Authentic assessment in elearning: Reflective and Collaborative writing in the arts

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Abstract

This paper examines the notion of authentic assessment and the role elearning can play as a teaching and learning tool to provide 'real world relevance' to learning in higher education. This paper will firstly, argue that educators should consider aligning course assessment to real world relevance. Secondly, it will argue that social networking tools such as weblogs (blogs) can provide one means of achieving this goal when assessment is designed to encourage collaborative learning and reflective practice. The two teaching and learning exempla's discussed will apply the concept of the reflective practitioner to the practice of writing about the arts as an authentic assessment (Herrington, Reeves & Oliver, 2010) task that is relevant to student's future professions as art administrators. The first discusses how students' collaboratively write, edit and publish an online art journal 'Artwrite'*. The second discusses student's writing blog journals where they reflect about their art industry placements.

Introduction

To promote and engage learners in the new and often tentative online space, educators, instructors and tutors must ensure that the students feel that this environment is safe and trusted. Studies continue to reveal that students who are engaged and provided with the opportunity to collaborate online are more likely to be active participants (Mabrito, 2004). Collaborative projects that allow students to feel ownership of the learning process can encourage such engaged interaction between students as well as with the material to be learnt. One important pedagogical factor to consider when designing online courses in higher education is to create an authentic context where the content and assessment is embed and integrated into the learning experience and

knowledge building.

Authentic Assessment

Good teaching practice in higher education is typified by student and teacher knowledge sharing (McLoughlin, 2002; Biggs, 1999), where students engage in learning that has real world relevance (Cronin, 1993; Jonassen, 1991) that is supported by both the teaching and authentic assessment (Herrington, Reeves & Oliver, 2010). The specified elements of design for authentic eLearning according to Lombardi (2007) include having real world relevance where the learning task is based on real life problem solving with a meaningful context for planned learning experiences. There also should be as Lombardi (2007) suggested, a learning task that provides long-term student engagement with learning that involves a variety of resources and perspectives over a sustained time where collaborations takes place to promote engaging open conversation. Authentic tasks ensure that collaboration is an imperative component of the learning task and learning outcomes. Reflection is also according to Lombardi (2007) important as it allows students time to reflect on their actions while discovering a nexus between classroom theories and 'real world' practice.

Through authentic planning, assessment and product development, the learning process is cyclic, it involves students actively participating in their learning as they move through tasks that include problem solving based in real world contexts, supported by scaffolding and modeled support that allows for the development of knowledge construction. As Herrington, Reeves and Oliver (2010) confer the learning space must inclusively cater for the needs of the students where possible through cued and modeled support that provides a critical and challenging learning environment. This learning should be based in an environment that the student would work in, learn in or utilize post task. The students must also have ownership of the product while having a sense of ownership of the learning process throughout. The issue of alignment of the goals, the course content, the instructional design, the learner task, the instructors and students' role, the technology and most importantly the assessment is imperative for effective learning design when considering assessing with technology. A blog for instance, provides a collaborative construction of knowledge and opportunities for self and peer reflection. It does take time however, to establish a student-centered approach to learning and assessment. A blog for assessment purposes when utilized as a problem-based learning tool, as a published product or as an investigative inquiry is an authentic task and as such can be more efficient and effective method in the long term.

An important aspect of providing students with an authentic context where learning can take place is to intrinsically link the content to be learnt with the assessment in a meaningful way. Authentic assessment "needs to support learning in general and be driven by the learner, to foster the attributes we expect of graduates and help learners prepare for a lifetime of learning" (Falchikov & Thomson, 2008, p.50). Designing relevant worthwhile assessment that focuses on student learning as opposed to 'marking for marking sake' has been a concern for educators' for many years as they come to terms with the move to integrate an assessment driven form of education into the curriculum. Transferable skills and university graduate attributes have begun to drive assessment away from the reliability and validity issues of recent years to a more life-long skills focus. Taking this into account educators need to consider more closely how the assessment they design, corresponds with the learning outcomes they envisage students to achieve, along side the life long relevance of the knowledge and skills they anticipate they should acquire.

