

Chapter IV

Collaborative Online Learning and Accessibility

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Inside Chapter

This chapter looks at how the issues of accessibility have developed over a number of collaborative learning projects that have investigated the use of various technologies to provide effective communication mechanisms between students in various virtual learning scenarios:

1. *Occupational Therapy Internet School (OTIS) investigated the use of a graphical virtual college environment to allow occupational therapy students to discover how practice differed in various European Union countries.*
2. *MOBIlearn investigated the new opportunities offered by mobile devices to develop a new paradigm of mobile learning.*
3. *The Health Informatics module allows Foundation Degree students working in Health Informatics to discover the different aspects of their various roles and to*

reflect on the way in which they interface with clinical and other professionals and their role within the wider National Health Service (NHS) agenda.

The use of different technologies has raised various accessibility issues that need to be addressed if this type of learning is to be adopted more widely and accepted best practices are to be followed. These are discussed and indicators are given as to how they may be addressed systematically to provide an effective learning experience for all.

Introduction

This chapter discusses a number of projects all with similar aims: that is, to engage students spread geographically over often a considerable distance in a collaborative learning activity in which they share their experiences and learn from them. They have led to a better understanding of the need to follow best practice guidelines for accessibility so that technical and pedagogic developments are used inclusively and do not unnecessarily exclude individuals because of their inability to engage with the technology.

The first example is the Occupational Therapy Internet School (OTIS) (Armitt, Green, & Beer, 2001), in which occupational therapy students from across Europe came together to discuss the practice of their subject in each country. The objective was for them to identify similarities and differences based on a series of case studies which were presented within a virtual college environment in which the students could navigate to find the various course materials and meet other students who were studying the same thing. This provided an environment which was much more like that experienced in the typical simulation type computer game, at least to the extent that the technology and network capabilities at the time would allow.

The second example is the MOBILearn prototype (MOBILearn, 2002), which exploited mobile technology to allow students to move round the real environment (for example, a museum, a university campus, or a first aid training area) and to access both the learning materials they required and discuss their findings with their peers as they explored. The aim was to provide a learning experience similar to that of OTIS but for the students to explore a real space, or series of spaces, rather than sitting at a computer and exploring the virtual world.

These examples used prototype environments which concentrated on the communication needs of the staff and students and operated in synchronous communication mode. The third example considers the attempt to integrate a collaborative learning environment into a learning portal by making innovative use of the standard facilities provided. The module is part of a Foundation Degree in Health Informatics and aims

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