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Enhancing the Engagement of Disabled Students with Disability Support Services: A Digital Story Approach

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Abstract Initiatives that recognise diversity within the student population and understand the range of learner variation have been found to help institutions to better recognise and reduce barriers to learning for disabled people. This paper describes the development of a 'digital story' designed to inform all students about the disability support services offered by the University of Hertfordshire. The development and utilisation of a digital story to inform students about disability related issues and services was also designed to foster a more informed and tolerant learning community. The findings of the pilot evaluation study have highlighted the digital story to have increased student understandings of what is recognised as a disability. It was also found to have increased the likelihood of them approaching their disabled student's coordinator. However, it is notable that a majority of students expressed a desire for an in person talk on disability services. It is concluded that although technology is not necessarily a replacement for the 'personal touch', new methods should be found to increase the personal feel of the digital story. It is suggested that the final evaluation questionnaire is modified to capture information about why students want an in person talk and how this can best be achieved in a digital format when personal engagement may not be possible.

Introduction

Initiatives that recognise diversity within the student population and better reflect a range of learner variation will help higher education institutions to recognise and reduce barriers to learning for disabled people (Doyle, 2002; Cavanagh & Dickinson, 2006). This paper discusses the development of a 'digital story' that was used to introduce and promote to all new and returning students the disability support services offered by the University of Hertfordshire. A digital story is a short film made from a script that aims to convey a story or message that is illustrated by pictures and text (Meadows, 2009). The project had three main aims. The first was to better inform students of how they could access disability advice and support services via faculty based disabled student coordinators and wider disability services. The second aim was to increase student understanding of what might be recognised as a disability and the type of support, adjustments and strategies a student could employ to overcome barriers to learning. The final aim of the project was to foster a more understanding and tolerant environment in which to learn.

The Drivers for Responding to Students with Learning Disabilities

Students with disabilities should be given advice early on about what constitutes a disability and in turn be made aware that it can take sometime before suitable

'tailored' arrangements are put in place (Cavanagh & Dickinson, 2006; HEA 2006; Clark, 2007). The Disability Discrimination Act in 1995 defines a disabled person as anyone who has

'a physical or mental impairment which has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on his or her ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities'.

Clark (2007: 212) highlights that this can

"include not only the user of a wheelchair and people with even minor impairments of sight or hearing, but the student who stammers or has dyslexia, autism, epilepsy, arthritis, vertigo or ME".

Clark subsequently progresses on to argue that if a student is not disabled, then the chances are that someone in their cohort will be. From the authors own experience, it is also imperative to provide students with information about what constitutes a disability because students with learning disabilities can, and do, progress with their studies, albeit not as effectively as they could do if they received appropriate support. As to why this happens has in part been observed to be due to outside attitudes leading such students to believe that to admit to, or be diagnosed with, a learning disability will have negative implications for their studies and what they might want to achieve in the future. With regard to the role of the higher education sector here, the Higher Education Academy, of the United Kingdom, has stated:

'The higher education sector can play a vital role in helping to eliminate these disadvantages through ensuring that disabled students are not discriminated against through any of their policies and practices and can fulfill their educational potential (Cavanagh & Dickinson, 2006: 5).

Facilitating access to supporting services in a higher education environment can, and does, make a huge difference to student retention and levels of educational achievement (Phipps, 2002; Cavanagh & Dickinson, 2006). It can also help students become better prepared for life long learning (Doyle et al., 2002).

The Digital Story Approach

The development of a digital story to inform students about disability issues and services was chosen because it allowed greater flexibility in tolerating differing learning styles. This is central to encouraging effective learning amongst an increasingly diverse student body (Beswick, 1977; Cox & Gibbs, 1994). Therefore, the digital story served to inject variety into induction programmes that are all too often based around a series of people simply talking to students. This new approach aimed to maximise the ability of students to absorb information by exposing them to a different learning experience and then allowing them to view the information again via the student e-learning environment. Therefore, if the student wished to view the digital story again, to

help them better understand its content, they could do so via the university's e-learning environment.

