

# ICT and self-advocacy in students with severe learning difficulties

*Robert Good*

*(formerly of) Watling View School, St Albans*

---

## **Abstract**

Robert Good graduated from the Herts. MEd in Teaching and Learning in 2002. In this article he provides an account of his work with post-16 students with severe learning difficulties (SLD). The article focuses on the use of video recording to support the students' self-advocacy and enable them to develop more ownership of their learning.

## **The school context**

Watling View is a day special school for students from age 2-19 years. At the time of my project there were eighty four pupils on role with a great diversity of needs, from those with more profound and multiple learning difficulties (PMLD) to those with more moderate learning difficulties (MLD). All students had Individual Education Plans (IEPs) that identify the nature of their learning difficulty and targets for intervention.

In the class where the project began, there were fourteen students aged between sixteen and nineteen following the school's post-sixteen curriculum. The Further Education curriculum aims to build on the knowledge and experience gained in earlier years while focussing more directly on the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of adult life. Fundamental to such preparation is the recognition of emerging adulthood and its application to students as a basic right. This should be reflected through a curriculum that incorporates approaches which seeks to promote students' identification of themselves as young adults through self-advocacy, choice and decision making leading to increased responsibility for their own learning.

## **Self-advocacy in learning**

Self-advocacy is about providing students with opportunities to control their environment through effective choice and decision-making. Empowering students to realise greater degrees of personal autonomy requires opportunities to develop key skills in contexts which are meaningful, accessible and adaptable to individual need. The Special Educational Needs Code of Practice emphasises the moral obligation to provide such opportunities.

Participation in education is a process that will necessitate all children being given the opportunity to make choices and to understand that their views matter.

(DfES, 2001:3:6)

Students need to be motivated to initiate approaches to their learning and to develop these views so they can make realistic judgements of their performance based on shared and valued criteria. Arguably a key component for such a mechanism is for students to develop ownership of their learning objectives and to be encouraged to set their own related targets.

In their study of effective target setting amongst students with SLD, Rose *et al.* (1999) identify opportunities for future initiatives including the production of student-friendly Individual Education Plans (IEPs) and the provision of regular tutorials during which students can be helped to discuss, review and produce targets. These initiatives were important in the development of the project. The aim was to enable students and staff to contribute ideas towards IEP development and approaches to target setting and stimulate an improvement in student ownership of IEPs. This involved the establishment of a new format that would help them to set related targets reflecting a growing understanding of their learning.

### **The research dimension**

The setting up of my project featured collaboration, active participation, assessment and development as illustrated by Rose and Grosvenor (2001). I was fortunate in having help from a research assistant funded under the DfES Best Practice Research Scholarship scheme. There was an initial need to clarify where students were getting their ideas for targets and if there was any reference to IEPs in this process. In the initial interviews I wanted to identify how students perceived their IEPs, the obstacles that were impeding ownership and ways in which the format could be developed to facilitate improved knowledge and involvement. This would provide the background for the introduction of the new format into classroom routines. Using specific criteria, students were asked to rank themselves in terms of their learning objectives and to identify their own learning needs. The interview schedule was designed to meet individual needs and elicit personal views.

Students were also observed in their target setting. They were succeeding in setting themselves some valid targets and most sought help from their own sources of information such as previous work and timetables, but some found the process daunting and would have given up without detailed guidance from staff. There was little peer discussion and some of the targets set were rather haphazard. Students often found it difficult to explain the sources of their ideas and none of the students used their IEPs as they did not have access to them in an appropriate format. There was scope for most targets to be more directly linked to the learning needs of individuals.

### **The ICT used in this project**

ICT helped us to make the IEP process interactive by providing an adaptable format which can encourage involvement. There was a range of commercial software available to deal with IEPs (Tod *et al.*, 1998) but there was a need to develop a specific format for this new way of working with IEPs. The school is very well resourced regarding ICT. In our classroom area, there were six networked PCs, a networked laptop linked to a large interactive board, a digital camera and an Intel 'Movie Creator' video camera. The Movie Creator in particular brought advantages to this project in

that it is very portable but shoots up to a minute of good quality film that is adequate for evidence purposes. It is easy to download any clip while editing features are simple to use. Students used Power Point to produce a slideshow to present what they had achieved.

