

The Use of Distributed Learning to Support Students with Dyslexia at the University of East London

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Abstract

The poster display will illustrate the problems to be dealt with in setting up and monitoring a discussion forum for dyslexic students at the University of East London using the 'Discussions' facility within WebCT. The aim is to encourage self-help and peer support, and to create a distributed community of dyslexic learners within the virtual learning environment. Issues covered are the design and layout of the site, the involvement and training of the dyslexia support tutor team, initial student log-in and continuing use, the level of support and monitoring required and the evaluation of WebCT as a suitable medium for the forum.

KeyWords

Dyslexia support, distributed learning, VLES.

The Dyslexia Forum has been set up as an electronic network using the 'discussions' features of WebCT to enable students with dyslexia at the University of East London to collaborate and communicate with each other and with their tutors. Communication within the service is not easy as there are more than 600 dyslexic students at the University, spread over three campuses and served by a part-time co-ordinator, a part-time learning support tutor and a number of hourly-paid tutors who visit the different campuses.

The electronic forum is intended to provide an additional channel of communication for the dyslexia service to complement existing provision, in the hope that a distributed community of dyslexic students and their support tutors will emerge, and to encourage self-help and peer support. Within the disability field research has been done into issues of graphic design, background colour, font size and page layout which affect the readability of web pages for those with dyslexia or visual impairment. However issues of accessibility for dyslexic students, many of whom are lacking in confidence and self-esteem, and the suitability for them of the electronic medium of communication, have to date been less well researched. The range of IT literacy among dyslexic students probably mirrors that of the general population, so it was planned to start with a small group of students already confident in using e-mail.

Discussion topic headings are as follows:

- Introductions
- Helpful Hints,
- Student Cafe (for private, unmonitored discussions)

Ask a Tutor.

Icons instead of text were used to identify the discussion categories, and attention was given to font size, background colour and spacing of text, all of which are very important for the dyslexic learner.

Advice, information and study tips must be posted regularly and updated by the support tutors, and requests regularly monitored by the Course Designer. If successful the Forum will be expanded to include other useful material, for instance notes on study skills and general information on dyslexia provision. An evaluation exercise is planned for the end of the project. It is currently recognised that none of the distributed learning media meets the criteria for disability awareness which will be required under the new SEN Disability Act which will come into force next September, and in setting up the web-site the following issues had to be taken in to consideration:

- The design of the communications area for the students
- Involvement and initial training of the co-ordinator and support tutors
- Arrangements for student log-in and the level of initial training required
- How to maintain their involvement
- The level of support needed to monitor the discussions
- The suitability of WebCT as a medium for the Forum

The poster display deals with issues arising from the setting up and monitoring of the Forum and illustrates them with examples from the WebCT site.