12: Blogging for assessment

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Background

The activity took place with a class of twenty-one full time third year undergraduate students. Ages in the class ranged between 20 years to early 40s and a mix of religious and racial backgrounds was represented. Students were studying an honours degree in Religion and Education and the activity was located in a discrete module on Education for Sustainability. For their assessment, students were asked to create a multi-media blog that analysed and evaluated a real project associated with sustainable development. The blogging tool on Blackboard, which is the University's Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), was used to facilitate this. Blogging was a novel assessment for students who, until this point, had submitted essay style assessments. The tutors involved in delivering the module and managing the assessment were initially unfamiliar with Blackboard's blogging tool and generally regarded themselves as novice Information Technology (IT) users. Technical support for managing the assessment was sought in-house.

Intended outcome(s)

The decision to use blogging as an assessment method was motivated by a range of pedagogical objectives, but was informed principally by the functionality of a blog to support multiple resources, including textual and non-textual sources. The aim was to develop students' skills of discernment when selecting resources, enhance associational and analogical thinking, and to develop their skills of critical analysis beyond text-based resources. Presenting the assessment via a blog was also intended to develop students' ICT literacy through knowledge of web 2.0 in an educational context and enhance their transferable skills by improved IT competency. Due to the nature of the subject (sustainability) and the assessment task (evaluate a sustainability project) it was assumed that students would largely select internet sources for their assessments. Presenting their assessments via a blog gave students the opportunity to opt for non-linear organisation, which, again, challenged their associational thinking skills.

The challenge

A key challenge was to introduce a novel form of assessment that enhanced, rather than distracted from, student learning and achievement. The challenge was particularly acute because the tutors supporting students through the assessment were not expert in web 2.0 or in Blackboard's blogging tool. Time had to be allocated in the delivery of the module to train students in using the blogging tool without this encroaching unreasonably on subject content delivery. A balance had to be struck between students being sufficiently skilled to use the blog

effectively, whilst not allowing the blog itself to overshadow the academic content of their assessment – the focus had to remain on the 'message' and not the 'medium'. Inevitably some students felt more comfortable with the technology than others, so it was vital to ensure that technological support was consistent and appropriate so that no students in the class felt disadvantaged by the method of assessment.

Established practice
Until this point, although there was variety in the assessment diet, the general theme of assessments was essay-based. Blogging was the first web 2.0 and properly multi-media assessment to be introduced. Tutors felt this to be a timely addition to enhance student experience and introduce technology into the curriculum.

The e/blended-learning/ICT advantage
At the end of the module students were asked to complete a Likert scale questionnaire about their experience of blogging for assessment. Out of seventeen students who completed the questionnaire, eleven said they could not create a blog before the assessment, whereas all seventeen responded that by the end of the module they could create a blog that incorporated a range of resources. This is a clear indication that transferable IT skills were achieved. Student responses about the extent to which creating a blog helped them to engage with subject content were more ambivalent; seven students said creating a blog distracted them from subject content and nine said it did not (one responded 'not sure'). Eight students responded that producing a multi-media assessment helped them engage deeply with the module content and four disagreed (remainder responded 'not sure'). Tutor reflection and close analysis of student feedback indicated that some students' reticence about technology based multi-media assessment was more likely to be located within the delivery of the module and the management of the assessment, rather than the medium of the assessment itself. Steps have been taken to address this in the current academic year. Nevertheless, it's an important point to note because it could have been easy for tutors to assume that difficulties lay specifically with the blog as the method of assessment.

Key points for effective practice
Two tutors were involved in the delivery of the module and assessment, neither of whom were confident IT users or proficient in Blackboard's blogging tool. Both tutors felt that supporting students through blogging as a method of assessment increased their awareness of the ways in which IT can support teaching and learning, and improved their confidence and proficiency in using IT in the classroom. The tutors felt this was crucial to their continuing professional development. In delivering the module and supporting students through the assessment, it was very important that the main focus remained on subject content and associated academic skills in a multi-media context and not on technological wizardry. In order to maintain this balance, technical skills are 'drip fed' throughout the teaching and learning and closely incorporated in lesson content.

Conclusions and recommendations
Blogging for assessment was effective to a certain extent, not least because it encouraged students to engage with multiple resources and clearly enhanced their IT skills. The blogging tool had certain short comings too, which led tutors to reflect on whether it was the best tool for the job. This year, the same assessment is being set but using Blackboard's wiki tool instead. It's anticipated that the wiki tool will provide the same multi-media functionality, but enable students to write and edit holistically rather than episodically, as is the case with the blogging tool. Tutors are also aware that the dialogical pedagogies offered by web 2.0 were not fully exploited by the method of assessment because students were not encouraged to read and comment on each

other's work. The reasons for this are complex and the success of dialogical pedagogies can depend on class dynamics, which are not constant. Nevertheless, tutors are exploring ways in which the comments facility can be used in a structured way for students to provide formative peer feedback on each other's work.

Additional information
This case-study provides a fairly brief summary of the experience and impact of introducing blogging for assessment. A more detailed analysis of student response and tutor reflection is available should this be useful.