The software itself was flexible enough to enable students to present their work and actively develop their IEPs. Each IEP was located in a specific network folder while all files were backed up in case information should be deleted. Each had a front page where the student talks about their IEP. Each target had its own page with a video clip of the student talking about it. Each of these clips plays automatically when a new page is accessed. Photos and symbols were imported into the documents as appropriate.

Students were encouraged to view their slideshow in two daily tutorial sessions. This was a time for planning when they could propose action points and suggest how they might meet them. Soon students were making suggestions for video clips and photos that represented a range of activities. They were identifying their targets and then watching clips of themselves involved in related activities. Any photographs or videos could be imported quickly so that there could be immediate reflection on achievements. Students were increasingly encouraged to place a judgement on their performances within each target by using the criteria laid down and negotiated with them earlier. It was only a matter of weeks before most of the students were independently accessing these interactive files on a daily basis and, with limited support, adding new information.

### **IEP development and piloting**

The new format was piloted with the students and appropriate evaluative adjustments were made. Once the formats had been established three more target setting observations took place using the methods previously described to gauge any developments in students' use of IEPs. The students seemed to have enjoyed giving their responses and seeing their views being acted upon and valued. It began to seem that the students were setting themselves more challenging learning targets, most of which had a direct link to an IEP objective and therefore reflected individual learning needs. They appeared to have an improved ownership of this process and were more self-reliant. If a student was asked for their reasoning behind a target they were able to give an answer. Students were able to access their weekly targets in their own folder on the computer network. Most had video clips to which they could refer. The mixture of symbol, text and video was very powerful. Students were now looking to staff for confirmation once they had an idea in their minds and had expressed their view. Often these ideas were prompted through reference to their IEPs. Discussion amongst peers remained limited although whole class sharing of achievements at the beginning of sessions was valued and appeared to be a motivating factor.

After some experience, the students began to interact with their IEPs in a purposeful manner, with video clips helping them to put their thoughts into context and form judgements on their progress. Some students began to consider their skills in terms of the context in which they used them and made judgements accordingly. They appeared happier to consider the need for improvement and tended to view this as an appropriate plan of action rather than outright failure. Students seemed proud of their achievements

and wanted to discuss them. The IEPs themselves contributed to the communicative process by providing motivating factors to communicate information with a clear purpose.

When interviewed again, students in general demonstrated an improved understanding of the role of target setting and its relationship to IEP objectives. A range of these views included:

*You work on your own*  
*Something you can't do yet but can do with practice*  
*It confirms myself as an adult*  
*I feel confident and concerned*  
*It helps you with your learning*  
*It's things you can't do but can get better at*  
*Things you want to do in the future*  
*Things you can do*  
*Something you need to work on*  
*Something to help you*  
*It's about target setting and trying to do it without help*  
*My education plan: I'm doing my targets*  
*Talking about yourself*

During the interviews, several students were able independently to call up their IEP folders on the computer and refer to their targets on screen, demonstrating how the new format was informing their answers.

### **The development of key principles**

IEP development has had a significant impact on the ownership of learning amongst these students in that they formed a range of views and could locate sources for their opinions. Their perceptions appear to be based on what they know they are doing in school in terms of both success and failure and their respective strengths and weaknesses. Their improved knowledge and ownership has been reflected in their target setting where they have set a range of targets that are related to their needs. They are increasingly defining these needs for themselves. The students are now using their tutorials to reflect on achievements and seek ways to approach new challenges. An enjoyable part of this process is to identify appropriate activities which can be incorporated into the IEP content as evidence. All of the students enjoy opportunities for whole class celebration by accessing and playing their video clips on the interactive board. In simple terms the students can talk about what they can do and why they are doing it and identify what they want to do next and how to plan for this.

