MidKent College: Using the cloud in the classroom to support learners with Google Docs

Introduction

The use of technology to improve accessibility for students with physical and learning difficulties is a top priority for all learning providers. At MidKent College, one particular student found his physical disabilities were preventing him from following classroom-based discussions in S2 Sociology. Through the imaginative use of Google Docs, his tutor was not only able to overcome this student's barriers to learning, but was also able to create a blueprint for real-time online collaboration that could be used both on site and between students in remote locations.

About Mid Kent College

As one of Kent's largest colleges of higher and further education, MidKent College has been providing top-quality education and training in the county for around 100 years. With excellent links with employers, local authorities, and industrial, commercial and educational organisations, the College offers a very broad spectrum of courses suitable for students who want to train for work, gain an academic qualification or learn new skills. The College boasts two main centres in Gillingham and Maidstone with provision at the Universities at Medway site (Chatham Maritime), providing full-time, part-time and evening courses in the heart of the Medway and Maidstone areas. In September 2009, the College moved into a new £86 million campus in Gillingham, combining two previous sites in Rochester and Chatham.

The Challenge

An S2 Sociology class included a student (J) who suffered from a very severe physical disability and poor eyesight. He was clearly coping with the intellectual demands of the subject matter, but it was obvious that he was finding himself left behind in class discussions and becoming frustrated with not being able to contribute as much as he would have liked.

Following discussions with J, it emerged that the problem lay in the communication process itself. The tutor, Liam Greenslade, was using PowerPoint slides projected onto a screen to highlight key points and topics for review. J could understand the
content and was following discussion of the slides as they appeared, because the Curriculum Access Support Team (CAST) note-taker would record them for him. However, when it came to answering or asking questions and participating in the discussion, J was effectively reading ‘over the shoulder’ of his note-taker.

Liam comments: “Every time a question came up, he had to re-read his note-taker’s notes, and by the time he had done this, the classroom discussion had moved on, leaving him frustrated and feeling left out. “

The challenge was to find a means by which J, despite his disability, could take ownership of the course material and play a more active part in the group discussions. It emerged that, although he could not hold a pen to take notes himself, he could type one-handed and quite speedily.

**The activity**

The solution arrived at was to use Google Docs, the increasingly popular cloud-based office suite, providing online and collaborative wordprocessing, spreadsheet and presentation facilities. In particular, it was the use of the presentation programme and its facility for live sharing that interested Liam.

Google Docs allows users to create and edit documents online while collaborating with other users. Uploading a PowerPoint presentation to Google Docs and giving J editing privileges meant that, even with his limited physical capacity, he could annotate and follow the slides, identify concepts he didn’t understand, and jot down questions for later discussion. These notes were available instantly to tutor Liam as well as other students. More importantly, this method gave him greater control and autonomy, which significantly enhanced his capacity to participate in question-and-answer sessions and classroom discussion.

To use Google Docs, all J needed to do was to open a Google email account, select Google Docs and see that the tutor had shared the presentation with him. J was now able to see live on his laptop the PowerPoint slides displayed by the projector on the main classroom screen. J then selected View from the toolbar and enabled ‘Show speaker notes’. This brings up an additional box into which J could insert notes, comments and ask questions as the tutor spoke.

In addition, the CAST note-taker could also work in a more economical and complementary way, adding notes only where there were obvious gaps in J’s own annotations.
Outcomes

Most importantly, J passed his Sociology S2 exam with a solid B grade. Before using Google Docs, C was his estimated grade. J has become a real advocate for Google Docs and, having now moved onto University, he is encouraging all his tutors to adopt a similar approach.

J observes: “I really felt that I was part of the class, and able to contribute. Google Docs has given me a far higher level of support than I had previously. I now use Google Docs as a way of storing, sending and organising my notes between me and my various note-takers. This allows me to partake in study sessions between my peers as we all log into the shared document and comment and discuss.”

In his observations, J alludes to perhaps an even more significant outcome from using Google Docs. Liam explains: “Google Docs has opened up a new way to engage and support learners. It enables practitioners to manage their time differently, allowing them to combine marking with tutorials.

“The students put their projects on Google Docs and work together. This enables me to review this work and leave them comments. Obviously the practice of sending in partially completed work for feedback is commonplace, but when we set up live online sessions with all the students at various remote locations - allowing instant interaction and sharing of ideas - this gives the sessions a whole new dimension.”

Liam adds: “It doesn’t take too long to set up and run, and even saves marking time. The whole process is quite manageable, and students find this approach really supportive. So what started as an exercise to improve the learning experience for
one student has developed into a whole new pedagogical approach to the support of learners."

**The impact**

There are two main benefits to the College. Firstly, a student’s experience and quality of learning has been improved because of this intervention. The fact that this learner has been able to progress and make use of the technology in his higher education is potentially a life changing result for him.

Secondly, this intervention gave this student more independence. The College has seen the number of students requiring learning support grow year on year while funding diminishes. Interventions like this can make better use of support team members, enabling them to support a higher number of students. For example, one note-taker could facilitate a number of supported students in the same class.

This case study also indicates that, even where the statutory requirements are met or surpassed, there is always room to reflect and build on the quality of the support given, and tailoring it in a way which utilises the learner’s capacity as much as compensating for his or her impairment.

Rosie Douglas, MidKent’s ILT Manager, explains: “This example has provided an excellent case study for the College to help promote more independent thinking amongst other staff and students. This is a clear case where technology has provided a solution to enhance the practitioner-student relationship.”

*Liam shows some of J’s comments*
The lessons learned

Rosie Douglas and Liam Greenslade sum up the key lessons with the following comments. Rosie observes: “Having lecturers and tutors who embrace technology gives them an advantage in reviewing options and finding solutions; and when a tutor is faced with a challenging situation, both they and the learning provider need to be brave enough to try new ideas.”

Liam adds: “You must never take disability at face value. There is always capacity or ability, and we all have a responsibility to find out how we can help make maximum use of it. Live collaboration adds another exciting and flexible tool to providing tailored access and inclusion. Cloud-based collaborative technology can provide an excellent platform for on-going student support and quite possibly a new way of teaching.”

What about the future?

Perhaps the main point to take from this case study is not the support of J - one could argue his needs were very individual - but the opening up of a whole new pedagogical approach of on-going support for all types of students - both on-site and online.

Liam finishes by saying: “Google Docs gives me a key tool to change the way I support students, moving from setting assignments and then marking after submission to guiding and supporting whilst assignments are being constructed. Google Docs allows true distant learning - not just distant listening. Even discussing this case study has opened my eyes to so many other possibilities.”

So watch this space! Ed.

Useful links

Link to Provider: MidKent College

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