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Work Placement Blogs to Harness Diverse Learning Experiences and Foster a Community of Practice

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Sub-theme: Diversity of the learner experience

Title: Work placement blogs to harness diverse learning experiences and foster a *community of practice*

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Students on work placement will have very different experiences from each other, however they are generally not connected to their peers, but working with professionals under the guidance of a college tutor. Therefore during placement they are not formally supported by peers and cannot learn from the diverse range of activities their peers will experience. An active learning community and a sense of connectedness to others are critical to real learning (LaPointe, 2008), while learning through participation in a *community of practice* involves sharing experiences and discovering how to improve by regularly interacting with peers (Wenger, 2002). The aim of this project was to introduce a blog assessment for pharmacy technician students to encourage reflection on performance and the development of a community of practice, which together are important steps towards *lifelong learning*. Benefits of embedding online discussion forums include engaging students in collaborative learning, encouraging deeper analysis and critical thinking (McNamara, 2009), and recently the use of blogs as reflective tools for students on placement has been utilised (Wolf, 2010).

This presentation describes the implementation of online work placement blogs to allow work placement experiences to be shared with the whole class. Feedback mechanisms are discussed, along with assessment strategies which actively promoted student interaction with their peers. This ensured that all students had the potential to learn: from each other's experiences, from tutor feedback on peer blogs and from the process of peer review.

Pedagogical evaluation was through an anonymous multiple choice questionnaire (N=33) and results suggest a very positive response to blogs for learning generally, and particularly for learning through sharing diverse experiences.

Introduction

Students on work placement will have very different experiences from each other, however they are generally not connected to their peers, but working with professionals under the guidance of a college tutor. Therefore during placement they are not formally supported by peers and cannot learn from the diverse range of activities their peers will experience. An active learning community and a sense of connectedness to others are critical to real learning (LaPointe, 2008), while learning through participation in a *community of practice* involves sharing experiences and discovering how to improve by regularly interacting with peers (Wenger, 2002). 'Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly.' (Wenger, 2006.). A community of practice has three required characteristics to distinguish it from a regular community, such as a neighbourhood:

The *domain*: A shared domain or field of interest and membership of the community of practice implies commitment to the field.

The *community*: In pursuing their interest in their domain, members engage in joint activities and discussions, help each other, and share information. They build relationships that enable them to learn from each other.

The *practice*: Members of a community of practice are practitioners. They develop a shared collection of resources: experiences, tools and ways of addressing recurring problems. This takes time and sustained interaction.

It is the combination of these three characteristics that form a community of practice. They may also be known as learning networks, thematic groups, or tech clubs, depending on the environment. Where members of a community of practice are not in regular personal contact, it is useful to use technology to assist in allowing the development and sharing of the groups resources. Online discussion groups, websites, wikis, and other Web 2.0 tools can be utilised for this purpose. A blog is constructed by people with common interests to collaboratively set objectives and formats, which is what distinguishes blogs from other forms of websites (Godwin-Jones, 2003), and have been described as being like a small learning community (Efimova & Fiedler, 2003).

In education, benefits of embedding online discussion forums, such as blogs, include engaging students in collaborative learning, encouraging deeper analysis and critical thinking (McNamara, 2009), and recently the use of blogs as reflective tools and for supporting a community of practice for students on placement has been utilised (Wolf, 2010, Shih-Hsien, 2009). Another interesting aspect of using blogs while students are on placement is their ability to uncover the informal 'hidden curriculum' which exists particularly in a learning environment outside the academic institute (Chretien, 2008).

The aim of this project was to introduce a blog assessment for pharmacy technician students to encourage reflection on performance and the development of a community of practice, which together are important steps towards lifelong learning. This presentation describes the implementation of online work placement blogs to allow work placement experiences to be shared with the whole class. Feedback mechanisms are discussed, along with assessment strategies which actively promoted student interaction with their peers. Pedagogical evaluation was through an anonymous multiple choice questionnaire (N=33) and results suggest a very positive response to blogs for learning generally, and particularly for learning through sharing diverse experiences.

Methodology:

The case study group were final year Higher Certificate in Pharmacy Technician Studies students in DT425, College of Science, Dublin Institute of technology. They must complete a 6 month full time work placement in either a hospital or community placement (module TFIP2001). Assessment of the placement has three components; an oral presentation (30%), a report (70%), and a logbook (pass/fail). Traditionally, the report has taken the format of a short descriptive and reflective commentary of the role of the student in the workplace. In this project, this was replaced with a work placement blog.