Disabled students, in similarity with the wider population, are subject to intentional and unintentional acts of discrimination. Therefore, it is imperative that inclusive and understanding learning and teaching environments are created (Doyle et al., 2002). It is the experience of the author, that all too often students who do not perceive themselves as disabled switch off when being spoken to about disability services, with disabled students appearing to be inhibited from appearing to be engaged with the topic and subsequently asking questions in the presence of their peers (Cavanagh & Dickinson, 2006; HEA 2006; Clark, 2007). Neither of these situations is conducive to the development of more informed and tolerant learning communities. Therefore, a digital story approach was also selected to improve engagement by all students with what constitutes a disability.

It is notable that the process of developing a digital story addresses and brings to life the core professional values of the Higher Education Academy. In particular, it demonstrates a commitment to the development of learning communities, including students, teachers and all those engaged in learning support. It is also illustrative of a commitment to encouraging participation in higher education and to equality of educational opportunity (HEA, 2005).

Digital Story Development and Implementation

The digital story was developed for students within the School of Life Sciences at the University of Hertfordshire. The school runs a wide variety of programmes in the areas of geography, environmental management, sport, and bioscience. The digital story was developed via the 'Photo Story for Windows' software package. This software was chosen because it was freely available and, from the perspective of the author, easy to engage with. The digital story was subsequently shown to students during induction week via their induction programmes. This presentation time was chosen because it was felt to be the most opportune moment to inform new and returning student about disability related issues as it allowed the digital story to be delivered at the start of their studies. The 'digital story' was subsequently posted on all e-learning programme homepages to help create a permanent and readily accessible information resource that could be used by students, and staff.

Evaluation

To date, this project has been evaluated via a combination of informal feedback from programme and year tutors, and the completion of a pilot questionnaire by all students based within the School of Life Sciences. The data collected clearly indicates that the exposure of new and returning students to the digital story during induction week, and via the e-learning environment of the university, has served to increase student understandings of what is recognised as a disability. It has also served to increase their understanding of how they can access

disability advice and support services from within the School. It has also served to increase the likelihood of those students with a self-recognised learning difficulty, and professionally diagnosed disabilities, contacting the disabled student's coordinator for the School. However, it is clear from student feedback that only a very small number of students have subsequently looked at the digital story via their respective programme e-learning pages. Upon evaluation it has been found that the prominence of the digital story on various programme e-learning homepages diminished over time as other news items were posted. As a consequence of this finding, it is recognised that there is a clear need to look at strategies that allow the digital story to be more prominently embedded in e-learning environment.

It was also identified that some groups of students were either not shown the digital story or shown it with no sound. This was found to be due to software incompatibilities, and/or staff not being able to operate the chosen software package. Completion of the pilot questionnaire has also served to reveal that although the students found the digital story informative, they would prefer an in person talk. An additional finding of the project is that it allowed staff increased flexibility in when students were informed about disability service provision. The digital story approach meant that they could choose to play the digital story at a time that was more convenient during their respective induction programmes, and not when the disabled student's coordinator for the School was available.

Discussion and Conclusions

From an institutional perspective, the outputs of this project are readily transferable to all schools within the University of Hertfordshire. All schools could seek to develop their own 'digital stories' with regard to disability service provision, subsequently posting them on all e-learning programme homepages for students. This project has served to establish the appropriate material to include in such stories. From the perspective of the higher education sector, the 'digital story' should be viewed as an additional tool by which to further engage with disabled students and encourage them to seek out appropriate learning support. Further benefits of this project include a clear and undisputable record of a university's efforts to recognise and reduce barriers to learning for disabled people, which is central to demonstrating equality of opportunity.

The importance of using differing communication mediums to engage with disabled students, and thus improve service provision, is underlined by fact that within the School Life Sciences, 70 per cent of those students who have disclosed a disability have contacted their disability coordinator to arrange for appropriate support to be put in place, whereas for the university as whole it is 50 per cent. While the author does not claim that the digital story approach described in this paper is responsible for this difference, this difference does serve to reinforce the need for new and innovative engagement methods to be embraced as a way of increasing student engagement.

A notable finding of the pilot evaluation study, is that students have expressed a preference for an in person talk on disability issues. This finding serves as a reminder that technology should not be seen as a replacement for the 'personal touch', and that it is important to understand why students would prefer an in person talk. As a result, it is proposed that the final evaluative questionnaire for this project be modified to solicit views on this issue. From informal conversations with appropriate staff, one approach to improving the personal feel of the digital story could be to include, or develop associated digital stories, that detail the experiences of student with learning disabilities. This it is felt may help to enhance the personal feel of the digital story and encourage more students to seek advice.

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Biography

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