

Computer Mediated Communication and Disability Support: Addressing Barriers to Study for Undergraduate Distance Learners with Long-term Health Problems

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Abstract

This work explores barriers to study encountered by undergraduate distance learners with long-term health problems. It considers ways in which problems identified in an Exploratory Study might be addressed. These include fatigue, difficulties with handwriting, academic and social isolation, together with a need for better interactive communication with support agencies. The student perspective is explored in depth. The essential finding is that the adoption of an *Autonomy* approach when using CMC for access to services on a 'Virtual Campus' can have beneficial effects and begin to break down the barriers to study that the Exploratory Study identified.

Two intervention studies sought to address these problems using a computer conferencing system as the medium of contact with support staff and other students in a 'Virtual Campus' environment. A novel mode of access to educational counselling provision was designed, introducing a group dimension into the process. In addition to one-to-one e-mail, participants could now consult the advisor in a counselling topic within a confidential peer group environment, DOORway. The findings suggest that informal contact with the counsellor in this conference had helped to build rapport and develop confidence for these students to approach her by e-mail when more private advice or help was needed. Given a choice of options, at the close of the studies more than three quarters of the sample said they would prefer access to a counsellor on-line rather than by traditional routes.

The role of the peer group conference is considered to have been pivotal to the reported benefits in a number of ways. Firstly, it provided an empathic on-line community for mutual support. Secondly, it provided an environment in which sensitive questions could be raised with an educational counsellor. Thirdly, it provided a gentle introduction to participation in the wider world of open conferences on a 'Virtual Campus'. The findings suggest that it was the combination of this raft of measures, a holistic package readily available when using CMC in a 'Virtual Campus' environment, that was most effective in addressing the identified barriers to study for this group of students with long-term health problems.