

Supporting Student Skill Development to Enable the Use of Networks for Collaborative Learning.

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- This case study examines the provision of scaffolding when using network technologies to support the delivery of an Information Skills module. 'Information Skills for Independent Learning', a second year module, was run for the first time during the academic year 1997-98. This module, open to students from all backgrounds, aims to develop students' information skills in the context of a rapidly changing information society. The students from different campuses, disciplines, and various modes of attendance, presented a diverse range of skills. Delivery was 'off-line' using a practical, hands-on approach with emphasis on student collaboration and discussion. The use of networked information sources was obviously a major component of the course. More importantly the module is underpinned by concepts of information retrieval that can be applied to any learning situation.

Network technologies were used to support the students' learning processes. As the module was delivered in a practical and collaborative style the use of e-mail was central to course support, enabling collaborative learning across campuses and the diverse student cohort.

Students were encouraged to join discussion services to establish wider communication and information retrieval outside the College. E-mail was used for a variety of purposes: for staff-student communication; delivering lecture notes; administrative information; group collaboration and discussion; and the submission of assignments.

The students all completed a self-assessment questionnaire at the start of the module on their current level of skills. Although all the students rated their level of e-mail expertise as adequate it soon became apparent that additional support was required. Students were encountering problems related to their knowledge and experience of using e-mail and more technical network problems. Students overestimated their skill levels. It was also apparent that their confidence in contributing to discussion using this medium of communication was low. As a result additional support sessions were delivered to ensure students had the skills to meet the module requirements.

The technical problems that were encountered compounded the low confidence issue for some students. Added to this were difficulties of access to computers, due to College wide high student demand.

The experience gained delivering this module shows how important it is to consider what support must be available if the potential benefits are to be gained from the use of networked technologies.

Course planning must ensure that appropriate support is available for students to develop the necessary skills and confidence and are not hampered by technical issues.

How could this be achieved? This case study will reflect on how effective support can be put in place. Including a consideration of: pre-testing and monitoring skills and confidence; on-line and off-line support mechanisms; peer support; collaborative groups; or a 'mentoring' system.

In conclusion the experience of this case study shows how important the planning of suitable and adequate off-line and on-line support is to ensuring successful networked learning.