

Collaborative Learning in Virtual Learning Environments: Supporting High Quality Educational Interaction [linked with the Community Task Force, i.e. CHALCS]

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The Chapeltown and Harehills district of Leeds faces many of the problems often associated with inner-city ethnic minority areas; notably, poor housing, single parents and high unemployment. These social problems are also accompanied by high levels of truancy, drug abuse and crime. High disaffection and low expectation can further undermine educational goals and individual achievements. Chapeltown and Harehills Assisted Learning Computer School (CHALCS) was established in 1987 to address these problems by providing community-based tuition out of school hours. CHALCS currently provides support in Maths, English, Science and Information Technology.

The aim of our project is to increase access to and extend the range of support offered to CHALCS students. A number of areas have been identified by the students as needing further support; these include problem-solving, critical thinking and writing skills. Firstly, we intend to increase access to such support through the use of Internet Connectivity and Computer Based Learning resources made available at a distance. Secondly, we wish to offer a greater range of subject area support, particularly to address the need for support in English beyond basic literacy skills and to include support for critical thinking and writing in Arts and Social Science 'A' level subjects.

It is proposed that a system will be installed to facilitate computer-based learning by specifically supporting writing and problem-solving skills. Important functionality will include provision for collaborative problem-solving, on-line discussion forums and electronically-mediated resources.

Several such environments are commercially available but, as yet, none provides the full range of support we have identified in one seamless environment. It is proposed that an integrated component-based solution will be advantageous. To explore the utility of this, more holistic approach, to the problem a prototype system will be implemented. A formative evaluation cycle will follow, directly involving the students in the on-going design process. Quantitative and qualitative data on students' use of the system will be gathered by following a combination of research methodologies. This process will be used to determine the on-going suitability of the system in meeting students' support requirements.