Implementation of Online work placement blogs:

The Institute's virtual learning environment Blackboard Learning System (*Webcourses*) was used to host the blogs, through the 'Discussion' tab. Students wrote individual blogs, but were assigned to blogging groups of three or four.

Generally students chose these groups themselves. They were not necessarily encouraged to form groups depending on the nature of their work placement (community or hospital pharmacy), and many of the groups were mixed from this perspective. They were instructed to post an approx. 400 word blog for four consecutive weeks (on prescribed dates), describing the tasks and experiences they had on placement, reflection on their performance, and how this all related to the theory they had previously learned in the associated college modules. They also were instructed to comment and respond each week to the blogs of the peers in their blogging group. All students in the class had access to read (and comment on) the complete set of blogs.

The students were familiar with *Webcourses*, however they had not previously used the 'Discussion' facility. They were given a short tutorial on how to use the software.

Feedback mechanisms:

Tutor feedback was provided to each student after the first blog and comment postings, and utilised the same commenting feature within the discussion forum as students used to comment on each other's blog posting. All students had access to the tutor feedback given to their peers. Feedback focussed on encouraging description, reflection, and relating experiences to theory and not on the student's performance in the workplace as described by the blog.

Peer feedback was obtained through reading the blog posts of other students and their comments to one another.

Assessment:

Feedback was provided after the first blog postings, and following this, the final three postings were marked. In addition, the student's interaction with their group through leaving comments to others students, and replying to comments left on their blog postings were assessed. No formal rubric for assessing each component has been developed to date.

Pedagogical evaluation:

The student reaction to the blog was captured using a four point Likert rating scale [Strongly agree, Agree, Disagree, Strongly disagree]. The audience response

system 'Clickers' from Turning Technologies was used to record and save the results.

Results:

Student feedback:

Section	Question	% Overall Agree	% Overall Disagree
Using the software	Using the <i>Webcourses</i> blog software was easy to use	95	5
	I was given sufficient training to be able to use the software	92	8
	My classmates helped me to use the software	59	41
Feelings towards writing and posting the blog	I enjoyed writing my blog	76	24
	I was anxious about what the other students would think of my first blog	59	41
	I was anxious about what the lecturer would think of my first blog	78	22
	I was comfortable posting my blogs by the	97	3
Feedback	I found the lecturer feedback comments on my own first blog was useful to help me	80	20
	I found the lecturer feedback comments on other students blogs was useful to help me	69	31
	I found the students comments on my blogs was useful to help me improve	64	36
	I found reading other students blogs helped me write better blogs	86	14

Supporting <i>Community of Practice</i> and learning through Reflection	As a trainee technician, I learned a lot from other students experiences through the blog	88	12
	As a trainee technician, my performance on placement improved reading the other students blogs	68	32
	The blog is a useful tool for students to share experiences while on placement	100	0
	I read the blogs of students outside my group	84	16
	My performance on placement improved through my self-reflection for the blog	63	37
	Through the blog I felt connected to my class	74	26
	I think the blog should be kept as an assessment method for future years, instead of a placement report	94	6

Preliminary Blog statistics:

Number of student participants	Total number of blog posts	Instructor comments	Average number of comments per student	Most active group (comments/students)	Least active group (comments/student)
37	704	37	19	29	7

Discussion:

Writing the Blog:

From the results it can be seen that there were no real issues with using the software to write the blogs. Almost all students felt the software was easy to use, and they were provided with sufficient training. It seems there was some peer support with using the software for many students (59%), those that did not seek peer support clarified it was because they did not require any further help. Use of the software had been a worry for many in the class prior to the commencement of the blogs, particularly amongst the mature students. It is recognised that as education embraces technology, that the needs of the mature student, and their perceived self-efficiency to manage technology based tasks, must be considered (Heaperman, 2001). However in this case, mature students confirmed that they had no difficulty once they had been trained.

Most students (76%) enjoyed writing their blog. Initially many students (59%) were anxious about what their peers would think about their blogs, and probably understandably, even more (78%) were anxious about what the lecturer would think. However, by the end almost all students (97%) felt very comfortable when making their blog postings.

Most students posted their blogs by the date prescribed. This was a successful outcome of the manner in which the assessment was designed. It has been reported that students may delay making blog postings until the end of placement if definite deadlines are not given (Chretein, 2008). This limits the potential for peer interaction and benefitting from meaningful engagement in a community of practice. In addition, feedback cannot be given early when it will be most beneficial for the placement as a whole.

