Sheffield Hallam University

Developing learning literacies with digital posters

Moving from talking about research topics to writing about them using simple screen and voice capture software

The aim

The module team wanted to try new approaches to supporting and developing writing, as feedback from placement employers was that graduates lack confidence and fluency with it.

The digital posters activity aimed to develop students' confidence as academic writers and demonstrate how an academic study goes through a process to become a refined and well-articulated piece of written work. The module leader wanted students to learn how thinking is developed through talking and writing, and how spoken and written media can be tools that aid their thinking.

Benefits

- Students find this a more enjoyable way to engage with academic writing

- Students learn how to work systematically starting with the broad and familiar to produce clear, well-structured academic presentations of their knowledge

- The use of simple digital media screencasting technology adds variety and supports digital literacy

The approach

Students made their digital poster as part of a two hour interactive workshop. The digital poster was a tool to help students think creatively about a research project into an emerging market. Students were asked to research and bring four or five images of aspects of their emerging market on a PowerPoint slide to be used in the workshop.

At the beginning of the workshop a digital poster was modelled using screencasting software and the PowerPoint slide. The tutor demonstrated the process of thinking by struggling to find the right words and make connections, thereby celebrating uncertainty as a legitimate and important part of learning to develop knowledge. This showed that "umms" and "errs" can be indicators of where more attention is needed in the workshop and later.

Students were then asked to produce their own digital posters, making several attempts through an iterative 'talking cycle' approach in which they rapidly explained, reviewed and refined their topic knowledge privately. Students followed a one-side, illustrated handout for support. After half an hour students were asked to add zoom and pan effects to their last take so that connections were clear between the images on the slide and their recorded voice. Students uploaded the resulting videos to a Blackboard wiki.

The workshop concluded with a ten minute discussion comparing approaches to research, the suitability of the images to represent structure, the difficulty of finding the right words and what further work needed to be done before their assessed written report.

The outcome

Students found the software easy to use and the workshop went smoothly. The digital posters helped to make a transition from the more familiar experience that students usually have of speaking towards writing effectively in an academic style.

Students enjoyed and valued the activity, telling us, "I can listen back to it so I know where I need to improve and where I need to work on it. And actually, it gives me a bit more confidence to listen to my own voice and knowing what I am going to include in my assignment" and "It's a fun and interesting way to engage in something that probably would have not been so fun before."

The module leader said there was a large time investment in developing the approach, but she felt it was worthwhile due to the high levels of student engagement and learning during the entire two hour session.

Profile

Tutor name:
Diane Rushton, with Andrew Middleton and Cathy Malone

Faculty:
Sheffield Business School

Size of cohort:
Large (70-150 students)

Technologies used:
PowerPoint, Camtasia Studio (screencasting software), Blackboard wiki

If you would like your e-learning practice captured and shared in a similar case study, please contact Brian Irwin within Quality Enhancement and Student Success.

Future development

The module has been further refining this process each year, including providing written feedback to students on the Blackboard site about what was good with their poster and why. Currently the teaching team is experimenting with getting students to review each other's posters in a follow-up session so they are exposed to different perspectives and approaches.

In this approach screencasting was used to mediate a reflective learning process, but its simplicity has demonstrated that there are many other applications for screencasting such as capturing and sharing presentations that the module leader wants to explore.

Recommendations

Be clear where the screencasting software is installed and how to book headsets. Have a one sided, illustrated sheet so that student can see how to use the software and work through the process. It's also important that the students understand the purpose of the activity and are properly briefed on it rather than just how to use the technology. Model the process before throwing the students in at the deep end. Have fun and enjoy the sound of students talking!

Where multiple lecturers are teaching on the module, it's important that all of the teaching team have bought into this approach and are thoroughly briefed on how it works.