This interaction with their learning environment has helped students to recognise when they are successfully coping with challenges. Such recognition may be helping to improve self-esteem (Powers *et al.*, 1996). In turn it is possible that this degree of efficacy and self-worth encourages perceptions of effective and purposeful learning. If these students can learn to deal with degrees of failure in positive terms then their self-esteem may improve.

## **Towards principles for practice**

Wade and Moore (1993) found that the self-concept of many students with special educational needs was low. If students feel that they are underachievers by nature then the teacher must change this perception by actively seeking to raise self-esteem. Key principles for achieving this include the following.

- Perceptions of inadequacy must never be reflected in the classroom if students are to be motivated to take risks in order to succeed.
- Students must discuss how they feel they learn best and see their views acted upon (Wehmeyer, 1996).
- With success there must be recognition of achievement to subsequently inform future progress.
- IEPs should belong to students and represent their developing knowledge of their learning and the expression of associated self-advocacy skills (Pearson, 2000).
- Practice must be underpinned by classroom mechanisms which enable students to gain an improved ownership of their learning. Students must be helped to actively contribute to the direction that they believe their learning should take based on their own informed judgements (Rose & Grosvenor, 2001).
- ICT has a key role to play in helping students to access their learning needs.

If students with SLD have the opportunity and support to make choices in a variety of contexts then they can become more self-determined (Wehmeyer, 1996). To facilitate this the students' community must not only be able and ready to recognise such choices, they must be prepared to honour them. ICT has a key role in facilitating and recording such mechanisms.

## **Laying the foundations for ownership**

The term 'special needs' is built upon assumptions of difference and alternative learning strategies, but this project has suggested that this is a world where students with very specific needs can be helped to develop their skills as independent learners. To this end the environment and ethos within which they work can enable them to develop their views so that they can control aspects of their learning. My study suggests that there is more to student involvement than just participation. It is about connecting students with their education, enabling them to influence and affect the programme and enabling them to become enwrapped and engrossed in their educational experiences (Good, 2002).

Genuine involvement requires a sense of control in the learning environment as well as the independent performance of specific activities. Students need opportunities to set a learning agenda that gives them the confidence and motivation to actively participate in partnership with their teacher (Cooper, 1993). They must see themselves as '...working towards a full role in the outside world and needing a full role in the world of the school' (Wade & Moore, 1993: 172). This project suggests that SLD students can be helped to develop such confidence and motivation through sustained involvement with their IEPs.

Initially the aim of this project was to examine self-advocacy skills in general terms and to explore beneficial teaching strategies. It became evident that students need to be

helped to identify what they are learning in school and to express their opinions about these activities in terms of their own strengths and weaknesses. They need to develop their knowledge of specific targets and identify the obstacles that they must overcome. They then need to problem solve and create action plans with personal targets that have their own measurable criteria of success. As they do this any notion of failure should be viewed as a natural part of the learning process which can become a stepping stone towards achievement. A key activity in this process is the provision of a weekly target-setting session that can help students to identify their own realistic learning needs.

The IEP should be at the heart of this process. If students can become more active in the development of their IEPs then there may be a beneficial impact on self-knowledge which will contribute towards an improved ability to set individually relevant and challenging learning targets. These students were able to achieve more control over the decision-making that affects their learning lives. It seems that there have been elements of self-realisation and genuine participation in the mechanisms of IEPs as they have become a living learning resource that is changing constantly due to direct student input. This project has suggested that the IEP should be a mirror for what the student recognises as 'school' and 'learning', a source of reflection and a route to celebrating the successful negotiation of failure and the subsequent attainment of success.

### **The desire to listen and respond**

This study has confirmed that a teacher must take every opportunity to consult students regarding their needs and how they may learn most effectively in different contexts. Teachers must be ready to listen to what students have to say and respond with all the resources at their disposal. Technology has a great deal to offer in such developments.

