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Work Placement Blogs to Harness Diverse Learning Experiences, Provide Timely Assessment and Feedback, and Foster a Community of Learning

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6 Work placement blogs to harness diverse learning experiences, provide timely assessment and feedback, and foster a community of learning

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Abstract

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 work placement co-ordinator. Therefore during work placement they are not formally supported by peers and cannot learn from the diverse range of activities their peers will experience. The aim of this project is to enhance the student experience while on work placement by introducing a blog assessment. The implementation of online work placement blogs will allow work placement experiences to be shared with the whole class. Feedback mechanisms are discussed, along with assessment strategies which actively promote student interaction with their peers. This ensures that all students have the potential to learn from their own reflections, from each other's experiences, from tutor feedback on peer blogs, from the process of peer review and through broadening the curriculum by connecting the "class room" setting to "real life working environment". Overall this assessment allows more efficient achievement of learning outcomes that all work placement modules share. For example, blogs can help to develop further students' personal and employability skills such as critical thinking and analysis through reflection, writing skills, communication, professionalism, listening, and giving/accepting constructive criticism through the discussions with each other. In addition, all of these important student graduate attributes can be further enhanced and developed through directed discussions with the lecturer using blogs.

Key words: Blackboard 2.0, blog assessment, feedback, reflective writing, work placement

Introduction

Work placement modules are an important and compulsory component of the majority of science degree programmes within the School of Food Science and Environmental Health, DIT. This requirement includes a period of planned work experience. The Higher Certificate Pharmacy Technician Studies students are placed in a community or hospital pharmacy. The students of the B.Sc. Nutraceuticals in Health and Nutrition Honours Degree programme are placed in a relevant industry or research establishment. This module exposes the student to the organisation and management of a pharmacy or industrial production/research facility, giving them the opportunity to apply in a community/industrial setting the skills, understanding and concepts studied in the course curriculum, and allowing them to benefit from the skills and expertise of the pharmacy, food or pharmaceutical industry professionals. The majority of students retrospectively refer to the module as one of the most useful modules of their course.

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 work placement co-ordinator. Therefore during placement they are not formally supported by peers and cannot learn from the diverse range of activities their peers will experience.

As work placement co-ordinators, some of the main challenges faced are to improve student learning, encourage reflective practice and instil an understanding of the need for continuous professional development. The main objective of this project was to introduce a blog assessment for students following the Higher Certificate Pharmacy Technician and B.Sc. Honours Nutraceuticals in Health and Nutrition courses, in order to encourage reflection on performance and the development of a community of learning, which together are important steps towards lifelong learning. The main benefits of blog assessment include:

- utilising Blackboard 2.0 to provide an effective web-based learning environment to support self-directed independent learning and foster a community of learning for work placement students.

- engaging students in collaborative learning, encouraging deeper analysis and critical thinking (McNamara and Burton 2009).

- uncovering the informal "hidden curriculum" which exists particularly in a learning environment outside the academic institute.

- providing student friendly peer and tutor support while students are isolated from college on placement, thus supporting student retention.

- giving timely tutor feedback and peer review on assessment.

- supporting professional development through reflection on practice (Carlile 2007) and written communication.

- broadening the curriculum through gaining, sharing and discussing external perspectives on core knowledge gained in lectures.

Outline of Project

Preparation of reflective writing and blog assessment workshop

A forum group was carried out to determine what resources and guidance the students needed for the workshop to prepare them for their reflective writing blog assessment. Conclusions from this forum group helped in the design of the following resources and tools outlined below which were made available to the students on Blackboard 2.0.

Workshop resources

Student and tutor "Reflective writing package" (instruction handbook) in an interactive annotated format (Articulate Engage) and a simple editable format (Word).

