

Case Study

Lost in Reflection. How SSPAL students use 'forms' to find their way.

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The background context

This project took place within the School of Sports, Performing Arts and Leisure (SSPAL) in conjunction with the Blended Learning Unit (BLU). Key members of the project team included Paul Towers (BLU), Gavin Ward and Alison Barbar (SSPAL).

Through a voluntary work based learning experience, students gain first hand experience of the primary school environment. Students reflect upon their own teaching, the teaching of others, and selected specific issues in the host school. The 90 students are required to complete a minimum of 40 hours of voluntary work and must complete a weekly reflection. There

are two assessments the students must complete for the first and second semester. The first assessment is to complete a group presentation and the second is to create a resource for the school. The weekly reflections aim to help in both these assignments.

The current practice

Pre existing work was word processed, printed and given to the tutor. Additionally, students have one-to-one tutorials, group seminars and lectures to help them through their placement.

All the work was printed off and submitted summaratively at the end of the semester/year. The existing process had no formative assessment integrated within the practice and therefore any reflective practice was only discussed if the student attended the tutorial sessions. The two assignments (presentation and resource) were a combination of word processed documentation and the presentation itself. Students would discuss their ideas and reflections in one-to-one sessions with their tutors Gavin Ward and Alison Barbar.

The students found reflection a difficult process to understand and engage in. They would not, or were reluctant to, express their ideas in group seminars or group tutorials. Students fell into 'friendship groups' and would not engage with their peers outside of these groups. This meant that group seminars were not as engaging as the tutors had hoped.



The challenge

The case study aimed to provide a structure in which the students would feel supported in their reflections, whilst offering enough freedom to not feel restricted.

The forms had to be readily available for the students and once completed they needed to be positioned in one place allowing access for their tutors to give developmental feedback.

There was also a strong need for students to communicate and work collaboratively outside the classroom. Having a space where students

can communicate with each other regarding their assessments or their placement was the 'gold medal' the team were striving for. The main challenge for this was student engagement. Creating these areas of work had to be backed up with training, enthusiasm and feedback from the staff.

The purpose

A tutor new to the module had identified an issue with the level and value of the students' reflections in a previous cohort. This issue was apparent from module results, student evaluation forms and discussions with staff members. These investigations clearly indicated a strong need to support students in their reflective practice.

At the time of revalidation and development of this module, the University had started on stra-

tegic plans and was underway with refocusing of the undergraduate curriculum with a move to 20 credit modules and the Blended Learning Strategy. With these developments in mind it was a perfect opportunity to explore new methods of learning and teaching for the module.

The approach

The BLU had worked and developed a variety of different modules using PebblePad in a variety of different schools. With the knowledge of the system and with Gavin Ward's understanding of how he perceived the module working and developing, the BLU and Gavin Ward planned a series of meetings to develop the material.

They started in early summer allowing them plenty of time for the forms to be tested and altered. The project team chose the form asset because the BLU and Gavin Ward could easily create a structure scenario for the students to fill in and complete, hoping that this method would give the students a 'map' to find their way through reflective writing and learning theory. The following is a link to the blank Weekly Placement Form:

<http://pebblepad.wlv.ac.uk/PebbleForm/answer.aspx?external=true&formid=1311789>

Once the students have completed the forms the team needed a mechanism that would store them in a linear way and that can be readily available to the student and the tutor.

“ After discussion in meetings the BLU decided that a blog would be the perfect container for the submitted forms. ”

The use of blogs has been well documented throughout our institution; they provide a platform where students can submit entries and/or other assets. This gives the user a complete history of the students' progression. The blog itself was published to a gateway allowing the tutors access to the forms that are contained in the blog. This process takes minimal effort from the students and it is clear for the tutor what new reflections are in a student's blog.

The issues

The main issue arising from this module was to ensure that staff and student expectations matched. Students' expectations at the time were that they were going to receive additional feedback via their reflections. The demand for feedback was high but the staff aimed to meet the expectations set.



There was a need for an introduction to the system and to show them how to use PebblePad. With help from the rest of the Blended Learning team, we had 3 groups with roughly 30 students in each and delivered a 2-hour session. The training session covered the basics of using blogs and the forms. The students would submit their blogs to a gateway that had been previously set up. The session allowed the students to create their first 'weekly placement form' and publish it to their blog. This would be backed up with constant support and guidance from the module tutors and the BLU team.

Both the BLU and the tutors followed up with a second training session in semester 2 when a second form was introduced to the group. This last form was optional for the students if they wanted to use it. The form was focusing on more detail of their placement, including information that they could only fill in for the second semester.

The result

At this moment the students will be finishing their final assessment. The plan is to revalidate the module for the 2010/11 academic year in the summer. There has been some success in using forms to make structured reflections. The students have also engaged in collaboratively discussing their placements via a blog as well as working together in making their presentation.

The students did ask to receive more feedback, allowing them the ability to reflect more in their independent blogs regarding their placement. The reflective forms and blogs were not assessed, but it was recommended that it would vastly help students with their final assessment. This condition has meant a relatively low uptake with the students.

The questions that have arisen from this module and will be asked at revalidation, are:

- Do the reflective forms need to be a core part of the student's assessment?
- Should the reflective forms be assessed?
- And if so how do you assess student reflections?

The learning

This module has shown that student assumptions and staff assumptions can be two different things, even though they were aiming for the same results. Any reflective writing or practice in any form needs to be supported with constant feedback, even more so when placed online. When students are presented with a choice be-

tween online support and one-to-one support, they will inevitably choose one-to-one. Giving students constant and sustained feedback means that tutors can focus on the key areas within their one-to-one tutorials or group seminars.

In brief

- Using forms in PebblePad is a great way to structure your students' learning, especially if they struggle with reflection.
- Collaborative learning helps students develop their reflections and is vital when students are on placement.
- Just like feedback in one-to-one sessions, it is equally, if not more vital to receive feedback in online reflections.

References

Paul Towers, 2010. *Weekly placement form* [Online] (Updated Unknown)
Available at: <http://pebblepad.wlv.ac.uk/PebbleForm/answer.aspx?external=true&formid=1311789>
[Accessed March 2010].

Acknowledgements

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