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Short Paper Proposal: Abstract

Weblogs, Reflective Practice and Autonomous Learning in Graphic Design Communication

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In 2005 he undertook the Postgraduate Certificate in Learning and Teaching in Art, Design and Communication at CLTAD conducting a short action research project exploring the potential of Wiki technology in fostering an autonomous and collaborative approach to learning in Level 2 Graphic Design Students.

The project proposed here as a short paper presentation is being funded by the Creative Learning in Practice Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning at UAL, which encourages imaginative and realistic approaches to help learners to become practitioners in their chosen creative field.

Conference theme(s) addressed:

- Reflective Practice
- Virtual Learning Environments
- Innovative design in teaching and learning

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Blog, Reflective practice, Peer learning, Graphic Design.
Autonomous Learning.

Intended audience:

Practitioners, researchers, managers.

Abstract

Since their inception in 2004 Blogs have become a major contributor to the development of the social networking phenomenon.

This paper reports on a small qualitative research project utilising case studies of the use of blogs by Level2 BA Graphic Design Communication students. In the project particular emphasis is given to the capacity of the Blog to assist in the development of reflective behaviour.

Reflection is consistently emphasised as a desirable graduate capability, and is an expectation in programmes in the general field of Art and Design. Whilst students in Graphic Design are used to handling sophisticated hardware and software in the fulfilment of design briefs, it is less common for them to draw on the power of ICT to support metacognitive activity such as reflection. The report discusses the tool in comparison to sketchbooks and reflective journals in terms of collating and organising information and reflecting on action and questions how this implementation can further foster an autonomous approach to learning.

The increasingly fragmented and often remote nature of current university education experience means there is a necessity for a re-introduction of community through a blended learning approach. To what extent can Blogs not only satisfy this need to engender community and promote peer learning but also offer new paradigms for the pedagogic practice of the teacher? The present study has particular value in that it bridges a number of aspects of level 2 student learning such as placements, student exchanges and electives.

The presentation will exemplify student practices and will demonstrate the flexibility of the tool in a range of learning and teaching activities. It will seek to situate this research project in the wider application of blended learning technology and discuss issues surrounding the use of third party software applications within learning and teaching practices at this level.

Weblogs, Reflective Practice and Autonomous Learning in Graphic Design Communication

Introduction

The Second Year of BA Graphic Design Communication at Chelsea College of Art has 46 students. During the year they undertake 6-8 practical design briefs, (including live projects and international competitions), contextual theory, electives, and possibly work based learning or an international exchange and – a busy and challenging year for both students and staff.

We continually aim to encourage reflective practice in as many learners as possible. Many strategies are in place to facilitate this, including the use of sketchbooks, learning journals, self and peer feedback and review. I became aware that further enhancements in teaching and learning process were required for the following reasons:

- Reflective activity and peer learning was not happening outside of timetabled sessions.
- Reflective activity that was seen and discussed sometimes felt strategic or discontinuous and failed to clearly explain practical developments towards the generation of outcomes.
- As a result of reduced face-to-face activity some students voiced a need for more dialogue and increased sense of community outside of timetabled contact.

Because of these issues there was a need for a seamless, integrated and continuous means to facilitate and evaluate reflective activity in learners while also helping to promote student autonomy and instil a sense of community outside of college. It was these needs that prompted and directed the research.

Before describing the form of the intervention and the findings, it is first of all important to discuss reflection as a method in learning and teaching. I will also briefly discuss the reasons for the use of social networking software as a tool to activate this change.

What is Reflection and Reflective Practice?

Race (2002) describes the act of reflection simply as:

“...one which causes us to make sense of what we have learned, why we have learned it and how that particular increment of learning took place.”

The original Kolb cycle describes the process of reflection as a sequence of experiencing, reflecting, thinking (or theorising) and planning. This process is intended as a private activity centred on the individual. Later writing on the nature of reflection by Cowan (2006) and Brockbank and McGill (1998) suggests reflection is not carried out in isolation but is in fact social and demands involvement from others.

