

The RUGROOM at City College Norwich

www.rugroom.net/information

The RUGROOM is a physical and virtual learning and social space at City College Norwich for learners with an Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

Tags:

FE, SEN/LDD inclusion, Social Network/Forum, E-Safety/Media literacies, Co-creation, Reconfigured learning spaces

Harnessing technology system outcomes:

Improved personalised learning experiences
Engaged and empowered learners

Sectors:

FE / SEN

Innovation

The RUGROOM exemplifies the integration of different technologies as part of a holistic approach to help meet the particular needs of students with ASDs. In the RUGROOM technologies are used in distinct ways, for example to provide a safe retreat space, for strategic use to help ease some of the stress associated with face-to-face interactions, and to explicitly develop the skills that learners with ASD need to cope with being part of the social world.

Background

People with ASD have difficulties in social and communication skills which affects their ability for flexible thought and behaviour. Consequently college life can be stressful and to thrive it is essential that students have both appropriate support and a safe physical and emotional space to retreat to.

The RUGROOM opened in 2007 to help address these issues. Danusia Latosinski, the RUGROOM manager, sought advice from students, staff and external consultants such as Cleveratom, an educational and creative technology company, throughout the design process. The aim was to ensure that appropriate technologies were chosen and that the design of both the physical and virtual space was centred on the learners' needs and appropriate use of the technology.

Technology

In the RUGROOM there is an emphasis on creative media and the space is therefore equipped with both Macs and PCs with internet access, digital cameras, digital camcorders, various music technologies, large LED screens and a dedicated TV and radio studio, as well as an editing room.

For social use there is a gaming area with gaming consoles including a Wii. The Wii has been particularly effective in fostering structured but spontaneous social interaction by providing a topic of conversation for both players and spectators.



Furthermore, every student has a page on the customised Virtual Learning Environment 'rugroom.net', which was designed by the students in conjunction with the Cleveratom development team. Rugroom.net provides a secure area that is only accessed by members of the RUGROOM community. Its main function is social networking and sharing of work through both private chat and participation in various forums initiated and run by the students. Crucially for many students, this type of communication alleviates the stress of much face-to-face interaction, and aids transition between school and college as prospective students are given personal access which they can use from home.

Teaching and learning

City College Norwich offers both supported access to mainstream courses and discrete courses specifically designed for people with ASD. Isobel Brewin, who designs the discrete courses, explains that technologies have a particularly powerful potential for learning in the RUGROOM as her students tend to feel comfortable using technologies due to their predictability, logic and non-interpersonal aspect.

The need to develop their learning in group interaction skills, as well as to encourage flexibility of thought and the transference of skills, is embedded in the extensive use of creative media. RUGROOM staff have worked closely with Cleveratom to devise and deliver appropriate regular creative sessions

which have included photography, animation, film making, music production, 3D interactive programming, 3D design, and radio and TV broadcasting.

All this occurs in a distinctly supportive and positive environment. Staff ensure that they have strong relationships beyond timetabled sessions, socialising with students during lunchtimes and arranging many evening events and daytime visits outside of college.

Impact

Isobel Brewin comments how the use of the creative media in particular has helped her students develop interpersonal skills that are key for independent living and finding and keeping a job. Through confidence gained through the RUGROOM, many students have presented creative media work at national conferences and events. However, it is the combination of the secure tailored environment, positive personal relationships and the use of technology that has raised students' self-esteem and view of life.

"In the RUGROOM the students have a chance to build up their self-confidence and their belief in themselves. Their self esteem just explodes. Parents are amazed at the difference they see in their children. Many are now looking forward into the future in a positive way." Isobel Brewin, Course Developer and Tutor

"The RUGROOM has given me a place to feel secure, it gives me a place to make me feel like I'm normal." RUGROOM Student

"I like the creativity of it. It helps me to keep in touch with my friends and to show them what I have been doing." RUGROOM Student talking about rugroom.net

Challenges

One challenge of running the RUGROOM is matching staff to the differing needs of each student and having enough staff who are confident with the many different technologies and applications used to help support these students.

Another challenge is that, due to the range of specialist technology, the RUGROOM falls outside the college's general IT support. Existing learning support assistants at the RUGROOM therefore maintain the website, computers and the radio/TV studio equipment. Although some training has been given, it is sometimes felt more expertise would be beneficial.



Wider adoption

The setting up of RUGROOM has been funded through the Learning and Skills Council. To replicate its success in other settings, the vision of using an integrated approach built around relationships in a dedicated space is essential.

All staff need both a clear idea of the skills that they are trying to develop through using technologies, and the frustrations and difficulties that people with an ASD may experience.

Isobel Brewin believes that seeking the views of the students and partnering with an outside creative company to explore options in using various technologies and applications has been instrumental in ensuring the relevant and effective use of technology in the RUGROOM.



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