

making the case

Is it acceptable to remotely supervise placement students electronically via their eportfolio reflective learning blogs?

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Theme(s)

Learning: Reflection

Teaching/Professional practice: Managing e-Assessment

The background context

I teach Film Studies BA (Hons) in the School of Humanities at the University of Wolverhampton. In the early 1990s the school validated a module template for a generic pan-subject placement learning module called 'Student Link'. The module consisted of 3 assessed components: (a) a negotiated learning contract (10%); (b) a reflective learning diary (30%); and (c) a final evidence based portfolio (60%). The module still operates today, with exactly the same assessment, but is now known as 'Community Link'. During the delivery of the module we often found that, whilst students were meant to create their learning diaries on a regular basis alongside their learning, most students were 'rushing' these diaries at the end of the module – normally very shortly before assessment submission deadlines. We also found that the level of reflection was relatively limited with reference to what was expected from the assessment criteria. Recently, the number of Film Studies placements has increased dramatically year-on-year and we wanted to find a way to logistically improve the operation, delivery and student results of this assessment component.

Why PebblePad?

I have been able to supervise geographically disparate placement students effectively via their weekly eportfolio blogs, delivered via PebblePad. To visit the students personally, and regularly, would be logistically impossible and potentially counter-productive. PebblePad has allowed me to 'keep in touch' with these students alongside regular submission of summative assessment. Both formative and summative written feedback from the tutor allows the students on-going dialogue at a distance, providing better communication than is usually possible face-to-face.

The purpose

Overall, we wanted to (a) encourage students to complete their diaries on a regular basis, (b) improve student reflective material to improve grades, and (c) be able to supervise students more effectively and efficiently. Obviously, being a reflective journal, it made sense to encourage regular student contribution. Improving student reflection helped students to meet the module aims and outcomes. Electronic supervision facilitated more efficient delivery of the module.

The approach

We designed a new form within the 'form builder' function in PebblePad. Students would 'fill out' this form on a regular basis – usually after each full day on placement – and this would then be shared with the module leader. We decided to set up a new gateway and use the PebblePad blog function for students to share their diary entries with their tutor.

The result

After the initial pilot we now supervise every student placement in this way. The method has now been in operation for 4 years. Other subjects are interested in implementing this method of supervision too and I am running internal training sessions to share this use of PebblePad and provide additional support. Student grades have improved and electronic diary entries are, on average, more than twice the length of their paper-based equivalents.

The impact

Managing e-assessment

This process has made a massive positive impact on staff resources. The evidence for now, however, is largely autobiographical and anecdotal. I am now able to spend approximately one hour per week reading and commenting on all student blogs. I have a full understanding of their experiences on placement and I am able to intervene if/when necessary. During staff focus groups I found that staff spent an average of eight hours supervising each student on placement - which was mostly done via email and telephone - whereas each student supervision electronically probably only requires approximately two hours in total.

Reflection

Having run some student focus groups (transcriptions available on request) we found that students found blogging quite motivating – especially those days when they thought they had achieved little until they reflected – with tutor comments helping them to improve their placement practice. Students also found a structured ‘form’ to complete was much better than a blank page to reflect within. Students explained that they were happy to be supervised electronically, with telephone or email support when necessary, since they knew face-to-face support was available if needed. Students actually preferred us not to visit in person since they would find this ‘embarrassing’. Overall students said that they would definitely recommend the PebblePad e-supervision.

Lessons learnt

I learned that, used properly, technology can have a very positive and ongoing benefit for placement supervision. Having said this, some students simply could not get their heads around what is required for reflective writing and others needed extra encouragement to deliver their diaries in this way. Some had a deep-seated prejudice towards PebblePad, sometimes because of Flash compatibility issues, but many of these students still felt that e-supervision was a positive experience once they engaged with the process.

In brief – making the case for PebblePad

- Very efficient (and environmentally sound) method of placement supervision for module leader.
- Students were more than happy to be supervised electronically.
- Student reflection appears to have improved.
- Student engagement with the assessment component has improved.