

Disabled students and group work in a VLE

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Use of Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) can be adapted and extended to allow a more inclusive learning and teaching experience for all students and provide particular support for disabled students. This guideline presents key issues related to group work in a VLE, based on perspectives of disabled students and academic staff. Pedagogical, practical and strategic implications have been identified and set in context within discussion and action points to encourage extended reflection on individual, departmental and institutional practice.

Group tools

Tools exist within VLEs which enable the creation of online groups to promote online interactions at a time and location convenient to students. Groups are created and students assigned to them; only members of that group and the facilitating tutor are then able to access the information. These online communities can provide support for disabled students by offering support out of face-to-face sessions and the opportunity to contribute at their convenience, providing support for handwriting, reading or mobility impairments.

Communication tools form the basis of the group work area including synchronous and asynchronous discussion tools and email (for further information please see other ALERT guidelines on synchronous and asynchronous discussion). There is also the functionality to be able to share documents and information via a file exchange tool.

“In online group work I can look at someone else’s work, and I usually interpret what they’ve written better than if they had said it...if they don’t write it down then I’ve no chance of understanding it.”

ALERT Student

Recommendations

Pedagogical

- Encourage students to contribute in online groups by guiding and responding to discussions.
- Ensure students have access to all the available group tools to optimise the sharing of knowledge and ideas.

Practical

- Allow self-selection to groups, so that students are able to adapt more easily to one another’s individual approaches and strategies to learning.
- Allow sufficient time for individual preparation prior to the group work commencing, so that individuals are not disadvantaged if they have slower reading or writing speeds.
- Encourage students to organise their own group dynamics, assigning specific roles to individuals.

Strategic

- Devise strategies to ensure that all students are aware that they are to be non-discriminatory within their groups. The level of expectation of students’ contribution, spelling and grammar may differ between types of group work, e.g. reflective online group discussion and spontaneous online group chat.

Pedagogical

Equality

Online group work is a useful mechanism to engage students in communicating, to share ideas and to expand their knowledge. Students who might not normally contribute in a face-to-face situation are given an alternative and potentially less intimidating way to contribute in an online environment. If a student lacks confidence because of their particular disability, they have time to read, deliberate and contribute to online group discussion over a period of time. This can empower students to feel that their contributions are valued equally by their peers and the tutor. In addition to this, face-to-face interactions are conducive to an environment in which those students who are more vocal and are more confident can more easily dominate. Online groups can encourage individual's strengths that might not be as visible in other situations. For example, students who are less vocal in a face-to-face situation may feel more confident about speaking out in a smaller online group situation.

Some students, in particular those with dyslexia, can find group work a difficult undertaking, mainly because they are under-confident and feel apprehensive about sharing their written work. Conversely, for some disabled students, written ideas are easier to understand and process than verbal ones. Therefore online group work with a written log of conversation can be more supportive than oral face-to-face communications. Teaching strategies can be adopted to ensure that all group members are non-discriminatory against individuals for such things as spelling and grammar.

“I'd never have been able to say that if I was face-to-face with everybody... and I wouldn't normally talk that much in a group.”

ALERT Student

“There's nothing worse than being put in a group, and being expected to produce a piece of written work when you just don't want to. ”

ALERT Student

“...group work is very useful cos you can bounce ideas and if you've all got different views you can have debates as to what's the right view ...”

ALERT Student

VLE recommendation: highlight different levels of expectation of students' contribution according to task, e.g. a more considered thorough approach to reflective online group discussion rather than in spontaneous online group chat.

Learning styles

All students, and in particular disabilities students, are familiar with managing their own work schedules and may have adopted a particular approach to learning because of their disability. Many students with disabilities are accustomed to working at their own speed with their own learning techniques, therefore working as part of group can become problematic. Again strategies such as self-selection to groups can ensure that group members will be familiar with each other's approaches to learning and adapt and accommodate each other accordingly.

Although online group work can encourage those students who might not normally contribute face-to-face, it cannot afford the assurances that confident individuals will not still dominate. This may result in de-motivation of certain

“...the problem with group work is that there's no reflection on what each individual is doing...when one person or several people are doing different amounts of work it can be quite annoying.”

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members of the group who feel that their individual ideas have not been reflected in the task. The role of the tutor is therefore crucial to the success of the group. Regular review of the group areas to guide and encourage active learning and monitor which groups students are participating in is fundamental. Allowing time for individuals to research their own roles and responsibilities as well as those of other group members is also important for the success of group work (Pavey and Donoghue, 2003).

“Everyone’s got their own set agendas and if you can’t meet a deadline for your group then you’re letting your group down as well.”

ALERT Student

VLE recommendation: to optimise group learning be active in monitoring student participation in online groups and encourage students to reflect on their individual roles.

