Thornbeck College: Making Moodle accessible

Summary

Thornbeck College is an independent specialist college for learners with autism and associated learning difficulties. The College has developed an accessible VLE in Moodle which uses Widgit® symbols throughout. Widgit® symbols provide pictorial support to vocabulary which makes it easier for learners to access the information on the VLE. Being able to access the VLE has helped learners to be more independent in their home environment, as well as within the College.

The College has developed an Accessible VLE in Moodle which uses Widgit® symbols throughout.

About North East Autism Society: Thornbeck College

Thornbeck College is an independent specialist college for people with autism, learning difficulties and/or disabilities. The College forms part of the North East Autism Society (NEAS) and was graded ‘outstanding’ in September 2009 by Ofsted and awarded Beacon Status in 2010. The college encourages learners from all backgrounds and cultures. All learners have autism, associated learning difficulties and/or disabilities, and varying levels of challenging behaviour. Some have other health issues such as epilepsy.
The challenge

Thornbeck College wanted to improve its quality of e-learning by developing a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) which would be accessible to all learners of which many find it difficult to read and write. It should allow for blended learning opportunities across a range of sites and environments and also support the training and development of staff.

The activity

To make the VLE a success, it is essential that it is accessible to all learners regardless of their literacy or ICT skills and structured in a way to minimise distractions.

Chris Surtees, tutor and e-learning champion at Thornbeck College, developed an accessible VLE in Moodle:

- Integrated Widgit© symbols are used throughout the learners’ area. Widgits© are simply drawn, colourful symbols, each illustrating a single concept in a clear and concise way. Text with pictorial support helps the learners to communicate, access information and be more independent. Widgits© are consistently used in Thornbeck College and the wider society, including local authorities, hospital and health care, charities and many more.

- To minimise distractions for the learners, Chris used the Moodle 2.0 dock option to move all blocks onto a special bar that is displayed in a constant position on the side of the page.

- Hyperlinked images enable learners to easily access resources through a range of assistive technologies and devices such as Touch screen monitors, interactive whiteboards, tablets computers and mobile phones and switch technology.

- The VLE’s staff area is used to share good practice across a range of sites and acts as a repository to share resources to reduce session planning time.

The usability and accessibility was evaluated by learners and staff for three months and after resolving a few minor problems, the VLE was implemented in January 2011.

The outcomes

Chris has created an accessible Moodle VLE which can be used by every learner at the College. The availability of course content and resources through the VLE facilitates e-learning and provides learners with the opportunity to develop their skills and knowledge outside the College’s environment. Learners also use the VLE to upload their agendas and minutes of their students’ council meetings to promote the Learner Voice.
The VLE has made a big difference at the College:

- Further enhanced the learning experience by making it more interactive.
- Encourages independent learning.
- Learners can now access learning materials from any environment, encouraging transferable learning across environments and between the college/home environments.
- Learners receive immediate constructive feedback on completion of activities.
- Feedback is centralised allowing reviewing of goals.
- Development of embedded ICT skills along with vocational content.
- Can be used with assistive technology, allowing greater independence.
- Familiarise learners with the concept that computers can be used for vocational and academic activities and not just personal enjoyment.

The benefits to staff include:

- Easily incorporate a range of quizzes and surveys to check knowledge and understanding.
- Acts as a resource bank of learning materials.
- Provides CPD modules and specialist training which can be accessed 24/7.
- Encourages collaboration across levels and vocational areas.
- Able to collaboratively develop courses to share best practice.

The impact

Learners who have accessed Moodle from home have shown greater independence within the home environment, both residential and non-residential learners, especially in meal preparation. Within the College the VLE has allowed for learners to increase their problem solving skills and reduced the amount of time requesting and receiving support from LSAs and tutors.

Charlotte (learner) says: “I use Moodle to upload our student council minutes and all of the recipes for catering at college and at home. I love getting the certificates when I have worked hard and keep them in my file”.

As part of the on-going development of the VLE during 2011-2012 Chris is now integrating Moodle with an in-house social networking site and wiki platform.

www.jiscrsc.ac.uk/case-studies
(following the same security as Moodle which would allow learners and staff access) to develop learners skills in common internet platforms.

The lessons learned

Chris: “I would just say plan, plan and plan. It is important to get the rest of the staff team on board from the very beginning so they are aware of the purpose and scope of Moodle and they can gradually develop their skills as Moodle progresses, as well as have some ownership of the VLE. Other colleges have often said that the main problem with a VLE is getting the staff involved to use it”.

Useful links

- RSC Northern
- North East Autism Society
- Moodle
- Widgit

Disclaimer

Disclaimer: Jisc Regional Support Centres work with more than 2,000 UK learning providers helping them to improve performance and efficiency through the use of technology. Case studies may refer to specific products, processes or services. Such references are examples and are not endorsements or recommendations and should not be used for product endorsement purposes.