This project confirmed for me a number of some key principles. Effective learning depends on:

- the evaluation of success and failure in positive terms in the classroom
- students being helped to attribute notions of failure to flaws within an action plan rather than personal attributes
- the provision of an enabling environment
- students being treated with respect and experiencing situations in which they perceive that those around them value them as individuals
- students being encouraged to interpret and respond for themselves so that they develop their own voice
- students having the means and motivation to communicate
- students developing their skills in self-determination together with a level of assertiveness that helps them to express their needs
- the provision of an IEP format which affirms students' responsibilities for their own education
- regular opportunities for students to set for themselves challenging learning targets which reflect a working knowledge of their IEP

Through the adaptation of such principles and the effective use of appropriate ICT resources students need to be helped to develop and communicate a voice that is listened to and then acted upon in ways that they recognise. It is then that students may

begin to question the purpose of what they are doing and play an enhanced role in defining it. Recognising their own strengths and weaknesses and developing a sound knowledge of target setting is likely to help them to make well-grounded personal decisions and to plan for their future in realistic terms. In doing this an interactive IEP can help them to evaluate and plan for the successful negotiation of identified objectives. If they can work effectively within their IEP then they may begin to break down the barrier that exists between the formality of an educational objective and the expression of a self-determined individual.

## References

- Cooper, P. (1993) Learning from pupils' perspectives. *British Journal of Special Education*, 20(4), 129-133.
- Good, R. (2002) *Self-advocacy and Individual Education Plans: research with students with severe learning difficulties aged between sixteen and nineteen*. Unpublished MEd Thesis. Cambridge: University of Cambridge Faculty of Education.
- Pearson, S. (2000) The relationship between school culture and IEPs. *British Journal of Special Education*, 27(3), 145-149.
- Powers, L.E., Sowers, J., Turner, A., Nesbitt, M., Knowles, E. & Ellison, R. (1996) Take charge: a model for promoting self-determination among adolescents with challenges. In L.E. Powers, G.H.S. Singer, & J. Sowers, (eds) *On the Road to Autonomy: Promoting Self-Competence in Children and Youth with Disabilities*. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes, pp. 291-322.
- Rose, R. & Grosvenor, I. (2001) Case study. In R. Rose, & I. Grosvenor, (eds) *Doing Research in Special Education: Ideas into Practice*. London: David Fulton, pp.70-75.
- Wade, B. & Moore, M. (1993) *Experiencing Special Education: What young people with special educational needs can tell us*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Wehmeyer, M. (1996) Self-determination for youth with significant cognitive disabilities: from theory to practice. In L.E. Powers, G.H.S. Singer, & J. Sowers (eds) *On the Road to Autonomy: Promoting Self-Competence in Children and Youth with Disabilities*. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes. pp. 115-134.

## See also

- Barber, M. (1994) Profound and multiple learning difficulties. In J. Coupe O'Kane and B. Smith (eds.) *Taking Control: Enabling People with Learning Difficulties*. London: David Fulton Publishers, pp. 49-60.
- Des Jardins, C. (1986) Assertiveness is / is not. In E. Weiner, (ed) *No apologies: A guide to living with disability, written by the real authorities – people with disabilities, their families and friends*. New York: St.Martin's Press, pp. 122-123.
- Nisbet, J. (1996) The interrelationship of education and self-esteem. In L.E. Powers, G.H.S. Singer and J. Sowers (eds.) *On the Road to Autonomy: Promoting Self-Competence in Children and Youth with Disabilities*. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes, pp. 155-170.
- Rose, R., Fletcher, W. & Goodwin, G. (1999) Pupils with severe learning difficulties as personal target setters. *British Journal of Special Education*, 26(4), 206 – 212.
- Tod, J., Castle, F. & Blamires, M. (1998) *Individual Education Plans: Implementing Effective Practice*. London: David Fulton.
- Wehmeyer, M. (1998) Student involvement in education planning, decision making and instruction: an idea whose time has arrived. In M. Wehmeyer, & D. Sands, (eds) *Making it Happen: Student Involvement in Education Planning, Decision Making and Instruction*. Maryland: Paul H. Brookes, pp. 3-25.