Practical

Wider range of information

Online group work facilitates access to an environment that offers a wide range of information (web links, Word documents, etc) that might not be as readily available and as easy to distribute face-to-face. In addition to this, from a logistical point of view, students are not deterred from being able to share knowledge, as they do not have to arrange to physically meet.

The provision of digital materials to groups allows for delivery of specific materials to each group. This enables tutors to provide resources that meet the students’ needs and the students to adapt any resources to be more usable.

Group work exercises promote benefits in efficiency and productivity and “accomplish tasks that can not be done by individuals alone; they bring multiple perspectives to bear on a single problem... they provide a vehicle for decision-making and taking,” (Harrison, 1999). As well as promoting problem solving skills and creating a support network for those students with confidence issues or cognitive impairments, this is also practically important for those students who are physically impaired and might normally be disadvantaged by building restrictions.

“(Group work) was a useful experience, in that you got to find out a lot more than you probably would have done on your own.”

ALERT Student

“... it was actually really good for stimulating discussion, seminar groups outside the work... definitely something I think should be used more.”

ALERT Student

VLE recommendation: make a wide variety of group tools available to optimise the group learning experience.

Communication

Online groups offer disabled learners assistance with communication barriers or problems in accessing pedagogical or technical support. It can also assist staff in assessing the levels of participation by individual students (Becta, TechDis and JISC, 2003). The group facility provides an additional communication mechanism between smaller groups of students and also between students and the tutor. Online discussion is proven to be more effective if conducted with smaller groups of students, as “it is within the small group that self-confidence can be improved, and teamwork and interpersonal communication developed,” (Fry et al, 1999).

“We all write specific essays...the tutor distributes them by email within the group which means that everybody gets a copy...and it covers all of the essays collectively over the whole module.”

ALERT Student

VLE recommendation: to form active communities consider allowing self-selection of groups where applicable, and establishing relevant group pages. Students will be more likely to form active communities if comfortable with their fellow group members.

Strategic

Implementation of groups

The establishment and implementation of groups is key to the success of the online setting. Enabling students to self-select to groups ensures that they have more control over who is and who isn't contributing. If students have selected their own group members they then take responsibility for the management of the group. This is especially important for those students with disabilities who are not as confident at sharing written work and who may feel more at ease sharing with other students who are aware of their disability.

“When you work with people who are as committed to working as hard as you are, then you can do really well.”

ALERT Student

Encouraging students to manage their own groups and to develop the group dynamics should be an integral part of the exercise. Assigning roles within groups will ensure that all students participate equally and enable individuals to focus on a specific task, as “ICT-rich group work needs to engage members in concrete group learning activities,” (Baskin et al, 2004). Students should also be briefed on how often they are expected to access and contribute to the online group communities in order that expectations on them are explicit.

“If you can choose your group it tends to be a bit better, ...if they think that somebody is going to do a good job...you want to do a really good job. ”

ALERT Student

VLE recommendation: encourage feedback from students on the dynamics of their group. By allowing students to reflect anonymously, they can develop their delegation or collaborative skills by identifying strong and weak points within the group without the discomfort of directly naming any classmates.

Life skills

Group work provides student with key skills for preparing them for the work place after University. Nearly all working situations require their employees to be able to work effectively as part of a team or group; very few environments are conducive to an individual approach. Therefore, online group work offers the flexibility to be able to prepare students effectively for the future at a time and location convenient to them. Students will also have to prepare themselves and be able to develop strategies to accommodate those people who don't contribute as fully as they should do, as these are all issues they may encounter in a working environment.

“Group work is very useful for preparing you for going into the workplace because you do have to do group work and you will meet people who don't pull their weight and such like.”

ALERT Student

VLE recommendation: placing responsibility on individuals by assigning designated roles within group work can encourage participation of all students.

References

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Discussion / reflection points

Based on the issues considered, below are some discussion points to encourage reflection on existing practice and provision.

Pedagogical

- Are your students familiar with how to use the different group work tools available to them in the VLE and to communicate online?

Practical

- Have group roles been identified?
- Have the group practicalities being defined? E.g. How often the group are meant to access the online space.

Strategic

- Has the tutor clearly defined their role in exercises? How often will they be accessing the group areas? How much guidance will be given?
- Do you allow self-selection of groups? If yes, do you believe this has impacted upon group dynamics and activity?

Action points

- Explore ways in which face-to-face group assignments might be conducted through VLE tools.
- Consult your departmental and university policy on strategic use of a VLE.
- Make contact with your disabled students' support unit, and establish what VLE support is provided or may be necessary.
- Review the extent to which the VLE recommendations within these guidelines are already embedded within your own use of a VLE
- Explore the other guidelines at the ALERT website – www.dur.ac.uk/alert