City College Plymouth: MyStudyBar offering students and staff better inclusivity

Summary

City College Plymouth have significantly improved accessibility for students with specific learning needs through the deployment of MyStudyBar. This accessible suite of assistive software is enhancing and enabling staff to better coordinate student support. Students with specific learning needs now have the tools to enable them to access content more easily. The college has also provided students with the ability to download the software onto their own USB drives, giving them inclusivity anytime and anyplace.

About City College Plymouth

The college has two main sites: Kings Road Centre in Devonport and the Goschen Centre in Keyham, both in Plymouth. The Kings Road Centre is built on the site of the former Devonport Kings Road railway station.

It is also a partner college of the University of Plymouth.

The college provides education and training to Plymouth, Devon, Cornwall and the wider community. Courses are vocational and academic, covering a wide range of subjects and areas.

The challenge

Traditionally support for students with specific learning needs was provided on a one-to-one basis between the tutor and the student. Whilst this is effective support, students are not always able to seek assistance from their tutor. So the main challenge for the college was to not only find a system that would help to give students more flexibility and accessibility, but also enable them to provide different kinds of support to a wider range of students.

One of the other areas that the college were keen to address was to help students to take ownership and make their learning more independent and provide them with the tools that they needed in order to achieve this.

The college additionally wanted to investigate how they could help their staff to understand the issues around accessibility and find a solution that was not going to be expensive to deploy.

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The activity

At the beginning of the project Peter Napthine, Learning and Technology Manager was provided with a copy of the Eduapps suite of assistive software and made aware of its potential by the Library Coordinator. After discussion on the potential of the software, he asked staff in the department to trial the whole suite of tools, which included: MyVisBar, MyStudyBar, CreateConvert and Access Apps.

After they had spent much time testing the software, they decided to focus on MyStudyBar. This seemed to be a versatile and sensible option, rather than provide the entire suite, which they thought could be difficult to manage. They then made 30 copies of MyStudyBar onto USB sticks and distributed these out to TEL (technology enhanced learning) representatives in their academies.

At the same time the Additional Learning Support (ALS) Team were exploring the software and were doing some initial testing of the software with their Learning Support Assistants and a few of the students they work with.

MyStudyBar is a fully functional downloadable suite of accessibility tools. Once opened a smartbar is loaded onto the screen and can be dragged around. It features an elegantly designed interface which consists of six sections categorised as:

- Planning
- Reading
- Writing
- Vision
- Text Reader
- Help

A screenshot of the MyStudyBar tab
Within each area are specific types of open source software, including:

- Xmind – Mind mapping
- Sunbird – Portable calendar
- Hott Notes – Sticky notes
- T-Bar – Screen masking
- RapidSet – Colour changer
- Vu-Bar – Screen reader
- ssOverlay – Screen tint
- LetMeType – Word prediction
- Lingoes – Talking dictionary
- Balbolka – Writing support
- Tinyspell – Spell checker
- Rapid Typing – Touch typing tutor
- Magnifier – Screen magnification
- Sonar – Cursor ring
- Thunder – Screen reader

A screenshot of the RapidTyping software

Following on from the initial testing phase, the college held a Technology Fair, which they used to promote MyStudyBar and give students and staff an opportunity to become aware of the software and its potential.

Both the TEL and ALS staff had training using MyStudyBar and the College launched its use in November 2012 providing 40 USB packs with the software and guides to both its campus libraries.

Additionally, in January Olly Ryles joined the TEL team from ALS for two mornings a week, with a view to extending the provision of Assistive Technology including MyStudyBar across the college. This cross departmental role provided the opportunity to help organise sessions for staff training days and other support for staff who were struggling to understand how to use the software.

"An important part of training is providing examples of where that software can be used, so specific teaching and learning examples and demonstrate what areas those applications would be useful for." – Olly Ryles, Learning Support Assistant

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Olly, Peter and their team also took time to identify what the student’s needs were before introducing MyStudyBar, here is some of the feedback they had from students:

“I can’t type that well, it’s hard to keep up.”
“I need help to recognise words and meanings.”
“I have a problem remembering what order to do things in”
“I find black on white hard to read but changing the settings every time is a pain and sometimes isn’t allowed.”

