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Efficacy of Reflection Journals for Student Learning in an Online Environment

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Purpose

- Across eight online classes, students were required to write a one-page meaning-making reflection at the end of each week of class.

- Do they work?

- How are they received?

eLEARNING TECHNOLOGY COMPASS

http://iteachu.uaf.edu/online-training/grow-skills/choosing-the-best-technology/
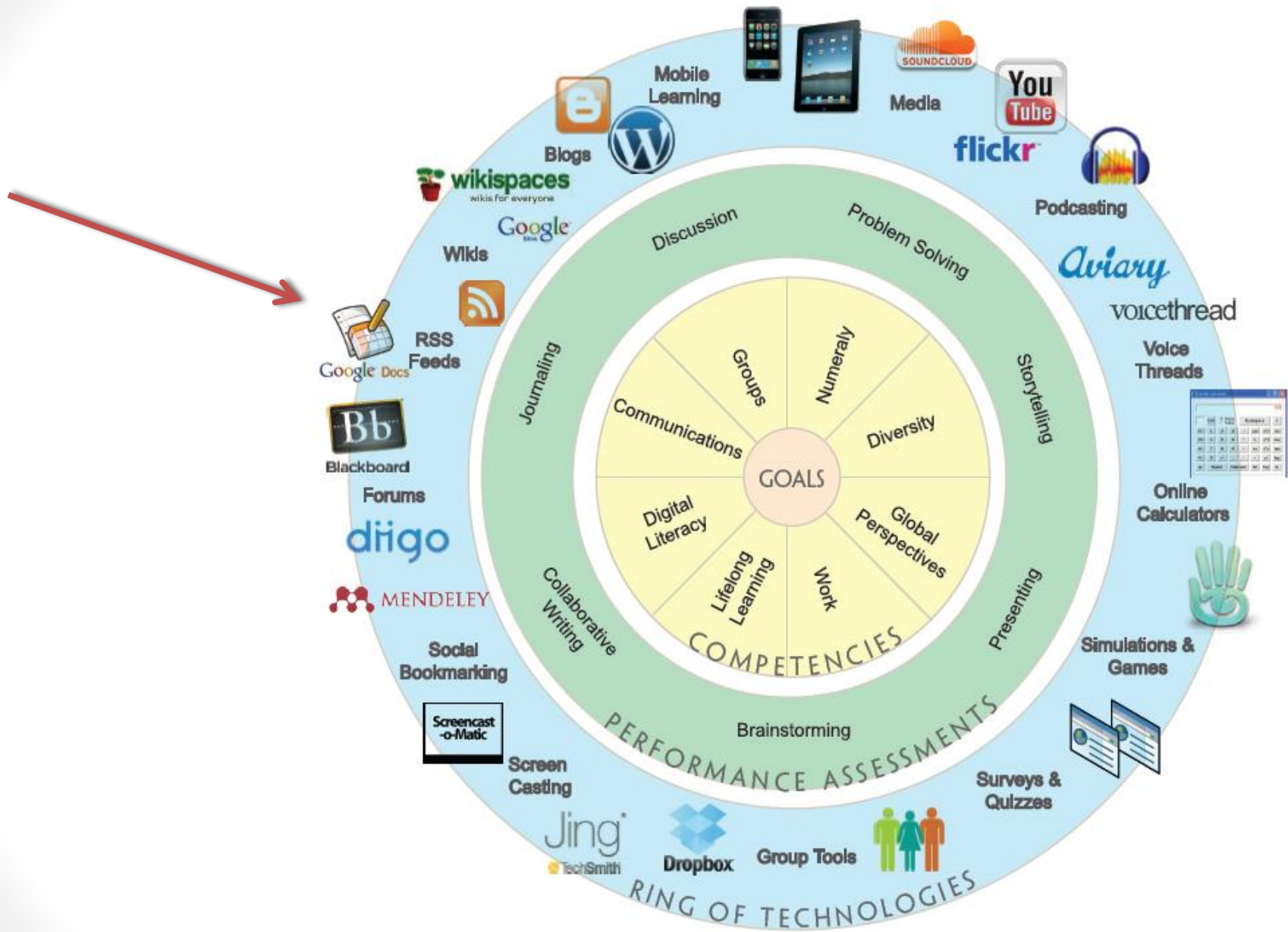
Student reflections

- Critically evaluate new learned information

- Tie it to course materials

- Analyze how this information helps them be a professional.

