

Using Online Learning to Disseminate Disability-related Staff Development Materials

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Abstract

The four universities in the Greater Manchester area have recently worked together on a HEFCE-funded project (DEMOS) which is investigating the use of online learning to disseminate information about disabled students. In this article, the Project Co-ordinator explains some of the issues behind this pedagogical approach to staff development.

Traditional Staff Development Model

Disability offices of UK universities are under increasing pressure to work with academic staff to disseminate information about disabled students. Due to recent legislative changes and an increase in the number of disabled students, staff developers are seeking more efficient ways of delivering this information. However, until recently the model most frequently evident in Higher Education for engaging academic staff in issues relating to this subject has been poorly conceived. Traditionally, disability offices of universities have worked alongside Staff Development Units (SDUs) to deliver training events. Also, in many cases the disability office is placed within central services and staffed by administrative personnel (McCabe, 2000). This can unfortunately lead to a 'them and us' situation and poor working relationships (Seyd, 2000) where central services are seen as feeding down policies from increasingly managerialist organisations and the latest government initiatives. In addition to these difficulties, Educational Development Units are usually better perceived by academics than SDUs as the relevant place to go for pedagogical advice (Webb, 1996). It is therefore easy to see why many events about the support of disabled students are poorly attended by academic staff. For instance, the four disability offices of the universities in Manchester in conjunction with staff from the Access Summit Centre have run disability-related training events in recent years and an effort has been made to continue to run this programme through the Staff and Educational Development units in the current academic year. Whilst many of the events have proved popular, some have been cancelled due to lack of attendance. This is despite efforts by the disability offices to deliver the programme in the most efficient method possible (i.e. lunchtime sessions of no more than 2 hours – with sandwiches laid on!).

Working Together

It is important that disability offices work together with academic departments if support for disabled students is to improve. In addition, there is a need to develop successful models from which to work. Recent signs indicate that the tide is turning. We appear to be at a fortuitous time when national policy is forcing HEIs to examine their policies and a number of initiatives have appeared that will lead to collaborative working between subject-specific departments and disability specialists. For me one of the most promising developments is the formation of the LTSN. This seems to be a network that academic staff can trust since it has their subject specialisms at heart. There is also a real increase in the amount of information that is being written about supporting disabled students. This special edition of PLANET is a good example and it appears alongside a number of articles that have emerged across several staff networks.

Useful resources include:

- the Geography Discipline Network's series of guides on disability and fieldwork (<http://www.glos.ac.uk/el/philg/gdn/disabil/index.htm>);

- a number of relevant articles appearing on the members area of the ILT website (<http://www.ilt.ac.uk>);
- a guide to assessment issues for disabled students available from the LTSN Generic Centre (<http://www.ltsn.ac.uk/genericcentre/projects/assessment/>);
- a series of guides to disability at the CoWork project's website (<http://www.cowork.ac.uk/development/materials/index.htm>).

What these resources have in common is that they address specific pedagogical issues. There has been a lack of research and literature on the pedagogical implications of working with disabled students in higher education and, although the resources listed above are beginning to address this problem, we have a long way to go before all the gaps are filled.

Situated Approaches

Another common principle about the above resources is that they represent a 'situated' approach to learning through staff development in this area (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Resources are now being developed by academics alongside disability specialists, written for and delivered through academic networks to academic staff. In this approach, staff concerned with working with disabled students in the learning situation are responsible for developing and taking part in their own development process and through hands-on practice.

This is a model that is beginning to be adopted by disability offices in their delivery of staff development. For instance, in another HEFCE-funded disability initiative based at Nottingham University (http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/~tazwebl/ssc/staff/randd_asdsds/index.html) and encompassing institutions in the M1/M69 staff development network, disability specialists are working alongside academic departments to form a plan to develop initiatives within the departments. Staff developers from the disability field are recognising that it is not enough simply to enter the department and deliver a workshop, an approach that stems from a deficit model of staff development (Candy, 1996). Academic staff need to feel that it is part of their role to support disabled students and that they are actively engaged in creating the practices, research and literature around this support.

Can Online Delivery Help?

Much has been written about the power of the web and of online learning to facilitate learner-centred or constructivist approaches to delivery. The remit for the DEMOS Project is to explore the usefulness of this approach and whether or not it can be utilised by disability offices and departments to disseminate information about disabled students. Many people are producing information online in the form of web pages that are simply electronic versions of text documents. Very few are being converted for the web or indeed written for the web as a learning experience. Also, little use has been made of online learning to deliver staff development in HE except in the field of training staff to deliver online learning itself. We hope to tap into the swell of concern about disabled students and at the same time provide a unique approach that will hopefully capture the interest of academic staff. An unanticipated benefit of the project is that staff who take part get an online learning experience. Even though many are engaged in developing courses of their own, few get such an opportunity.