The outcomes

Students now have a tool, which they can access at college and download onto their own USB pen drives and take home. The advantage of this is that they can make their working environment more accessible and inclusive.

The awareness of accessibility throughout the college has been a positive outcome for the deployment of MyStudyBar. Julia Taylor, e-Learning Adviser for the Jisc RSC South West has provided additional advice and support at City College Plymouth.

“In March we had Julia from Jisc RSC SW deliver training to the college, which was very helpful. Just having that on the agenda and promoting the event was great. I think that impact has been that tutors are aware of the tool much more than they were and that’s spreading by word of mouth as much as anything.” - Peter Naphine, Learning and Technology Manager

The ALS team have additionally produced 40 packs, which are located in the library for students to loan out. The packs contain the following information:

- A leaflet which explains what the software is
- A USB stick with the MyStudyBar, this also contains a guide for each of the pieces of software
- An evaluation form, which the students must complete on return of the packs

The college has seen a significant rise in the number of packs being loaned out from the library as well as some excellent student and staff feedback.

“A screenshot of the Xmind software

“It’s definitely allowed certain students to access the course in a way that they haven’t been able to before.” – Olly Ryles, Learning Support Assistant
The impact

Although the project is still relatively new for the college, there has already been some brilliant feedback from students.

“I borrowed the software and it’s honestly the best thing/support I have ever been given. I’m mostly using the screen tinter software and a few others that help me out a lot. Since I have had this software I have spent more time on my coursework as before I was struggling and my eyes were straining a lot. It was really useful and I think that anyone in the same position should be told about this software as its brilliant! Thank You for taking the time to find me some ways of support and basically making my whole life and education easier.”

“I’ve used the overlays and it’s really, really helpful.”

“My overlays have allowed me to work, whereas before I was struggling to concentrate because of a certain colour on the screen.”

“I think that every member of staff should be aware of this”

Students and staff have additionally found XD Mind to be very beneficial for their classroom activities and not just accessibility, it has really helped in their organisation of their work.

“It’s not just accessibility though, the mind mapping has really been a very useful tool that many staff have adopted and are using within their teaching practice.” – Olly Ryles, Learning Support Assistant

The lessons learned

There were several lessons learned from this project, the first being that initially during the development of the project, the college IT department migrated their computer systems from Novell Groupwise to Microsoft (server management systems). This meant that the USB sticks and software may not have worked because of the changes in protocol. So this delayed the project until the IT department had enabled the new system and tested MyStudyBar. The TEL team found one app that did not function, which was the Thunder Screen Reader, so the college advised students to use this particular program at home.

“Make sure that you test the software out with your network and computer systems before deployment to iron out any issues.” – Peter Naphine, Learning and Technology Manager

With the LetMeType program they have found it can be erratic and not function correctly at certain times and at other times work fine. There have been updates available from the Eduapps website and Kevin Hickey (Jisc RSC NW) has provided some tutorial support to fix a problem with spacing.

“LetMeType, which is a wonderful tool in terms of building up a lexicon of vocabulary to work with, but you have to get the procedure in the right order. So it might be that you have to open LetMeType first and then the Microsoft Word document and so that requires a little bit of testing before using it immediately in the classroom.” – Olly Ryles, Learning Support Assistant

There is also a potential issue with the SS overlays, which is that if you open several instances of the program this can end up covering up your Windows desktop and hiding all the icons. This happens if students become inpatient or think that the program is not loading
and double click to open the program several times. So with each SS overly at 20%, if 5 overlays are opened the screen will be completely covered.

Lingoes software requires an internet connect in order to function fully as it accesses web dictionaries to get its definitions.

Useful links

- MyStudyBar on the Eduaps website
- Jisc RSC South West
- Jisc Techdis
- Support for inclusivity

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