Cowan (2006) describes a socio-constructivist view of the Kolb cycle which allows for *planned interaction with peers*. He uses a quote from Pavlica and Colleagues (1998:301) to justify this:

"Kolb tends to over-emphasise the unit of account in learning by concentrating on the individual and portrays them as a kind of 'intellectual Robinson Crusoe', someone cast away and isolated from their fellow beings. While we feel it is important that learners should be self-directed, we also feel that the social processes involved in learning should not be ignored. [...] The means by which we experience the world are developed through social contact and our actions and experiences are normally shaped through the contact with others."

Brockbank and McGill (1998) describe this more social approach to reflective practice as *reflective dialogue*. They emphasise the particular importance of the process of triangulation that occurs between the learner, their peers and the tutor/facilitator in helping to consolidate and confirm reflective activity. This social or collaborative form of reflection is significant in this research project. There is a direct relationship between the nature of activity required for *reflective dialogue* and the intrinsic capabilities afforded by social networking software such as blogs.

There is a growing body of research into the potential use of blogs and other Social Media as tools to aid Learning and teaching in HE. Williams and Jacobs (2004) offer a comprehensive overview of blogs and blogging and document an evaluation of the use of blogs at Harvard Law School. There is however little research at this time concerning their use as part of an integrated, blended learning approach and little evaluative work of their potential in the field of Art and Design.

Why Use social media to encourage reflective practice?

A quick review of the intentions for Social networking software or Social Media tells us that by its very nature it:

- *facilitates communities of shared interest,*
- *promotes collaboration and sharing of content (knowledge, opinions, insights, experiences)*

- *encourages the development of unique cultures*

In particular, blogs present themselves as being of value for this research because they are:

- *flexible, active and participatory.*
- *free, easy to set up and require little or no programming knowledge*
- *a chronological record of activity that can be edited and archived.*
- *online and 'in the world' and so can be viewed and commented on by others*
- *a repository for various media such as text, image, moving image and audio.*
- *customisable and so can be personalised and therefore increase ownership of content.*

The Research Project:

Blogs were integrated in to the learning and teaching strategy of the course in order to provide a blended and continuous means to facilitate and evaluate reflective activity in learners. At the beginning of term a short workshop was held to discuss the nature of reflective practice and its value in learning and teaching. We discussed ways in which reflective practice could occur and how it might be evidenced to promote critical awareness of practice. Learners were informed that it was a requirement to evidence reflective activity at each assessment point to gauge learning and offer insight to how project outcomes were arrived at (this is stipulated in the assessment evidence in the handbook)

Learners were asked to use a blog as the final vehicle to record this reflection. With the agreement of all learners the blog addresses were placed on Blackboard to facilitate peer review and peer learning on a continuous and ongoing basis. There was little specific direction on how the blog should be used and we did not specify that the blog should replace sketchbooks or learning journals. Comments from learners in feedback describe a variety of individual approaches to using the blog to document their reflective activity in parallel with other tools such as reflective diaries, journals and sketchbooks, such as by taking screenshots to represent *reflection in action*.

The blogs quickly became integrated into a blended learning approach. One day each week the blogs were used in face-to-face progress-review sessions. The blogs were projected up and learners described their activity in a short verbal presentation to small groups. The group

and tutor/s would then feedback to the presenter in a question and answer session which was documented and given to the presenter at the end of the session.

Evaluation

In order to evaluate this research a multiple-choice questionnaire with 11 questions was devised and emailed to the learners with a section for the inclusion of further comments. From a cohort of 46, there were 23 responses.

Over half (13) of the respondents considered that the blogs had directly helped with their reflection on coursework. 11 stated that it had helped them organise their coursework and 19 considered that it helped with presenting their work. (It could be considered that this organising and presenting of coursework is evidence of *reflection on action*).

Evidencing Reflective Activity:

The following is a small selection of Learner's comments regarding the project:

"I write in a notebook most days and then transpose that to the blog and upload images. This can be time-consuming but it does make me think about my work, which helps me to generate new ideas. It's very useful that a tutor can look at work and give feedback outside of tutorials."

"When on work experience it meant that I could quickly show the work I produced from the project's development to final outcome. Blogs are also a great reflective journal and I find words a useful way of reflecting back on design decisions."

"At critique sessions at college it has become increasingly easy to present work to the group due to the accessible way in which it is shown. In addition, because of the increased interaction, tutors/students are able to provide better feedback due to my intentions being addressed through my blog."

All respondents to the questionnaire had looked at the blogs of other students. Of these, 14 found this inspiring, 7 said it helped them with their coursework, 8 found out more about Graphic Design as a result, and one did not find it helpful.

