Supporting Student Development Using Reflective Writing

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Introduction

This paper reports on work in progress with regard to the assessment approach adopted within a pilot HE orientation module (QB109) on the Business Information Technology degree. The assessment strategy used seeks to support retention and progression within a diverse student group. Reflective writing (see e.g. Moon, 1999) is a key component of the strategy adopted.

The module is assessed entirely by coursework. In combination with two other coursework components, reflective writing gives students the opportunity to relate theories, ideas and techniques to past and current experiences, to develop self-awareness in the context of their course of study and to start to identify action points for personal development.

Formative, and, where appropriate, diagnostic feedback on students' self-reflective part-submissions supports students' development and helps to maintain motivation. From a tutor perspective, reflective writing also provides a 'window' on the student experience and helps to identify any issues or concerns at an earlier stage than the 'end of module' student feedback questionnaire.

Background and module learning outcomes

The QB109 level 1 module 'Research and Communication Skills for BIT' was validated for the early specialist Business Information Technology (BIT) undergraduate programme in 2002/3. This paper refers to the 2003/4 run of the module which built on earlier work. The learning objectives for QB109, as it ran in the 2003/4 academic session, were as follows. On completion of the module, students will:

- have demonstrated an understanding of key principles involved in academic study, including use of research resources
- have developed a method for recording, storing and retrieving information to support study

- have developed strategies and skills for assessment by examination and coursework, including writing essays and reports
- have used a variety of methods to analyse data … and be able to make recommendations and decisions
- have successfully worked as part of a team
- be able to make an effective oral presentation
- have demonstrated competence in the presentation of information
- have made appropriate use of IT to support study and research

As indicated above the module includes an emphasis on team work which is an essential skill for those involved in BIT and IT development work.

The assessment strategy

The assessment strategy adopted on the module seeks to promote learning from experience by encouraging reflection, conceptualisation and testing of ideas (see e.g. Atherton, 2002). Hence it incorporates three coursework elements: group work, an individual portfolio of evidence and a self-reflective learning journal which is submitted in two parts.

The portfolio requires students to provide evidence of completion of weekly activities and documents other work completed outside class, hence demonstrating understanding of relevant theories, ideas and techniques. The group work enables students to put into practice some of the ideas and techniques covered during the module. The self-reflective assessment element is based on the kind of reflective writing process advanced by, for example, Moon 1999 and is submitted in two stages (see below).

The self-reflective component

The self-reflective assessment component asks the student to reflect on their learning experiences by relating the material on the module to past, and current, study and life experiences. Students are then encouraged to examine what they have learnt, how they feel they can progress and then to identify action points for their personal development.

The initial, part A, submission of the self-reflective component which is submitted in week 5 requires the student to complete a brief activity diary for the first four weeks of their module and then complete a reflective account of their learning experiences during the same period, concentrating on just 2 or 3 areas of their experience. Students receive formative feedback on this submission during week 7. Where appropriate, it also allows diagnostic feedback to be given and the student to be guided to a relevant central student support unit such as the University's

Learning Development Unit. The part A submission accounts for 10% of the total module mark.

The second and final self-reflective learning journal submission is presented in week 12 and accounts for 20% of the total module mark. For this element, the students are asked to select events and experiences that have been important to them during the module and to write a reflective account of the learning they have stimulated.

Reflection and reflective writing

Reflection and reflective writing requires explanation in order for students to understand what is required of them. Hence, during the early stages of the module students are introduced to Kolb's learning cycle (Kolb, 1984), and the model of learning as initially described by Race, (1993) presented to students as described in Race (1999). Additionally students are given the "Approaches to Studying Questionnaire" (Ramsden, 1992) to introduce the theory of the 'deep approach' to learning. From there they are introduced to reflection and reflective writing as described by Moon, (1999):

> *"Reflection is a form of mental processing – a form of thinking – that we use to fulfil a purpose or to achieve some anticipated outcome. It is applied to relatively complicated or unstructured ideas for which there is not an obvious solution. There is an outcome to the process."*

Further Moon, (undated) describes it as follows:

> *"Reflection lies somewhere around the notion of learning and thinking. We reflect in order to learn something, or we learn as a result of reflecting."*

Moon, (undated) further comments that reflective writing is one way of expressing the reflection that has taken place within an individual. Thus students are being asked in the self-reflective writing assignment to do two things, firstly to reflect and secondly to provide evidence of their reflection through examples of their writing.

Reflective writing is not an easy thing to do well and its requirements need to be clearly explained to students with the aid of examples. It also helps students to develop an understanding of descriptive approaches to writing compared with analytical approaches and allows students to provide evidence of a 'deep approach' to learning.

Tutor perspective

The submissions, particularly the Part A submission (see above), allow the tutor to view the learning experience from the students' perspective and (as appropriate) address individual and group concerns while the module is still in progress. For

example, from that submission in the 2003/4 session, the tutor was able to pick-up on an individual student's misunderstanding about a situation that had arisen in class. It also allowed the tutor to make written comments on the work addressing that student's misunderstanding. From a group perspective, if a number of students make similar comments about the same teaching session then the tutor has the opportunity at that early point to make adjustments to the subsequent teaching schedule to address the comments or concerns raised.

Student perspective and diversity

Through their reflective writing students can express individual concerns and receive feedback through a tutor's written and oral comments. Students are also able to relate the material on the module to their *own* experiences and this is one of the main ways in which this style of writing accommodates diversity of background and experience. The student can examine how *their* previous experience of study and life relate to the material covered, what *they* have learnt and what *they* need to do to move forward.

Student engagement

The assessment approach used on this module has been successful in supporting student development and encouraging progression. For example in the 2003/4 academic session, 87% of the students (37 out of 43) completed all three coursework elements. While completion on its own is no guarantee of students' on-going commitment and success, it is certainly an encouraging sign that they are engaging with the material.

Concluding remarks

For reflective writing to work well its requirements must be clearly explained to students and a formative assessment point is important to enable students to receive feedback and in that way better understand what is being required of them. Weaker students, particularly, need appropriate support if they are to correctly interpret the requirements of reflective writing and the next time the module is run, the requirements of the Part A submission will be reinforced and supported by 'scaffolding' included within the assignment specification itself.

Again, through the reflective writing process described above, students are continually identifying both their strengths and areas for improvement and this could be tied more explicitly to action points within their personal development plan

(PDP). However, such potential links to the student PDP would have to be explored carefully so that students may be directed to appropriate developmental support, - for example, study skills, self-reliance skills and attribute development - as well as support for particular skills and knowledge that may be related to their subject.

Finally, for reflective writing to work well in a Higher Education Orientation (or similar) context, links between reflective writing elements and the module content/other elements of assessment need to be very clear, so that the student understands what it is they are reflecting upon and how it might lead to action points relevant to them and their subject. Also, for students to commit themselves to writing reflectively, a reasonable degree of trust needs to be established between tutor(s) and students. This may develop from relationships built in the classroom, but will also develop from students believing that tutors value that reflective work and think it is important. In this respect, assignment weightings are perceived as an important indicator of the value attached to reflective work.

References

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Biographical note

Sarah Wilson-Medhurst is a senior lecturer within the department of Computing, Communications Technology and Mathematics. Sarah is an HE Academy registered practitioner and has worked with a variety of student groups including 'returners' and work based learners. Building on both her industrial and academic work experience, Sarah's learning and teaching research interests include 'employability' and supporting retention and progression.