Student reflections

1. An instructor's "window" into student thinking
2. Help build the student relationship with the instructor (Spalding and Wilson 2002)
   - Social and teaching presence
   - Bridging emotional gaps

- <u>Vital importance in online environment.</u>

Student reflections

- <u>The aim is to:</u>
  - *Continually build knowledge from week to week*
  - *Have a record of thoughts, feelings, attitudes and "ah-ha" moments at the end of the class*
  - *To give instructor insight into students' learning processes and the impacts of components of the course*

Student reflections

- Reflections are **intellectual and emotional** reactions so there are not technically "right" or "wrong" answers (Nilson 2003)

- **Insist** that students refrain from summaries of materials

- Setting a **minimum** number of words and a schedule is advisable

- **Grading** of reflections is <u>optional</u>.
  - Two simple criteria = minimum number of words and no summaries

Theoretical framework

- **Constructivist learning model** as applied to online learning (Schell & Janicki, 2012)

  - *The constructivist learning model <u>rejects</u> the notion that teaching must be from the expert to the learner.*

  - *Rather, the learner may "<u>construct</u>" their own knowledge and learning through idea formulation.*

Theoretical framework

- Reflection journals force students to critically think and actively describe what they have learned (Guthrie & McCracken, 2010).

  - *Reflection journals facilitate a student-centered learning tool within the online environment*

  - *Oppose the didactic nature of student-teacher interface typical in online course system.*

Theoretical framework

- **Transformative learning theory** (Mezirow 1991)

  - *How adults **interpret** the world and how instructors teach their educational philosophies*

  - *Role of the educator to equip the student to **critically evaluate** their own assumptions, thus leading to a <u>change in perspective</u>*

Methods

- 2013-2014 academic year, <u>eight nine-week online undergraduate courses</u>

- Reflections were <u>required seven of the nine weeks</u>

Methods

- Students were required to write a minimum of 500 words for adequate reflection.

- This was a total of:
  - *56 weeks of student reflections,*
  - *from 107 students resulting in*
  - *5992 reflection papers*
  - *or about 3,000,000 reflective words reviewed by the instructor over the course of the year*

Results

1. Relate to <u>personal & professional</u> experiences

2. <u>Intellectual & emotional</u> reactions

3. Writing <u>competencies</u>

4. Professional <u>development</u>

5. Instructor-student <u>connections</u>

Personal & professional experiences

- *"One of my wife's patients is a Vietnam veteran… My wife said that the vet's wife told her that you wouldn't believe how much it has helped her husband when he comes talking to Tony and that she really wanted Tony to know how he has helped. That really touched my heart and is why I am grateful for this class."*

Intellectual-emotional reaction

- *"Growing up, sports meant everything to me. My family consisted of hard working farmers, so sports was my outlet, and even though we didn't have a lot, sports provided a place I could go and dream."*

Professional development

- *"I'm going to take your very first advice you gave me and try to get more involved with other volunteer and networking organizations in the area; so many of the career options sound promising. I'm very passionate about personal growth development; without it you cannot be positive member of the community."*
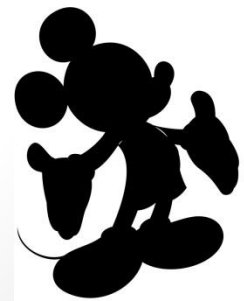
Instructor-student connections

- *"First off besides just assigning me a grade you give awesome feedback on everything I turn in. This is extremely helpful in aiding me, so I know exactly what I need to work on."*
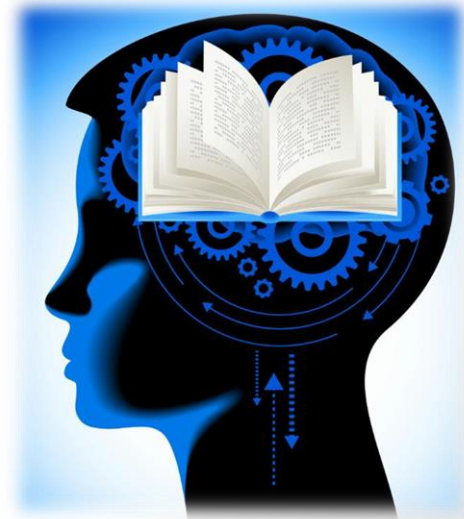
Instructor-student connections

- *"I've had a great term, and I've learned a lot. I hope that this passion never dies, and continually grows. I hope I can be graced with the time and opportunities to explore many more benefits of this field, and share my passion with others."*

  - *"We keep moving forward, opening new doors, and doing new things, because we're curious and curiosity keeps leading us down new paths." - Walt Disney*

Discussion-students

- Initial learning curve of how and why "diary-style" reflection journals were useful as a pedagogical instrument.

- Wide-spread thoughtfulness and interest

Discussion-instructor

- Rich, casual and meaningful dialogues on learning

- Powerful tools for monitoring and adapting the course to meet and exceed stated student learning outcomes

Recommendations

- Student reflection journals **have a pedagogical place** in an online learning environment.

- They **facilitate** intellectual and emotional responses.

- Reflections **develop** a constructivist learning paradigm, wherein the student takes the lead in learning.

- The main recommendation is to **incorporate** reflection journals into online learning environments as a tool for student learning outcome success.

Questions