Feedback:

Students generally found that the feedback provided to them helped them to write better blogs. This is consistent with many studies which claim that feedback is one of the most powerful tools which can be used to enhance student achievement (Petty, 2009). The feedback comments given by the lecturer focused on improving self-reflection and relating experiences to their studies in college, as opposed to directly commenting on their performances on specific tasks. Shih-Hsien (2009) has reported

that comments by instructors designed to challenge student teachers' thinking by posting questions and asking for further reflection resulted in deeper and more critical thinking by students. Most students (80%) found comments on their own blog were useful, while fewer (69%) considered that lecturer feedback to other students was valuable to them. Interestingly, the most useful feedback from the students' perspective was from reading the blog entries of peers. This is consistent with the previous studies, which describes effective assessment as allowing students to become confident in making judgements about their own work through self and peer assessment (Nicol 2010), and report on the value of reading the submissions of their peers (Dunne 2011).

Reflection:

It is recognised that the accelerating pace of technological, social, and economic change requires graduates to be Lifelong Learners, and that much of the learning across the lifespan is unplanned, experiential and emergent (Bourner, 2003). The key to this type of learning is reflection, which turns experiences into learning (Boud, D. *et al.*, 1985). Many professional courses recognise the importance of graduates being '*Reflective Practitioners*' as described by Schon (1983). The use and appreciation of reflection in medical education to promote professional development and encourage humanistic qualities is increasing, and blogs have been utilised to help develop these skills (Chretien, 2008). As professional pharmacy technicians dealing with patients, many of the same qualities of patient care must be developed. While many students (63%) believed that self-reflection through the blogs improved their performance, it is not clear at the moment why a significant proportion of students did not agree. It is possible that insufficient support and explanation of the process and value of reflective writing was provided from the onset. Bourner (2003) has developed a model to help students reflect through asking appropriate questions, which may be useful going forward. Providing examples, a tailored rubric for assessment and an appropriate framework, such as the '*What? So what? Now what?*' model developed by Rolfe (2001), may improve the quality of reflection and presumably the perceived value by students with respect to its impact on performance and professional development.

Community of Practice:

Most trainee technicians (88%) believed they learned a lot from reading about peer experiences through the blog, and many (69%) also believed their own performance improved from reading peer blogs, presumably through common incidents shared on the blog. All students agreed that the blog was a good way of sharing experiences, and most (84%) read beyond their assigned group. Many students (74%) felt that the blogs allowed them to feel connected to their class while out on placement. This has been identified by LaPointe (2008) as being critical for real learning in the case of distance learning students, who similarly are not in face to face contact with their peers. While the overall number of comments left by students shows an average of 19 comments per student, this varied greatly between different groups, with the most active group commenting on average 29 times, and the least active just 7 comments per student, which represents less than the bare minimum required in the assessment. A full qualitative analysis of the content of student to student comments has not been carried out at this stage, but the general trend shows students' comments related more to peer support of one another, and comments on the tasks and how they compared to the approach in their own work placement, as opposed to requesting further information or depth on the content of the blog postings based on empathy with or reflection on the content. In some cases it seemed as though trivial comments were being posted in order to meet the criteria of the assessment. Chretien (2008) recognised a similar problem, and commented that further work was required to identify ways to make commenting more meaningful and educational for a larger proportion of students. Perhaps a comprehensive rubric with clear allocations of marks for comments as well as for the blog postings would encourage students to spend more time and effort on comments to peers. The aim would not be to discourage the casual language of the comments which make the blog a source of peer support that students can identify with, however.

Overall, it appears that the blogs have been successful in supporting the development of a community of practice, where the students can tap into the diverse range of work placements of their peers and harness their experiences. Almost all students (94%) agreed the blog format should be retained. Furthermore, the relaxed format of the blogs by comparison to the more formal report previously used to assess placement, has exposed aspects of the hidden curriculum. This is useful for both for peer support and learning, but also for academics in their support of

students while on placement, and in the ongoing revision of the curriculum as a whole.

Conclusion

The introduction of blogs into a pharmacy work placement module has been successfully implemented. It has proved very useful in supporting the students to develop a community of practice where experiences can be shared for the overall learning of the class group. Tutor feedback on initial blog posts was helpful to students, and generally improved the quality of the entries, including increasing the reflective content, however it is possible that further initial training in the skills of reflective writing would improve this further. This could perhaps be achieved through provision of a tutorial and a model for reflection. A tailored rubric would be useful in increasing the emphasis on students' comments to peers, as this appears to be less important than the blog posts themselves. Overall, the technology did not pose a problem for any of the diverse student cohort, and they agreed that the blog is a good way to share placement experiences and should be retained. Further qualitative analysis of the content of the blogs is merited to uncover aspects of the hidden curriculum which could be used in future revisions of the curriculum proper.

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