Sheffield Hallam University

Supporting Reflective Learning through Private Blogging

Giving students a private space for online reflection, allowing tutor access and feedback on reflections and managing the reflective process

The aim

Previous cohorts had kept reflections in their lesson plans, which was a suitable vehicle for recording reflections privately. However, many students struggled with how to write reflectively, instead writing more descriptive accounts. These lesson plan reflections could only be shared with the tutor at limited set points such as observations since they were part of the students' portfolios.

The tutor wanted to try an innovation which would allow her more frequent access to reflections and more flexibility to feedback on them at a distance.

Benefits

• Provide regular developmental feedback on student reflections

• Encourage and monitor student reflections over time

• Automatic record keeping of communications about the reflections

The approach

The tutor decided to replace the Word document with a blog hosted inside the Blackboard site. A blog is a simple form of online communication which is particularly well suited to journals or diaries. Messages can be added to blogs, which are automatically arranged chronologically and can have comments added to them. The blog provided a space that was specifically set up for reflective writing.

Each student was given his/her own blog inside the module Blackboard site. Each blog was only available to the individual student and their tutor, to encourage honesty and openness in their reflections. The students were tasked with regularly writing entries in their journals as part of an assignment, and the tutor was able to access the blog site to monitor this.

The tutor checked in on the student blogs at set points during the year, ensuring students were participating with frequent, high-quality reflections. Where the whole class struggled with particular issues either in their reflective writing or their placements, the blog allowed the tutor to identify those issues early and then address them with the whole group via tutorials and email. Alternately issues specific to one student could be addressed through feedback on the blog using its commenting ability, though the tutor also used email and face-to-face conversations to discuss the blog. Students could then reply to the tutor's comments directly using the blog, facilitating dialogue about the feedback.

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The outcome

The tutor was able to intervene at several key points during the year to ensure students were participating appropriately in the reflective journals. The tutor found that some students wrote regularly in their blogs, even outside of the timeline for the assignment, while others only engaged to the minimum level necessary for the assignment.

Students found this an easy way to create and store their reflective journal entries. The blog tool automatically date stamps and sorts blog entries, removing some steps that students would otherwise have to do if using, for example, Word. The journal was stored securely online, which meant a history of entries was kept in case of accidental deletion.

One issue with using the blog for reflection was when students needed to rewrite some of their reflections on the blog, such as due to not having internet access or having written reflections in other places.

Future development

The tutor is now exploring the use of blogs to build a community among students while they are on placement, rather than solely as a private reflective tool.

Profile

Tutor name:
Alison Hramiak

Faculty:
Development & Society

Size of cohort:
Small (1-30 students)

Technologies used:
Blog tool within
Blackboard

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.

Recommendations

When trying this approach, it is probably worth considering the timing and effort involved in giving feedback. In order to avoid increasing the marking burden, you could consider not returning significant feedback at the end of the year, in exchange for more regular developmental feedback throughout the year. Also, where students are all struggling with the same issues, consider giving whole class feedback to address those issues instead of commenting on each individual blog post.

Ensure that students have convenient access to the Internet. If students may be in placement situations where that is not the case, you may consider allowing an alternative format for the journal for those students. Students should also be encouraged to avoid duplication of reflections - writing directly in the blog instead of copying and pasting from other sources.

The tutor also recommends making students aware of the frequency of both how often students should make postings, and how often the tutor will be commenting on them. By setting clear expectations early on in the process, you can avoid misunderstandings and confusion.

The tutor also recommends linking it to the assessment process, as she found this encouraged engagement.