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DOORway (Disabilities, Opportunities and OutReach): Interactive Computer Conferencing System which provides Peer Group Support for Distance Learners.

Introduction.

DOORway is an exciting and innovative support conference providing peer group contact for a group of 30 Open University undergraduate students with a wide range of disabilities and long term health problems. The Open University UK is a distance learning establishment and students study for degrees on a part time basis while working from home. The students are widely distributed across the UK and electronic conferencing provides a means of communication which is proving extremely effective in reducing the sense of isolation which can come from studying alone. This paper reports how one particular conference for disabled students originated. It also summarises the issues which have arisen from the inter-active discussions between its members. It became apparent that some students were finding particular problems with certain study requirements and were not even aware of the remedial help that the university could make available including special provision for examinations taken at home and special study materials such as comb bound units and course material on audio tapes. A postal survey was undertaken in 1994 to understand these difficulties and to assess how far students with disabilities might be disadvantaged in their studies.[1] The survey has identified issues for future research such as identifying the ways in which computer mediated communication might be used to provide specialist counselling services to students and secondly in the area of understanding the different types of study support required for the various categories of illnesses and disabilities represented in the study.

Origins

In 1988 the Open University offered a new course entitled "An Introduction to Information Technology: Social and Technological Issues". The course was revolutionary. For the first time in the University's history students were able to connect to the Open University conferencing system (CoSy2). They could communicate with other students, taking the same course, from all over the UK and with OU staff. In 1989 interested alumni of this course were permitted to remain on the system and to use it for course based self help groups and for personal social support groups. This step had far reaching consequences, since links were now possible across course boundaries for informal contact between students

The birth of **DOORway** is attributable to this decision. In 1989 two students began an informal 'conversation' on the network on the advantages and disadvantages of the medium for students with disabilities. Gradually other students with disabilities joined in and an edited version of the resultant discussions was published in 1991. [2] The conference was formalised as **DOORway** in 1994. The name is important as it embodies the philosophy of the conference. The rationale is that such a conference provides a private area for discussion of issues directly relevant to those with disabilities taking part; at the same time it preserves the right of students to reveal/not reveal that they have a disability in the wider world of open conferencing. Discussions since 1989 have shown that this is regarded as a crucial advantage of conferencing. Those with disabilities remark that their disability frequently causes them to be

treated differently by the able bodied. Thus they greatly value the opportunity which conferencing gives to be treated on an equal footing and the fact that the personal choice of telling others about their disability remains their own. The doorway opens *outwards* into open conferencing and DOORway students take an active role in the open conferences.

As a result of issues raised in the early days of the conference, a postal student survey of volunteers with long term health problems was undertaken in 1994, as part of an Open University research project. 140 students then volunteered to take part in a project to provide counselling services to support their studies using computer mediated communication as the main contact medium. A pilot study to provide this service to a group of 10 students will be undertaken in 1996.

Structure and content of DOORway

When the conference began informally in 1989 there were just two students in communication with each other. By September 1994 this had grown to about 10. At the start of 1996 there are 32 members of the conference, 27 are students with disabilities, 3 are able bodied staff members, one an able bodied student who is a volunteer Summer School helper for students with disabilities and one a senior officer of the OU Students Association, experienced in student support. From mid-1995 moderation of the conference has been undertaken by a young Open University graduate with disabilities. This is considered to be important since she brings to the task a wealth of personal knowledge and understanding of the difficulties faced by students through her own experiences of study.

Table 1: Analysis of number of messages by topics

CoSy2 DOORway September 94 - April 95		CoSy4 DOORway February 1995 - December 1995	
Topic	Number of messages	Topic	Number of messages
Welcome	1	Read me	1
Chat	42	Chat	438
Discussion	117	Discussion	158
2discussion	21	Guidelines	1
About	1	Information	19
Contacts	9	Introductions	88
Introductions	68	Technicals	25
History	1	Medical	2
Guidelines	1	Addresses	2
Total no. of messages	261	Total no. of messages	734

Table 1 shows the total number of messages contributed to the conference for the period September 1994 to December 1995. The conference has been well used by the participants. Whilst some are very active others have said that they benefit by passively reading the messages. The conference system (CoSy4/Wigwam) utilises an off-line reader. The advantage of this facility is that :-

- It minimises the cost in phone charges for those on low incomes
- It allows sufficient time for students who have difficulty typing time to prepare messages off line.

The student discussions have covered a wide number of topics. Examples of these are illustrated below and begin with some of the difficulties encountered by students who suffer with problems of manual dexterity. These students were concerned about the need for user friendly software to be provided which could produce mathematical and scientific symbols easily and quickly to enable them to take their examinations. Other issues discussed include

difficulties with attendance at the week long residential Summer School associated with many courses. Most of the members of the conference were rarely able to attend the face to face tutorials for their course (which take place on average 6 times in the academic year) and therefore found conferencing to be an invaluable aid in reducing isolation.

The issues discussed provided the rationale for the postal questionnaire undertaken in 1994 which was designed to question students about the following specific features of their study :-

- Work for continuous assessment
- Problems with tutorial and Summer School attendance
- The taking of examinations
- Which support services on offer by the university they had used and how effective they had found them

The questionnaire was completed by 281 students with disabilities, the analysis of which revealed that 66 were unable to attend face to face tutorials with most of the remainder only able to attend occasionally. 85 were not able to attend Summer Schools and 132 were unable to attend examination centres and therefore required a special home based examination provision. The results of the survey will be expanded upon in the full paper; The substantial benefits which students taking part in DOORway have enjoyed suggest that computer mediated communication could provide essential support for students falling into this category. However further research is being undertaken to take full advantage of this exciting medium to enhance the educational experience of disabled distance learners.

References

- [1] DEBENHAM, M. (in preparation) A Survey of the Study Problems and Difficulties of Open University Students with Long Term Health Problems, The Institute of Educational Technology, The Open University 1996
- [2] DEBENHAM, M. Article in 'Open Links' magazine. The Enabling Power of the CoSy Conferencing System, The Open University Office for Students with Disabilities, Spring 1991