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Learning to weave an argument using Blackboard threads.

Abstract

Diversity in learning is a challenge for student and facilitator alike. Returning to learning, or learning in a second language, are daunting prospects that require preparation and understanding in course design. Academic writing is a particular area that creates anxiety. This paper offers a potential solution for building confidence and developing academic writing by explaining how the discussion forum, available on the Blackboard virtual learning environment (VLE) system, is used with an academic development group on a return to study course in the United Kingdom (UK). In particular it looks at how discussion threads can be developed to build the infrastructure of an argument, and how using the 'real' healthcare knowledge of the student enables this process to occur.

Introduction

Lifelong learning is important for the nursing profession in order to maintain professional knowledge as healthcare evolves and roles change. Organisations recognise their responsibilities towards supporting the lifelong learning of staff (Department of Health, 2001) however, pressure on resources may also limit opportunity, as can resistance within nursing to engage with information technology (Timmons, 2003) which is needed to source evidence. Returning to learning is often a daunting prospect for many nurses, as they find themselves in the position of being a novice again in terms of writing assignments within an educational system that may be unfamiliar to them. Increasing diversity in nursing means that some may be adjusting to the British system, or be learning in a second language. This paper considers some of the surrounding factors to beginning academic writing, through the context of a course offered to support academic development. It explores how nurses might be facilitated to begin to express different stances in their writing through the use of a Blackboard virtual learning environment (VLE) discussion board in association with class interaction. The students own writings have been used from such a course with their permission, to illustrate how different stances on a topic can be arrived at. The resultant key points are listed and then categorised into possible strands that can be woven together into an argument, as part of developing academic writing.

Background

The Academic Development post-registration course has been designed to assist those returning to study after some time, or who are adjusting to the British system, develop study and writing skills in preparation for entering a continuing professional education (CPD) programme. Course participants may have no prior experience of Higher Education study, or be used to an exam based system that has not required any sustained writing for assignments. The course content encompasses academic thinking and writing, information management, reflective practice and is designed to enable participants to recognise the significance of evidence in producing ideas, and explore arguments in relation to their practice. Assessment, as an integral part of the learning process, helps identify progression, and learners in higher education expect and are expected to have greater independence, and to become active agents in their own learning (Knight, 1995; Orrell, 2006). Yet some nurses may not have chosen to return to study or come on the course themselves, instead having been sent by their managers, and additionally find engaging with information technology challenging necessitating practical ways of stimulating engagement.

The ten nurses involved in producing the writing demonstrated here came from a range of roles and professional status, but were all equally anxious on starting the course. Such fear, according to Whitehead (2002), is often related to the possibility of failing and in the process may paralyse the ability to engage completely with learning, requiring additional support. It should be remembered that although nurses may be novices when facing academic study processes, nevertheless, they have expertise in their own fields of practice where they are used to articulating their ideas. This can provide a rich resource of knowledge and confidence which may potentially be drawn upon when developing ways of thinking and writing. Social and cultural constructs are an important part of learning that may be overlooked by overemphasis on cognitive aspects (Lea, 2004). Providing opportunity for activities that integrate these aspects as part of learning together is likely to be perceived as valuing student identity and help build confidence.

The literature is replete with guides to developing the academic writing process suggesting that academic literacy is not straightforward (Peck and Coyle, 1999;

Greetham, 2001; Clay, 2003; Rose, 2001; Gimenez, 2007). Such guidance on writing for academic purposes is placed within process and theoretical frames of reference to enable the reader to follow a logical and systematic path to completion. For example, achieving critical analysis is explicated through Bloom's taxonomy of skills acquisition within the cognitive domain of separating and examining information (Gopee, 2002). While there is some debate over what critical analysis actually is nevertheless, its processes of detailed examination are viewed as the crucial difference between writing at diploma and degree level (Knowles and McGloin, 2007). Alternatively, the development of a suitable style of writing is set within a 'PROCESS' framework that outlines planning, referencing, organisation, composition, engineering, spelling and structure in the construction of a piece of academic writing (Lloyd, 2007:51). It could, however, also be said that the abstraction of guidance in a text makes assumptions of the novice's ability to comprehend that may not be reflected in reality. This is particularly pertinent for those studying in a second language.

