FE.19 Using ICT to encourage students with visual impairment to participate in lifelong learning

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Background

As supervisor of the Crook Community Learning Centre I am eager to promote the ethos of inclusive and lifelong learning. Over the last four years the centre has taken a pro-active approach to attracting a diverse range of students with a variety of social and economic backgrounds.

The centre provides a range of learning opportunities with accredited and non-accredited courses, utilizing both resource based learning materials as well as a more traditional tutor lead curriculum. The diverse range of courses and learning styles on offer, maps to the learning requirements of students with a preference for tutor or student led learning. Although there was a wide range of students with disabilities at the centre, students with visual impairment were completely underrepresented.

Development

Two years ago an opportunity arose to provide an exciting learning experience for a student who was completely blind and partially deaf. Student A, arrived unannounced at the centre with his wife in support asking if it was possible for him, at over seventy years of age, to do an ICT course. My immediate response was, "Yes" but my immediate thought was how are we going to meet the expectations of a student with such disabilities. Student A had gone blind due to an accident at 4-years old and schooling had consisted of being ignored at the back of the class. Previous attempts to engage in adult education had been met with broken promises and vague undertakings of 'getting back' when something suitable materialises. I made an immediate decision that no matter what the cost in time or resources, the centre would provide as a minimum, a productive learning experience that was appropriate and enjoyable. Also any promises made at initial advice and guidance were going to be kept and built upon.

Progress

Although the centre was equipped with a range of resources to enhance the learning experience of students with visual impairments, this was the first time they had had such a rigorous test. It was agreed that the most appropriate course would be using resourced based learning materials, allowing progress to be made at the student's own pace. It was also agreed that one-to-one tutor support would be necessary as well as specialist software and speakers acquired to support the learning.

Adaptations were made to one of the computer keyboards, which allowed the student to place a series of small round stickers on several keys giving a point of reference on the keyboard. Computers within the centre were using Microsoft xp as the operating system but the student had been using and felt more comfortable with Windows 98. As it was important to provide continuity, one computer was initially adapted to run Windows 98 with the aim of progressing onto the latest software when appropriate.

Specialist 'Zoomtext' software was used to facilitate the learning and this gave verbal feedback as to what keys where being touched as well as what information was being typed. The tutor support also gave instructions as what to type from the workbook. As the student also had a problem with hearing, it was essential that there were no distractions from background noise, consequentially, it was agreed an extra afternoon session would be put on with only the student and his tutor support.

Evidence of Change

The first few weeks were initially difficult with changes to positioning of computer/speakers as well as modifications made to hardware. Student and staff had to bond and both had to become accustomed to the new software. Over a period of time progress snowballed and an excellent working relationship developed with student and tutor. Previous learning for student A did not have the same impact, as feedback could only be provided from outside help. Test Bed has allowed expensive specialist software to become imbedded into a learning program that promotes independent learning. The goal of independent learning was an essential ingredient in the initial action plan that had been developed at the start of the course. Student A had expressed strong views at initial advice and guidance how important it was for him to be able to work without the reliance of other people. As part of the Test Bed project student A was able to have a computer installed at home allowing the opportunity to practice and develop lessons learned at the centre.

On completion of a non-accredited course, confidence was so high a City & Guilds Level 1 accredited course was discussed and agreed. Over the last year student A has completed Level 1 word-processing and is about the take the assessment for the more demanding Level 2 Diploma in word-processing. All challenges had been met with determination from the student and nothing could stand in the way of progress, resulting in Student A winning the national NIACE award for learning this year. It has been a learning curve for staff as well as student but the end result has been an interactive learning experience that has seen progress, enjoyment and independent learning. The joy of learning was encapsulated when the student A received his first City and Guilds certificate, which was the verification he needed, saying that, "Just because I have a disability does not mean I am unable to learn".

The success of student A has encouraged two other blind students to enquire about a course at the learning centre. Student B is in a wheelchair and went blind due to an accident four years ago and student C also went blind due to an accident. Following initial advice and guidance a plan of action was agreed that had seen both students undertake a program of accredited learning at the centre. A new software package (JAWS) was purchased by the college as this met the needs of both new students and a new support assistant was also provided. Student B is chairman of a local support group for visually impaired people in the Durham area and has provided an interesting insight into the learning needs of the visually impaired. The group, which is called Blind Life in Durham (BLIND) have twenty-five members and meet on a monthly basis. Student B reported a major problem with software for the visually impaired was the, "Lack of standardisation, with many different packages (JAWS, SuperNova, ZoomText, LookOut, Windows Eyes, HAL, GUIDE) offering different options with prices ranging from £100 to £700". This creates a problem for colleges, as it is impractical to have staff trained to meet every possible wide-ranging eventuality. Student B also mentioned, "I would like to provide a solid base of learning from which I can provide feedback to the group with the intention of other group members accessing learning at the centre". All staff and centre students have formed an integrated support network with a circle of advice, help and support being generated.

Conclusions and Recommendations

For student A, ICT has been the tool that has allowed him to express his learning capabilities. Frustrations accumulated over the years due to neglect and broken promises have been vanquished with an action plan of positive and realistic goals. Other students in a similar position of learning isolation have been encouraged to participate in a learning strategy that flexibly adapts itself to the learning requirements and needs of its students.

Problems occur with the lack of standardisation in many of the software packages available, also the cost and time in training support staff. If groups like Action for the Blind could partner the government and agree a 'standard' package that could be funded to ease the cost of purchase and training, immediate support would be on hand to combat the learning requirements of all visually impaired students. All three visually impaired students presently studying at the Crook community-learning centre were able to touch type when they arrived. This was a massive initial help and learning to touch type would be a prudent first step before the progression to accredited learning.

All participants have to realise from the outset that there will be initial problems and adaptations may need to be made through the course. Expense and extra work will almost certainly be generated, together with possible changes in hardware and session times. If the goal of inclusive learning is to become a reality for visually impaired students, all who participate will have a learning experience that will be both productive and stimulating.