- Student instruction handbook
  - Explanation of what reflective writing is.
  - A series of activities to demonstrate the principles of reflection applied to a work placement experience.
  - Examples of 'good' and 'needs improvement' blogs.
  - Detailed assessment rubric (Table 6.1) informed by best practice and literature in the area including a breakdown of marks awarded for all elements of assessment aiming to support tutors and clarify to students the requirements of blog-type assessments, including how to interact with peers.
  - How to apply an assessment rubric to samples of reflective writing.
  - Examples of suitable vocabulary for reflective writing.

- Instructional videos screen-cast with voiceover (developed using Camtasia Studio 8.0 software).
  - How to post a blog on Blackboard 2.0.
  - How to post a comment on peer blogs.

- Tutor instruction handbook: The same as the student handbook but with tutor support material, for example solutions to the different activities and advise on how to implement them.

- Instructional videos (developed using Camtasia Studio 8.0 software).
  - How to set blog groups up on Blackboard 2.0.
  - What settings to choose for Blog tool on Blackboard 2.0.

Pre- and post-survey evaluations were conducted to assess whether the learning outcomes of the workshop were achieved.

Implementation of online work placement blogs

During work placement students were instructed to post a blog of approximately 400 words for four consecutive weeks on prescribed dates. They were also instructed to comment and respond each week to the blogs of their peers in their blogging group. All students in the class had access to read the complete set of blogs. 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 focused on encouraging description, reflection, and relating experiences to theory and not on the student's performance in the workplace as described by the blog. Feedback was provided after the first blog postings, and following this, the final three postings were marked using the assessment rubric. 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.

A post work placement evaluation using clickers was conducted after students completed their work placement. The outcomes of these results were further discussed in a post work placement focus group. The focus group comprised of one representative student from each blog group, also ensuring gender balance and standard and mature age group.

Criteria	Beginning	Developing	Proficient	Strong	Marks Weighting
Content	Experiences are poorly described or are not relevant to the course of study or profession	Experiences are reasonably well described and somewhat relevant to the course of study, but not related well to theory	Appropriate experiences are chosen and are well described, but not well related to college theory	Appropriate experiences are well described and related back to college theory.	25%
Reflection	No evidence of reflection on performance or personal response to experiences described	No evidence of reflection on performance but some personal response to experiences described	Evidence of reflection on performance and good personal response to experiences described	Evidence of deep reflection on performance and clear personal response to experiences described, together with statement of learning achieved both from the experience and reflection.	25%
Comments	Lack of comments, or comments of a trivial nature with no evidence of empathy with blog group	Comments of a somewhat trivial nature, and showing only slight empathy with the blog group	Comments show interest and empathy with blog group, requesting further information, and comparing to own experience. Replying to peer comments and questions is evident.	Comments show empathy with blog group, requesting further information, making suggestions, and evidence of deep reflection of experience of others, and how this relates to own practice. Replying to peer comments and questions is evident and very meaningful and purposeful.	15%
Frequency	Completely insufficient blog posts.	Sufficient blog posts, but always late.	Sufficient blog posts, rarely late. Comments mostly on time.	Always posts blogs and comments on time.	25%
Style	Poor grammar and spelling, and poor general language usage makes blogs difficult to read or follow. Blog is incorrect length.	Spelling and grammar are good, but little thought out into construction of blog post into a coherent piece. Incorrect length.	Good grammar and spelling, and correct language usage. Blog is correct length.	Good grammar and spelling, excellent language usage, demonstrating style and personal expression. Blog is correct length.	10%

Table 6.1: Rubric for DT425 blog assessment

Evaluation

Outcome from student consultation forum

The students were consulted ahead of their work placement to determine what resources they believed they needed in a pre-placement workshop to prepare them for the blog assessment. The two resources which they determined to be important were:

- Examples of good assessment blogs
- Resources to show them how to use the blogging software

This led to the development of the Reflective Writing Instructional Handbooks and the Camtasia videos.

Outcome from the pre-workshop student survey

The quantitative data obtained through a student survey immediately before the workshop is summarised in Table 6.2.