Evidencing Reflective Dialogue and Peer-Learning:

The following are examples of comments from Learners that evidence peer-learning resulting from the research.

"I believe the use of the blog has encouraged interaction on the course. It has allowed us to understand and appreciate each other's working methods."

“I like looking at other people's blogs to see how they are doing, have even checked out the rest of the students blogs to perk up my enthusiasm for my own project! Sometimes the technical aspect of them prevents people from using them, which is a shame.”

“Keeps a really good link between the students constantly open.”

“It gives the students, their processes and their outcomes a constant presence, depending on who they want to see it; friends family, peers, tutors or industry. They take ownership and responsibility for their learning and how it is packaged.”

“As with everything I think people migrate to feeling a part of something, particularly when a common interest is involved, the sharing of knowledge can inspire fresh ideas and concepts.”

17 of the 23 learners said they had spoken to others about the work on the blog. 12 had asked a tutor about work on their blog and 15 said a tutor had contacted them about work on their blog.

In most cases discussion about the blogs happened face-to-face, usually in peer review sessions. Only 7 students said they had either received or left messages on the blogs. The Face to Face nature of this dialogue is due to the blended learning approach, Learners knew they would meet once a week to discuss the blogs, and so rather than leave messages online, they held the discussion in the progress/review sessions.

Evidencing Autonomous Learning:

I would like to offer up one example from the events of this year which clearly demonstrates the potential for blogs to support student autonomy:

Towards the end of the final term we held two extra-curricula workshops by professional practitioners, one in Filmmaking and another in Bookbinding. There was not room for everyone to attend both of these. In a tutorial one student who had been on the Filmmaking workshop arrived with a range of hand made books, he revealed that he had used a Blog documenting the Bookbinding Workshop, which had been set up by a fellow in order to make them.

Widening Participation:

As previously discussed, blogs offer a range of ways to document and discuss activity, one advantage of using the blogs for written reflection was provided by an international student;

“As an international student, it really helps me to communicate because of the written form rather than speaking.”

There is also however a high rate of dyslexia amongst Art and Design students and potentially written reflection could be problematic. Evidence from the research also suggested a way forward to help these students also. On one of the blogs I noticed that a learner had posted a video from Youtube of herself talking directly to a Video Camera, doing what Cowan(2006) might describe as *reflection for action*. This mode of spoken reflection holds interesting possibilities for those with learning differences.

Did Reflective Learning occur?

Based on the evidence of student feedback and tutor observation of the blogs, the private and personal nature of reflection commonly found in learning journals did occur to a large extent, which is surprising considering that the addresses were shared amongst the group.

More interesting for me was the evidence that supports the existence of peer learning and the move towards student autonomy as a result of this research. The evidence would suggest that Social Media with its intrinsic ability to facilitate knowledge sharing, encourage participation and generate online communities of interest are therefore powerful tools to encourage the socio-constructivist reflection described by Cowan (2006) and Brockbank and McGill (1984) i.e. *reflective dialogue*.

When students were asked to describe who they write for when they updated their blogs there was a fairly even spread between ‘self’, ‘tutor’, ‘peers’ and ‘the outside world’. There is evidence here then that the triangulation sought by Brockbank and McGill (1984) to consolidate and confirm reflective activity is at least being anticipated by Learners in the writing and making of the blogs.

Did all students reflect?

No, and this was clear in the observation of the blogs at the end of term. On occasion, even though learners kept and updated blogs there was no evidence of any kind of reflection on activity. There are many reasons for this but quite often it is simply that some don’t know how to do it and some don’t want to do it (it can be considered uncool or unnecessary to reflect). The majority of the feedback on the research was positive and many confessed to becoming “pro-blog converts” or vowing to continue to keep blogs into their final year on the course.

Changes to Teaching and Learning as a result of the CLIP CETL Research Project

- *Reflective dialogue* is encouraged through a blended approach to using Social Media
- Students work together to develop their own learning and share knowledge in a focussed community.
- Tutor role moves further towards that of facilitator as the students become more self directed and autonomous.
- A continuous record of reflective activity is documented on the blogs learners/tutors/industry to view.
- Learner progress can be tracked while away from college including on exchanges and placements.

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