

Online educational counselling for students with special needs: building rapport

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Abstract:

This paper reports the findings from a study which investigated the effects of providing on-line counselling for undergraduate students with long term health problems. Issues associated with learning at a distance for such students include fatigue, manual dexterity, academic and social isolation, together with a need for better interactive communication with support agencies (Debenham, 1996a). The results of a feasibility study undertaken in 1996 suggested that for students with special needs personal rapport with their educational counsellor is considered important for problems to be aired and addressed. (Debenham, 1998a). This raises interesting questions relating to how such rapport can be developed using Computer Mediated Communication (CMC). Participants in the study reported appreciation of a small amount of informal contact with the counsellor in a closed peer group conference; this conference is described in Debenham (1996b). Building on this finding, a main study was undertaken which was modified by the addition of a counselling topic - a 'Virtual Study' for the counsellor - within this conference area (Debenham, 1998b). The counsellor was encouraged to participate informally in the other student-lead topics. This added a group dimension to the study. The results are encouraging. Increased levels of motivation and enjoyment of the study process were reported by more than three quarters of the sample and in autonomy by more than half the sample. These findings to date not only throw light on the support of students with special needs, but also contribute to the development of knowledge in the wider fields of academic advising and the use of CMC in distance education.

References

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