DEMOS's early experiences demonstrated the difficulties that disability offices have previously faced in engaging academic staff. The first module was written using a collaborative learning environment and attempted to engage academic staff in a discussion of the issues around implementation of the QAA's Code of Practice on students with disabilities (QAA, 1999) but it proved very difficult to deliver this module in an effective way. However, as discussed above, we feel that this is mainly due to the context in which the materials were presented.

DEMOS are currently developing a series of modules with the concerns of academic staff in mind. So far, the modules are generic in nature, and the project has developed two that are available for piloting – on dyslexia

and university admission of disabled students. DEMOS is also releasing a module on assessment issues (in late February) and in the summer will make available another generic module on teaching and learning issues. These learning modules are enriched with a number of further resources - web links, further reading, a database of student experiences from interviews with students and case studies where possible. As the information on the site grows, the learner will be able to explore these resources and hopefully find the answers they are looking for. The content is being underpinned by a social model of disability (one that looks at the social construction of disability rather than an individualistic medical model) and also by an appreciation of the impact of the Special Education Needs and Disability Act (2001). We have also tried to interweave some interactivity into the materials with learning activities and hypertext links to external resources. An analysis of need is an ongoing feature of the project and modules have been written for academic staff with academic staff acting as members of each module writing team. The materials are also being independently checked for quality by an external representative who is a respected academic in the field.

The challenge for the rest of the project's lifetime and indeed for those interested in utilising the materials developed is how to embed the tool within a delivery method that has meaning for the academic staff it is intended to reach.

Information about the DEMOS project is available at our website: (<http://www.demos.ac.uk>).

Finally, DEMOS is looking for groups of staff to try out the materials. If you are interested or would like to know more, please contact the author below.

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The Teachability Project: Creating an Accessible Curriculum for Students with Disabilities

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Abstract

The Scottish Higher Education Funding Council (SHEFC) Teachability Project is about making the higher education curriculum accessible to disabled students, an aspiration which will soon become a legal duty on HE providers. The experience of St Andrews' School of Geography and Geoscience shows that it is possible to make disciplines with strong fieldwork components accessible to students with mobility and visual impairments — it also shows that implementation of 'Teachability' can benefit all students, not just those who are disabled. This article will be of interest to other disciplines, such as Environmental Science, which also have fieldwork components.

Introduction

The School of Geography and Geosciences at the University of St Andrews is one of 62 academic departments to have used the resource materials developed in the Teachability Project to do two things: to self-audit and evaluate current curricular provision for disabled students; and to identify a strategy for enhancing that provision. This article briefly describes some key features of the project, which was piloted by the Geoscience staff within the wider Geography and Geoscience school at St Andrews. Some further information about the Teachability project is also included in the article by Adams in this special edition of PLANET.

Background to the Project

The SHEFC-funded Teachability project commenced in January 1999. A partnership of five West of Scotland HEIs, involving disabled students, a range of academic departments, Teaching and Learning units and Disability Advisers developed a resource booklet and — at least as important — a recommended process for its use. The resource booklet is intended to be used by academic departments, supported, where this is helpful, by those in the institution with specialist knowledge of the ways in which the design and delivery of curricula can impact on the learning experience of disabled students. Through a process of self-audit, academic departments are asked to reflect on the ways in which their current curricular design and delivery are accessible – or not – to current and future disabled students.

Departmental Self-Auditing

The academic self-audit rests on an understanding of key ideas, such as 'inclusive teaching practice', 'core course requirements' and a sense of what it is that aids or inhibits access to the curriculum for disabled students. However, the concerns of Teachability extend beyond notions of inclusive practice. While it may be the case that the needs of many disabled students are met by good, inclusive teaching practices, it is also true that the participation of some disabled students on some courses will require consideration of needs which are specific to the individual. The goal of Teachability, which matches with the 'anticipatory duties' articulated in the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act, 2001, is that curricular provision should be as ready as possible for diverse learners and that the notion of "diverse learners" should be informed by knowledge of the generality of disabled students' needs. When that is achieved, *ad hoc* reaction to individual disabled students becomes less necessary. At the same time, where barriers to access continue to exist for some disabled people, creative "one-off" solutions can often be found by academic staff. Experience at St Andrews suggests that such solutions can develop into a more universal practice which enhances access to the curriculum for all students.



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