

Pedagogical approaches to teaching blogging and reflective writing to library school students



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Background

I am a library information professional with over twenty years' experience of working in a variety of library and information environments, and am a part-time lecturer in the School of Information and Communication Studies at University College Dublin. In 2012 I began teaching a course to Masters in Library and Information Studies, and Masters in Computer Science students, entitled Management for Information Professionals, which covers a range of management theories such as general management, project management, staff management, strategic planning, leadership, introduction to finance and accounting principles. In order to ensure that students have a firm understanding of these principles they are assigned weekly reading tasks about each topic; they then reflect upon them and how they relate to the management theory being explored in the upcoming class. They write their reflections in WordPress blogs that form a significant part of their course assessment.

Introduction

The luxury of reflection is a rarity in a world where there is often a constant surge of activity as we tick things off lists and move on to the next task or engagement. Decision-making has to take place in an instant; the barrage of information via online resources only seems to heighten the pace. The time taken to reflect upon one's experiences, readings, research and application of findings should become integrated into the way we work and understand the world around us.

The students who undertake the MLIS and MSc degrees at University College Dublin tend to come from a variety of backgrounds, primarily from humanities and computer science. Very few come from business management undergraduate programs. The knowledge and understanding of management principles is an essential part of their professional development once they enter the workforce.

Assessment construction

A detailed step-by-step WordPress guide has been developed and is given to students via the VLE Blackboard. At the end of every term each of the students submits a critique of what was useful or not in the guide and this ensures the WordPress guide is kept up to date and is reviewed from the student's perspective. On a weekly basis students are assigned relevant chapters from the course textbook (Evans, 2013). Related articles and many cases studies and related videos about the upcoming topic are reviewed. The WordPress guide is in essence an online e-portfolio.

Week 1 of the semester includes an introduction to what reflective writing is, and students are given supplementary readings and videos to help them gain an understanding of the process. They are instructed that the assessment will be based on the following criteria:

- As a reflection, your writing should not primarily be a summary of the readings. Rather, you should summarise each article's argument in a sentence or two and then reflect on your own assessment and the questions and connections they inspire in you. You should use the questions below as starting-points; in some weeks additional questions or activities specific to the topic will be assigned.
- Meeting minimum criteria adequately would earn a B. Evidence of additional thought and energy, signified by critical thinking, reflection, and connections made, would warrant an A, while significant deficiencies regarding the criteria would put you in C range for the assessment.

Pedagogical approaches to teaching blogging and reflective writing to library school students

The blog post is due on the Monday before the class that takes place on Thursday afternoons. By Wednesday of that week each student receives bullet-point feedback for discussion in class. This level of interaction ensures that students take responsibility for their own preparation for class and have the basic grounding in topics that many of them are learning about for the first time. It allows the teaching session to focus on the application of theory to practical examples in library and information environments. The iterative process of constructive feedback adds to the dynamic elements of this continuous assessment course. Students who find concepts challenging are identified early on and concerns can be addressed in class that week during the interactive discussions.

Flipped classroom

The flipped classroom is a pedagogical model in which the typical lecture and homework elements of a course are reversed (Educause 2012). Students in the Management for Information Professionals course are in a constant state of preparedness for the upcoming class. They come to class with a working knowledge of a one aspect of a theory and then discover its relevance to practical applications. For example, during the week in which students are introduced to accounting principles, the lecture consists of examples of the role of an acquisition librarian and how to develop a basic library budget. The students are not the only beneficiaries of this approach. The lecturer can move away from the podium and the slide deck to be more involved with students on a collaborative basis. This makes the teaching and learning process more interactive and cooperative (Educause 2012). There are greater demands on the lecturer's time on a weekly basis, but the ethos of a continuous assessment approach to teaching compensates for this.

Reflective writing

Reflective writing provides a means by which students can engage with and evaluate a complex topic using a range of sources and resources to make sense of the content and to reflect upon its relevance and their understanding of it. Students in the MLIS programme at UCD are exposed to a range of courses and assignments which require them to read information, analyse the content and then evaluate and reflect upon it. Reflective writing from a pedagogical perspective helps the student to be a self-learner, and this is a highly relevant skill for a library and information professional. Professionals in the field are required to work in diverse and complex environments while supporting, and increasingly collaborating with, researchers from a range of disciplines.

Sen (2010) conducted a study at the University of Sheffield to analyse students' reflective writing in terms of identifiable outcomes, as explored through the reflective writing process. In summary, the findings of this study identified a significant relationship between seven of the eight outcomes tested. These were academic learning, the need for self-development, actual self-development, critical review, awareness of one's own mental functions, decision making and empowerment and emancipation. Sen identified the practical applications of reflective study as a management skill that has potential benefits for personal and professional development.

Learning outcomes

The use of a blog is an ideal conduit for student development in this area. It has the potential to provide students with the following skill sets:

- The ability to set up and develop an online communication platform which can be used for blogging but also for basic website design. The WordPress solution enables the linking of images, video and other media and the understanding of the application of key words and themes enhances the skills required to make work discoverable.

Pedagogical approaches to teaching blogging and reflective writing to library school students

- The ability to read complex information from the course textbook and assigned readings, reflect on what has been read and write about it in a clear and succinct format (maximum 300 words) develops students' editing and writing skills. This is a direct transferable skill relevant to abstract writing and research grant applications.
- The reflection process makes the learning and understanding more personal and provides students with an appreciation of this learning style, which can transfer to the workplace and to further learning.
- The ability to write concisely enables students to summarise information for the non-expert – an integral part of library and information management work. Perhaps most importantly, students learn to reflect on what they have learned. The reflection element carries the most points for assessment – comprehension and application of the management theory are secondary.
- Students have reported that they have found this part of the assessment a key part of the learning experience. More significantly, they have referenced their online portfolio on CVs and discussed it at interviews as an example of their technical, writing and reflective skills.

Challenges

Students often struggle to understand the difference between summarising and reflecting on information they have read, so lecturer involvement in giving feedback in the initial stages is critical. Clear examples should be provided in class and on the platforms where students manage their work, such as a VLE.

Conclusion

This article shows a practical application of the use of reflective writing using the medium of blogging by MLIS students who are learning about management principles. Students perform well in this course, demonstrate an understanding of these key management concepts and have anecdotally reported positive and practical applications in workplace environments. Please contact the author if you wish to obtain a copy of the WordPress guide.

References

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