Collaborative learning

When participating in online courses in higher education, many students can feel isolated from and disengaged

with the content, learning process as well as other learners. It is important that students are encouraged to not only actively engage with the course material but also to interact with fellow students in the learning process in a meaningful way. Postgraduate coursework students in particular bring with them many learning experiences built from years of learning from high school, undergraduate studies, work, family and friendships. This prior knowledge needs to be connected with their newly acquired knowledge, and can be further engaged by the use of a social and collaborative online environment to extend their face-to-face learning. As students utilize the synchronous and asynchronous tools and peer review processes in authentic elearning tasks they collaboratively and cooperatively work towards promoting learning through both communication and reflective practice. When utilized as a journal or digital diary (Gleaves, Walker & Grey, 2008; Rourke & Coleman, 2009) a blog can promote and enhance a student's developing writing skills in both reflective and reflexive text. As an assessment tool, blogs can be used as reflective diaries for group presentations, demonstrating the learning of each student in the group though posts and comments.

Reflective practice

Paramount to the notion of reflective practice is 'recognising' the value of learning from experience as well as the importance of linking past knowledge and experience to new knowledge. Korthagen (2001) defined reflection as the "mental process of trying to (re)structure an experience, a problem or existing knowledge or insights" (p.58). Another factor behind this perspective is getting students to recognise the relevance of these new learning experiences and to discover the nexus between classroom theories and 'real world' practice. As Ashcroft & Foreman-Peck (1994) recommended, "the critical part of reflective practice is that it requires a commitment to learning from experience and from evidence, rather than to learning certain 'recipes' for action" (p.3). Hence students need to be taught how to be a reflective practitioner especially when training for a profession, by taking into account that there are many factors that inform their future 'real-world' practice. Glowacki-Dudka & Barnett (2007) recommended, that reflective practice "becomes critical when it is applied within organizations and communities to examine the collective assumptions of the work" (p. 43). The reflective practitioner ultimately through further understanding their own practice and by being receptive to other's philosophical stances, develops a theoretical perspective that enhances their understanding of their professional practice through as Beale (2007) suggested, a cyclic pattern of planning, experience, observation and reflection. As Schön (1983, 1987) advocated, reflection is an important part of the learning process as reflectivity allows the students to see the fundamental relationship between their actions and their framing of a situation, this is where old and new knowledge and understandings can collide and be constructed. As many researchers have acknowledged, reflection is a continuous cycle (Kolb & Fry, 1975; Boud, Keogh & Walker, 1985). Students need to be provided with opportunities in higher education to not just accomplish an assessable end product but also to look back on what they have learnt and think about how this could be utilized in the future. For when "learning and context are separated, knowledge itself is seen by learners as the final product of education rather than a tool to be used dynamically to solve problems" (Herrington & Oliver, 2000, p.2). Through peer shared writing students can as Korthagen (2001) suggested, "become aware of their mental structures, subject them to critical analysis, and if necessary restructure them" (p.51). This can be achieved through reflective online diaries and peer reviewed journal writing, as the learning and teaching exempla's in this paper will discuss.

Exemplar one: Publishing an art journal

Artwrite is an essential part of two writing classes at the College of Fine Arts, UNSW, Writing for Different Cultures and Audiences (in the Master of Art Administration) and Writing for Art and Design (Bachelor of Art Theory). Writing for Different Cultures and Audiences is delivered as a blended online teaching and learning model. The production of this online journal is based on the assumption that there is no point in writing to a disinterested examiner when work can be published to an interested audience. The use of *Artwrite* as a teaching and learning tool is a prime example of authentic assessment, where the assessable task is directly related to the

