Chapter 9

Using Learning Platforms to Support Communication and Effective Learning

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the development of resources for a unit of work for the English National Diploma in Information Technology. These on-line resources are designed to support a personalised learning environment that maximises opportunities for students to achieve greater control of their own learning and progression. The resources are designed to promote metacognition, with the intention of encouraging students to think about how they learn and how they can progress most effectively. The resources were developed to explore ways forward in developing personalised learning environments and implications for research on wider implementation across all National Diplomas.

INTRODUCTION

Personalised learning is a key national aspiration for secondary education in the UK. The government report, 2020 Vision for Teaching and Learning DfES (2006, p. 6) describes personalised learning and teaching as “taking a highly structured and responsive approach to each child’s and young person’s learning, in order that all are able to progress, achieve and participate.” Becta (2008, p. 2), as the government agency leading the national drive to ensure the use of effective and innovative use of technology, describes learning platforms as critical to these aspirations, with the ability to integrate learning and school management systems and the potential to provide exciting teaching and learning opportunities. Learning platform is the term used by the UK government in the context of school education and is the term used through out this paper. A learning platform can also be referred...
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to as a virtual learning environment (VLE) or learning management system (LMS). The learning platforms in Hounslow offer integration with the school data management systems, e-portfolio management, communication tools and tools to create and deliver on-line teaching and learning resources. The government wants every school in the UK to make full use of learning platforms by 2010, but learning platforms are in danger of becoming little more than administrative tools. Weller (2009, p. 2) warns that such systems offer acceptance of an e-learning approach and acknowledgement of tools already used by students, but a more decentralised model, that acknowledges the proliferation of free tools and services, will offer greater flexibility, although less control for the education provider. Four Hounslow schools have come together to form a consortium to deliver the Level 2 Higher Diploma in Information Technology. This presents an opportunity to investigate how a learning platform can enhance learning if linked to tools that can provide a powerful personal learning space that encourages collaboration, teamwork, and effective learning strategies.

Research by Ireson, Hallam and Lewis (2001, p. 213) describes motivation and engagement as dependent on metacognition, self-esteem and self-regulation, this suggests that to develop an inclusive learning environment that supports personalisation, we should consider opportunities to meet diverse needs by developing thinking skills and confident, independent learners with effective learning strategies. The following section considers literature that offers advice on planning for personalised on-line learning and use of digital technologies to promote inclusive practice in education.

Visual tools based on classroom research on teaching problem solving skills (Wallace, Maker, Cave & Chandler, 2004) and visual mapping tools to support metacognition (Cavaglioli & Harris, 2004) are also discussed and inform the lesson plans and development of tools for self-assessment, and for mapping personal learning, thinking skills and functional skills in order to track progress and skilled thinking. The development of resources for a personalised learning environment is then described, as well as the delivery of lessons designed to help students make use of a personalised learning environment to their greatest advantage. The final section concludes that understanding pedagogical implications for on-line teaching and learning is crucial to success, supported by resources designed to help students to understand and reflect on the learning process. Teachers who used the visual tools when teaching the Diploma in Information Technology, concluded that such tools were valuable, but appropriate pedagogies to support use of personalised on-line learning spaces, within and beyond the classroom, need considering as part of professional development. The functionality of a centralised learning platform was acknowledged as lacking flexibility as implied by Weller (2009). Teachers found the learning platform a useful administrative tool, but restrictive for sharing resources. Students were not as attracted to the tools provided, as they were to those freely available on the Internet.

PLANNING FOR PERSONALISED ON-LINE LEARNING

Many students are not confident learners, particularly those with learning difficulties, which can affect motivation as described by Ireson, Hallam and Lewis (2001, p. 213). This must be addressed, like any other learning difficulty, with appropriate pedagogic practice. Claxton (2002, p. 41) supports this view by suggesting that good learners have the resilience to “lock-on to learning, to pay attention to what is going on around them in a number of ways … (they) use a varied toolkit of learning methods and attitudes to make them resourceful.”

Programmes that develop thinking skills can contribute to this intention. The aim is to help students understand and take control of their own
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