Pre-workshop evaluation DT425		Overall Agree (%)	Overall Disagree (%)
Do you have an understanding of what reflective writing is		80	20
Do you feel confident to write a reflective blog		50	50
I am able to post a blog using Blackboard 2.0 software		27	73
I am able to post a comment on my peer's blog using Blackboard 2.0 software		27	73
Which of the following resources would be useful to write reflective blogs:			
	Reflective writing examples	96	4
	Assessment rubric	48	52
	Audiovisual 'how to post a blog'	74	26
	Audiovisual 'how to post a comment'	61	39
I believe the reflective writing blogs will....			
	Help me learn about other students work experience	87	13
	Help me to do a better work placement	74	26
	Keep me connected with the class	57	43
	I do not see the purpose of writing reflective blogs	9	91

Table 6.2: Summary of quantitative data from pre-workshop student survey evaluation (N=23)

Outcome from the post-workshop student survey

The quantitative data obtained through a student survey immediately after the workshop is summarised in Table 6.3.

Post-workshop evaluation DT425		Overall agree	Overall disagree
Did you find the assessment rubric helpful		100	0
I have a better understanding of what reflective writing is after the workshop		100	0
Content of reflective writing resources was presented clearly and effectively		100	0
The reflective writing examples are appropriate		100	0
I feel confident to write a reflective blog		100	0
The reflective writing tools from this module would be easily applied to other modules		100	0
From this training I would be able to use these skills in other areas		100	0
Content was presented clearly and effectively		100	0
The audiovisual was helpful		100	0
I was able to post a blog after watching the video		100	0
I would be able to post a blog on a subject related to other modules of the programme		100	0
I was able to post a comment on my peer's blog after watching the video		100	0
I would be able to comment on different blogs not related to this module following these instructions		100	0
From this training I would be able to use these skills in other areas		100	0
Which of the following resources were useful:			
	Reflective writing examples	100	0
	Assessment rubric	96	4
	Audiovisual 'how to post a blog'	90	10
	Audiovisual 'how to post a comment'	76	24
I believe the reflective blogs will....			
	Help me learn about other students work experience	100	0
	Help me to do a better work placement	100	0
	Keep me connected with the class	100	0
	I do not see the purpose of writing reflective blogs	7	93

Table 6.3: Summary of quantitative data from post-workshop student survey evaluation (N=23)

Outcome from the post-work placement student survey

The quantitative data obtained through a Clickers student survey carried out following the blogging assessment is summarised in Table 6..4.

Outcome from the post-work placement focus group (N=8)

The focus group provided clarity on many issues, however the main student recommendations from the focus group were:

- To provide several examples of blogs from both community and hospital pharmacy
- provide examples of blogs which contain instances of reflection on positive experiences, as well as critical incidents and unresolved issues.

	Agree	Disagree
Software		
Using the Webcourses blog software was easy to use	86	14
I was given sufficient training to be able to use the software	90	10
Personal attitude towards blogging		
I enjoyed writing my blog	62	38
I was anxious about what the other students would think of my first blog	76	24
I was anxious about what the lecturer would think of my first blog	100	0
I was comfortable posting my blogs in beginning	36	64
I was comfortable posting my blogs by the end	86	14
Lecturer feedback		
I found the lecturer feedback comments on my own first blog was useful to help me improve	81	19
I found the lecturer feedback comments on other students blogs was useful to help me improve	73	23
Peer feedback		
I found the students comments on my blogs was useful to help me improve session	54	46
I found reading other students blogs helped me write better blogs report	97	3
Peer learning		
The blog is a useful tool for students to share experiences while on placement	96	4
I read the blogs of students outside my group	76	24
Through the blog I felt connected to my class while out on placement	76	24
As a trainee technician, I learned a lot from other students experiences through the blog	75	25
As a trainee technician, my performance on placement improved reading the other students blogs	43	57
Reflection		
I found reflective writing difficult in the beginning	96	4
I found reflective writing difficult by the end	38	62
I understand why reflecting on performance is important for professionals	89	11
My performance on placement improved through my self-reflection for the blog	50	50
My own performace improved through thinking about and commneting on other students blogs	60	40
Assessment		
I have found using the assessment rubric criteria useful to understand how I will be assessed	82	18
I think the blog should be kept as an assessment method for future years, instead of a placement report	97	3
I often referred to or considered the rubric during the time I was blogging	58	42