students learning (Wiggins, 1990). The first issue, written and edited by second year students in the Bachelor of Art Theory was published as a photocopied Word Document in June 1992, from 2004 to the present *Artwrite* has been published as a professionally presented publically accessible blog. The history of the publication mirrors the rapid changes in desktop publishing over the last decade and is now published each semester by the editorial team from the class at http://blogs.cofa.unsw.edu.au/artwrite/?p=915. Through peer review, the class editorial committee selects the blog submissions posted throughout the course for a final published peer reviewed journal. In Writing for Different Audiences and Cultures course students collaboratively build the blog *Artwrite*, learning and reviewing openly, building trust and developing the ethos prevalent in the arts industry of open peer to peer review. Students in this course had long assisted each other to edit their work for publication, but the speed of online communication means they can have their work subjected to several layers of editorial correction, which gives them an approximation of the kind of editorial intervention they are likely to experience in the workplace (Rourke, Mendelssohn, & Coleman, 2008). A further aim for this course was to give students realistic expectations of how publishing operates as many may choice to work in this field in the future. There is another further benefit from publishing online, *Artwrite* is one of the publications harvested for the National Library of Australia's Pandora archive (http://pandora.nla.gov.au). Articles published here are also well ranked in Google searches. Therefore the course gives a further reward for the student writers (Rourke, Mendelssohn, & Coleman, 2008).

Exemplar two: Writing an Internship blog journal

All students enrolled in the MArt Admin. are also required to complete a work-integrated 240 hour learning internship that enables students to gain practical and supervised experience in the field of art administration. These Postgraduate students are also required to create a blog journal of their Internship experiences and read and comment on other student's Internship journals. They are required to collaborate in this process with the objective that it is important to develop in students the attribute of collegiality and empathy for future arts industry workers who may someday cross paths in the closely-knit art world. Digital diaries not only offer this connectivity but as Davi, Frydenberg and Gulati (2007) suggested, they allow students "to become a part of the blogging phenomenon that is increasing in the real world" (p.1). It was important from the beginning of the Internship journal that the students were given ownership of the process, so to address this factor students were asked to come up with their own class journal blog etiquette. The points on this list provide some insight into what aspects of the Internship journal were important to the students. They felt that frequent postings were necessary and that these entries should be anecdotal, they were aware that no racial/religious/gender/lifestyle prejudices or offensive language should be included. The students saw the importance of working collaboratively and offering positive advice. "Confidentiality", they wrote, "was sacrosanct" and that no details should be left on the web "that may come back to haunt you". Respecting other's privacy and intellectual property by not disseminating or copying material was another factor they initially insisted upon. The issue of anonymity was optional "as the use of aliases and avoiding references to people and places could be potentially confusing" and possibly detrimental to people about to embark on a careers in the arts industry. They felt that images were essential, including video of curatorial practice, gallery invites and openings including a rule that students should read and comment regularly on other student's blogs. Finally students expressed the need for their peers to "keep their sense of humor" throughout the whole journaling process as they worked for experience and no reimbursement. An important aspect of the Internship blog is that it is not given a grade mark from the educator this removes the focus off the student producing an assessable 'criteria driven' end product. As a result the motivation to write the Internship blog journal comes from the student and their need to want to share their experiences of the art industry with others. The focus is on developing and nurturing other more essential life-long skills, students learn the value of constructive criticism, empathy, and the moral obligation of assisting others with kind words, while improving their ability to communicate their thoughts, knowledge and understandings of the art world in both visual and written form.

Conclusion

In higher education the cases for using blogs as an eLearning tool and for assessment have been written about for many years (Drexler, Dawson & Ferdig, 2006; Farmer, Yue & Brooks, 2008; Rourke & Coleman, 2009; McMahon, 2010) from the first weblog used as lists to the web author/publisher role that blogs now play. Technological literacy and multi modal learning in these online communities requires new modes of thinking, ways of learning as well as new approaches to assessment. The use of technology for the sake of technology is not educationally sound, nor does it prepare students for the future. As Nunes and MacPherson (2006) confer, "learning activities must be authentic…embedded in realistic and relevant contexts" and "learners must be provided with the opportunity to explore multiple perspectives on an issue" (p.4) through learning experiences that are driven by sound educational choices and pedagogy. For these students blogging in the visual arts provides peer support in a community of practice, opportunity to reflect as well as providing the chance to experience 'real-world' opportunities. Students should be encouraged to reflect on their learning as they have the opportunity to as Oravec (2002) suggests, "gain a sense of empowerment and personal identity while learning how to interact with others online" (p. 621). Social networking tools such as weblogs can provide one means of achieving this goal when online courses design their assessment to encourage both collaborative learning and reflective practice.

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