Oakwood Court College: Enhancing communication through ICT and improving access via an accessibility kit

Summary

Oakwood Court College have developed an accessible course for their experiential learners, through their Enhancing Communication Through ICT programme. The aims of the programme are to enable their learners to use ICT to develop and improve their communication skills at the college. The course identifies and uses different forms of communication and resources as well as being complimented by a range of assistive technology.

About Oakwood Court College

Oakwood Court College is a specialist residential educational College, for learners from 16-25 years old.

The College provides support for its learners, all with different types of disabilities and needs, these include Asperger's Syndrome, Autism, Down's syndrome, Williams Syndrome and other types of learning difficulties.

At Oakwood Court College every learner matters and their future independence and success is at the forefront of all that they do. It is a friendly place to live, work and learn, offering a great variety of academic and vocationally focused programmes. Learners have a wide range of interests, backgrounds, abilities and ambitions.

The college is committed to providing each learner with the skills they need to become self-reliant in leading purposeful and fulfilling lives. This means ensuring that people with learning difficulties have the opportunity to gain knowledge and experiences that in many cases leads to employment at the conclusion of their College programme.

The college has campus-wide wireless networking and remote access to both the MIS and email, and laptops and digital cameras for staff use. There is an interactive smartboard in most classrooms and the College provides Web Cams, screen magnifiers, digital photo frame key-rings along side accessible
computer software like Vubar, Dspeech, MindMap, Art Rage, Picassa, and Photo Elements to aid the learners.

**The challenge**

Teaching ICT in the traditional sense had become a challenge because of the learners' disabilities and learning needs. One of the problems that KC Kelly-Markwick (ILT Coordinator) encountered to start with was that many of her learners were unable to log-on to their computers because they could not identify the letters on their qwerty keyboard. Even when assisted and the learner's had been able to log-on their cognitive difficulties were exacerbated because they found it difficult to navigate using the mouse, this became a major block to learning.

The first challenge was to find a way that enhanced a learner’s ability to attain their long term destination. This was identified as developing skills that enabled them to live as independently as possible and access meaningful occupational activities. In turn, KC and Sue Morris (Communication specialist) identified communication as their primary need. Therefore, the main challenge has been how best to further communication that enhanced important areas such as:

- Health & Safety
- Forms of Question and Answers
- Identifying colour, shape, weather, feelings
- Signing, Symbols

A learner using the interactive smartboard related to an activity

The RSC South West accessibility kit loan, featuring a range of accessible equipment has also been instrumental in providing assistive technologies that KC’s learners have been able to trial to enable them to overcome some of the communication boundaries.
The activity

KC and Sue have developed a course that would use ICT as a means to enhance communication. The course has been carefully planned utilising some of the fantastic work already done, particularly with web-cam avatars. One of the important factors has been that the course has been developed through years of experience and dedication as well as drawing on the support of the RSC South West.

“We wanted to create a specific course that would be able to use all the progress we have already made and also enhance the learner’s communication through real life activities” – KC

The course itself focuses on many key areas for enhancing communication, these include:

- Safety through ICT – ergonomics, regular breaks, don’t look at projector bulb!
- Key communications – questions forms, feelings, weather, days of the week
- Creative technology – colour, shape, size
- Using ICT to communicate – Skype, email, webcam, accessories, e-cards
- Interact using IT – shopping scanner, using a lift, pedestrian crossing, Parking ticket, train ticket, library touch screen, iPad, mobile phones
- Using audio aids in ICT to enhance understanding – follow Instruction, listen & respond, sound pitch & tone, record sound, identify sound
- Using visual aids in ICT to enhance understanding - non verbal communication, signs, symbols, sequence

A learner communicating with a friend through Skype

Software also plays a big part in the course resources and much of the assistive software has been sourced online for free. KC has helped to introduce a whole
range of different activities for her learners through different online programs, which are either downloadable or work in the browser, these include:

- Sen Teacher face games
- Jib Jab
- Visual Thesaurus
- Face Turn 3D Expression Viewer
- Photostory
- Virtual Magnifier
- Big Calculator
- Dspeak
- Artrage
- Jigzone
- Access Apps
- Read the Word
- Photofunia

A learner using an interactive white board

KC also uses many other types of software to help her create interactive quizzes, using websites like the Hot Potatoes website. In addition KC uses other websites for educational resources and screen capturing, which are also very useful, these include:

- Do2Learn
- Wink screen capture
- Teacher Tube
- Content Generator Educational Games
The RSC South West provided the college with an accessibility kit, which contains a whole range of assistive technology to aid learning. Julia Taylor, eLearning Advisor has worked closely with KC to provide advice, support and guidance. The assistive technology box has enabled KC to monitor which types of equipment are of most benefit and to gauge from the learners themselves what equipment they like using the most through fun quizzes.

KC ran a pilot with 2 learners for a 6 week period last year in order to trial the course to determine if it would be a success.

The outcomes

After the pilot was completed KC found a lot of positives with the resources on the course, in particular:

- Skype to encourage signing & Communication
- Email – Location in College
- e-Card (Jib Jab)
- Jigzone
- Photo Story
- Telephone and Smartboard interaction
- Facial Expression Flash Games

Both learners involved in the pilot enjoyed the activities and there was a lot of laughter and interaction. The Rainbow song on YouTube was used to encourage the signing of colours which worked very well.

“The Rainbow song on YouTube was a great find and the learner’s are making great progress learning about signing in a colourful way” - KC

What the course does well is involve activities that also relate to real-life challenges, such as planning a journey and safety issues when crossing a zebra crossing. It also involves a range of audio and visual activities using new technology often in an inventive way. Such activities include:

- Tom-Tom, Sat nav to find the post office
- Using a Lift, Self-service scanner and train ticket machine
- Treasure hunts using a Digital Photo Key Ring
- Technology in everyday life

The accessibility equipment has been a great benefit to help the learners with their communication and KC has been able to find out which pieces of equipment suit individual learner’s the most.

Although the course is still in the early stages it is helping to improve communication with the learners, through using technology and practical activities.
“Our learners really enjoy the activities and are making excellent progress” – KC

The impact

Learners are able to work in an environment at Oakwood Court College, which utilises the latest and best researched assistive equipment to aid their learner’s learning. Through the Enhancing Communication course the learners are able to learn about a variety of activities, which not only aids their communication but also helps to give them practical skills and raise their confidence outside of the college.

“This course will benefit the experiential learners because we are targeting communication using a medium that lends itself to an accessible, multi-sensory interactive platform” – KC

A learner using the webcam avatars

The free online software available for learners has really helped the learners to be able to use the computer inclusively through software like the virtual magnifier, which enlarges any area of the screen. Dspeech enables the learners to hear any text highlighted on-screen and Access Apps provides a whole suite of assistive free programs to help. The assistive equipment has enabled the learners to use programs on the computer that they would be unable to normally.

What is very apparent is that much of the online software although free is very well produced and also a lot of fun for the learners. So the real benefits are that the learners are learning about fundamental cognitive and life skills in an educational and interesting way. The Enhancing Communication course has really bonded all these elements together, in a well-structured and managed project which is opening up further opportunities for KC’s learners to develop their practical skills.

“The learners really enjoy learning and it is a real pleasure to be able to help them to develop their communication skills as well as providing an inclusive learning experience” – KC

The lessons learned

Look to the needs of your learners, if you take a step back to really watch them, they can educate you as much as you educate them!
Useful links

Dspeech
Access apps
Sen Teacher
Abilitynet
Inclusive Technology
Jisc Techdis
Do2learn
Hot Potatoes

Jisc RSC South West assistive technology kit list

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