Table 6.4: Summary of quantitative data from post-work placement Clickers student evaluation (N=32)

Conclusions and Future Work

Broadly speaking, we are satisfied that the reflective writing workshop was successful in preparing students for their work placement blog assessments. This is evidenced by the generally positive nature of the student evaluations provided in Tables 6.3 and 6.4. Compared to previous years, the quality of writing and the focus on reflection in the blogs has certainly improved. Most notably, the quality and empathy shown in the comments has greatly improved. However, in some cases early instalments of blogs suffered some loss of creativity compared to previous years as many students attempted to mimic the example they were provided with in the workshop. Although this improved as students were inspired from reading peer blogs, we believe this can be addressed earlier though providing several diverse examples of blogs as a resource ahead of blogging. Furthermore, the focus group brought to light a worrying trend that students felt it was important to blog only on critical incidents or issues, leading to an overly negative tone to the blogs. Additionally, from the focus group there is some anecdotal evidence to suggest that occasionally students blogged on plausible issues or problems which did not actually occur in order to have a topic upon which to write a blog. To discourage this, and instead promote more constructive creativity, we intend to develop blogs which reflect on more positive, and perhaps more routine, experiences. We are also piloting the blogs over an eight week period for the B.Sc. Nutraceuticals in Health and Nutrition, to allow more time for reflection and for the blog–comment–feedback cycle. Together with the suggestions mentioned, we will await completion of the project and full evaluation on the B.Sc. Nutraceuticals in Health and Nutrition to decide on the exact nature of our future developments in this project.

Recommendations to DIT

- Where reflective writing is used as part of a "high-stakes" assessment of work placement, the students should be introduced to reflective writing for assessment earlier in their programme of study, for example in a "low-stakes" assessment in an unrelated module.

- It is useful for students to be given an example of a blog on a "critical incident or issue". However, to avoid an excessively negative tone throughout the peer blogs, students should also be provided with examples of reflection on positive, and more routine, work placement incidents and experiences.

- Provide students with several examples of diverse, high quality blogs to avoid a single blog becoming a "blueprint" or template for blogging, thus reducing creativity in style and originality of topics.

- Ensure that there is diversity of work placements in each blog group, to ensure a range of experiences are shared within each group.

- Consider extending the blog and comment cycle to once every two weeks as opposed to every week to allow more time for reflection between blogs, and for the commenting and feedback process.

- We recognise that the rubric is a very useful tool to provide clarity and transparency of assessment to students. It is important that due consideration is given to the weightings of the various criteria, as this influences the relative importance that students place on each of the criteria. We recommend that writing style is included in the rubric, to avoid students reverting to an informal or overly casual "text-speak" tone of writing in the online environment.

- The recent DIT report on "structured work placements" (Academic Quality Assurance Committee 2013) suggests that work placements should be assessed on a pass/fail basis. This is sensible where the assessor is an external supervisor assessing the core competencies associated with the placement. However, we recommend that other attributes and skills developed during work placement are assessed separately by an internal DIT supervisor and using a graded assessment. This graded assessment can be divorced from the main work placement module and form part of an associated module, for example in professional development or a graduate attributes portfolio.

- We believe an assessment of this nature resonates with several of the recommendations of the recent EU high-level group on Modernisation of Higher Level Education in Europe (European Commission Report 2013), particularly in terms of assessment against clear and agreed learning outcomes, and the exploitation of opportunities presented by the digital era to improve the quality of teaching and learning.

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