additionally needed to be of a high standard, HD and well produced to enable the learners to understand them.

“Technology can be great, but if it only works on one device or two devices, and it’s not working for everyone then it’s not really fair if it’s not working for everyone.” – Will Britton, Assistive Technology Specialist

Awareness of the new technology and the QR codes was another challenging aspect in terms of the staff support required to facilitate the project with the learners.

**The activity**

The project encompassed many stages before the learners were able to use their mobile devices to scan QR codes for everyday living skills.

In terms of the videos and their production, Will used his own company (Inclusive Media Solutions) to develop the high quality video materials, which are also hosted on their server. Along with Shaun La Touche, Support Worker, they trialled the videos with learners, by creating sets of visually appealing and easy to read 'call to
action’ cards. These cards display a cartoon picture of the everyday object as well as the QR code associated with the everyday item, attached via a velcro sticker.

What they found was that before the learners could use the QR codes they had to be trained in how to operate their mobile devices and access the required QR code scanning software needed to scan the codes. In order to help the learners, Will’s company produced an accessible QR code scanning app, called InclusiveQRscanner, available on all iOS devices. This scanner contains no advertisements and has been specially designed for learners with severe learning needs.

Will made the demonstration videos for a variety of everyday activities, such as making a cup of tea, washing up or making the bed. In terms of the videos they
deliberately left out any of the actors’ faces as they felt that people on the autistic spectrum may get confused.

Once the learners had become used to the technology and the QR codes, both Will and Shaun populated areas in the college, in which the learners would frequent, such as the kitchen.

In addition to the instructional videos, Will has also created quizzes that the learners can access through QR codes. Learners simply scan the QR code to bring up the question on their screen, which is very clear and easy for them to use. Invariably these could be voice-driven questions or a video.

**The outcomes**

By utilising QR codes and mobile smart devices the learners are now able to be much more independent than before. Learners can use the QR codes every time they want to make a cup of tea, or dry their dishes. The QR codes are not just a trigger for the learners, but a resource that is invaluable to them and something that they can access easily by themselves.

One of the primary aims of the project was to enable the learners to develop skills that would be beneficial to them, to really make what were in some cases impossible everyday tasks into ones that the learners can achieve through technology.

“We can develop skills that will create an independent living skill for them, so that they can manage on their own outside of this environment.” – Shaun La Touche, Support Worker.
Throughout the inception and development of the project Will has been able to find out exactly what is required in terms of providing the learners with something that is accessible on all devices. Will also realised that instead of making specific QR codes for certain educational establishments, that he could create something that would also appeal to parents for activities that could crossover from the classroom into the home.

“You can have the best provision in education, but if they go home and it’s not available to them then it’s not going to help anyone.” – Will Britton, Assistive Technology Specialist

“Over a quarter of disabled people say that they do not frequently have choice and control over their daily lives.” - Office for National Statistic opinions survey 2011.

In terms of the provision provided, Weston College are using technology in an innovative way and helping to narrow boundaries and provide their learners with real-life skills, which will help them to have more control over their lives today and tomorrow.

The impact

In terms of the impact, it’s been primarily observational and there have been many examples of how the QR codes have been making a real difference. One particular learner would always use a tea towel for washing up rather than a dishcloth, despite being constantly told which cloth to use. When the QR codes were introduced for the activity of washing up this learner was able to develop the correct procedure for washing up using the correct equipment. This was reinforced over a number of sessions with support from the team.
In terms of the QR codes Will is able to track their use and aims to develop further analytics on their use in the future.

It’s very much a service-orientated project, which is extending the reach of learners with severe learning needs and not just something that is good to look at.

“Each learner needed an individual Support Worker just to make a cup of tea, where embedding this new technology and QR codes has enabled us to withdraw the support and allow the flexibility for the student and department to grow slightly better without that need.” – Shaun La Touche, Support Worker.

**The lessons learned**

Shaun has found through conducting recent surveys that initially the technology is used because it is new and there’s a buzz or ‘wow’ factor. But one of the crucial aspects is to ensure that there is continual development and awareness of any changes in technology as well as making sure that staff are trained and kept well informed.

“Once that learner has developed that skill there needs to be a progression onto another tool and another skill that they need to develop and it needs to be continually progressive otherwise that QR code is being used and there is no other function for it and it will be left.” – Shaun La Touche, Support Worker.

**Useful links**

- [Weston College](#)
- [Jisc RSC South West](#)
- [Jisc TechDis](#)
- [Inclusive Media Solutions](#)
- [InclusiveQRScanner](#)

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