

Encouraging Reflective Writing through Blogging

Using reflective diaries to support writing skills development and transition to higher education

The aim

The first few weeks can be extremely challenging for new students, with many new experiences and skills to develop.

Managing the transition into higher education and quickly developing autonomy are critical for students.

This tutor was concerned that it was taking up to 6 weeks for initial personal tutoring sessions to commence, during which time students may already have dropped out or be on the verge.

The tutor wanted to ease this transition process and had identified that students also had limited written communication and critical self-reflection skills. A method of simultaneously addressing both these issues was required.

Benefits

- **Blogging encourages development of essential writing and reflection skills**
- **Blogs allow students to document their thoughts and concerns as they happen**
- **Potential problems can be identified and resolved quickly**
- **Student transition to higher education is improved**
- **Tutors can gain greater understanding of their students**

The approach

To help with this transition process, the tutor asked the students to use blogs as reflective diaries where they were able to describe their challenges and successes. The diaries were available to the students from the very beginning of their access course and used throughout the year. Diary entries were graded and these formed 10% of the final marks for one module on the programme; however, entries were not limited to that module or their academic life in general.

Diary entries were private to the student and the tutor, and marked weekly. In order to remove perceived barriers of communication, particularly for students where English is not their native language, the quality of reflection was assessed rather than the quality of the writing. Students received example entries with different marks and given an explanation of the reasons for these marks.

The tutor set aside an hour each Monday morning to read through and mark the entries made during the preceding week. The dedicated regular time was important as it ensured that the students continued to engage with their diaries and that any issues were identified and addressed immediately. The tutor also endeavoured to reflect critically about her week in a Blackboard blog that all the students could access, providing a further model for the students to use for their own reflections.

The outcome

The tutor gained a greater understanding of her students and their thoughts about the course, which helped build rapport between the tutor and student, and provided a way to identify and address problems before they escalated. The tutor was able to initiate conversations with students relating to personal issues or other problems that may have prevented them from completing the course.

There was a noticeable positive impact on the writing and reflective abilities of the students, which could be seen by looking at a student's entries across the whole year. Early entries typically being of lower quality and related to transition issues, whereas later entries were of a higher standard and showed greater critical reflection. Students commented that the activity showed how important it is to be an effective communicator and had helped them develop skills to use when reflecting on their own work.

Making the reflective diary part of the formal assessment for the module was important as it ensured that students engaged throughout the year, whereas it is likely that few would have with a purely private diary or as part of a formative assessment.

The approach has been used successfully with both Blackboard blogs and custom developed software. Online tools such as these provided greater flexibility when creating diary entries because the students could write and reflect on issues as they arose, regardless of the time or their location.

Profile

Tutor name:

Karen Vernon-Parry

Faculty:

ACES

Size of cohort:

Large (70-150 students)

Technologies used:

Blackboard blogs, ACES
Student Progress Files

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 tutor plans to:

- use reflective diaries to encourage students to access Blackboard regularly
- modify the requirements of the exercise to encourage fewer, larger diary entries in order to develop students' abilities at writing extended reflections
- give a more detailed explanation of the theory behind reflective practice and why it is important for learners and practitioners

Recommendations

The tutor advises anyone interested in this approach to:

- Set aside a regular, dedicated block of time to read through the students' posts
- Be aware that this approach gives significant insight into the personal lives of students, and that some entries in the diaries may not make easy or comfortable reading
- Ensure students trust the tutor and feel able to write about anything that is affecting them
- Be ready to intervene if necessary, possibly by making direct contact with the student or acting on their behalf
- Be prepared to have awkward conversations with colleagues about how students perceive their teaching