Methodology

Students entering the Academic Development course are first orientated to the use of information technology and the virtual learning environment as part of supporting their learning. They undertake a key skills audit to identify areas of strength and those requiring development. Their first foray into writing is to produce a formative piece of free flowing writing relating to their practice as a way of assessing their current writing style. Formative self-assessment is a way of '*learning to learn*' (Taras, 2001 p606) with feedback devoid of a mark allowing the student to work through comments and self assess own work against the criteria giving reasons for their grading decisions. This is then followed up with a joint discussion of the tutor grade and matching of criteria, and is particularly helpful with overseas students, as, from Taras (2001 p611) perspective, it helps to '*reinforce* assessment procedures and *patterns*'. Whilst increasing transparency, nevertheless, it is the actual production of learning that is important rather than how the product is handled. In this regard the tutor mark does not seem as relevant as how writing addresses scholarship criteria and ways need to be considered of reducing dependency upon it.

The medium of the Blackboard VLE system is used as part of this purpose to enable students to develop argument points through posting threads onto the Blackboard

discussion forum after viewing a video clip displaying questionable healthcare practice, as a method for stimulating debate. Posting a response onto the discussion forum requires being able to make a critical judgment from among multifarious impressions that are then articulated in language that is accessible to others. Articulation is a way of emerging thought as a work in progress, in that it may become modified through discussion with others.

Similarly, the students need to be able to take the first step in writing that at this point, by convention, may not be particularly academic or scholarly, but which, nevertheless, allows them to begin to express themselves to develop their ideas. After all, opinion is likely to be the starting point of argument, of saying “This is what I believe is happening” before going on to explain why. To make the writing accessible and encourage debate, the points are collected onto one page and displayed via Powerpoint for class discussion where such explanatory justification follows on. Each posting is examined for key issues by reading them out and discussing with the class what apparently the focus is and why. The key issues are then listed on flipchart paper. These are identified as forming the basis of argument points that could be made, and of possible keywords for searching for relevant literature if going on to write on the subject. Interrelatedness with other issues is considered by using different colours to group argument points together. These groupings can be used to form sequential paragraphs that include the relevant argument point. Overlaps emerge from the class discussion in considering areas where points might not be confined to just one category and where these issues could be used as linking sentences between points, helping to develop logical flow.

Results

The students used their knowledge of effective healthcare practice to critique what they saw on the video and to write their responses. Some examples of the students’ initial responses are entered in a brief summarized form in box 1. As may be noted, for some of the overseas responses words were missing, or expression was different. But, by taking the plural view they were able to see other ways of constructing sentences for themselves, negating the need for a more paternalistic approach of correction. Although initially focusing on obvious main points emerging from the video, they began to move to questioning the use of emotive language that they felt

was trying to steer them in a certain direction, and to looking at some of the counterpoints that could be argued. Some of the key issues emerging from the nurses responses are similarly illustrated in Box 2. They commented on finding this 'real' as they could relate to the subject matter. While they discussed the emerging points they also began to relate them to each other unconsciously already grouping and thinking how to articulate this. Some of this grouping and overlapping is illustrated in box 3. When able to see all the examples of what they had done in terms of the initial responses, the drawing out of key issues and the categorizing, they were able to see how much material they actually had to work with, and how different stances were developing.

Discussion

Such a hybrid delivery promotes flexibility in taking account of the diversity of learners' needs and cultural backgrounds (Howatson-Jones, 2004), and encouraging participation through not allowing the few to dominate, thus equalising discussion (Morris, Buck-Rolland, and Gagne, 2002). In this way argument can start to build by drawing out the main points and considering how these might be manipulated in a text. At the same time, it not only develops academic skills, but also those needed for engaging with information technology and computers that are likely to help with sourcing information and evidence in the future.

Academic literacy research has begun to move away from narrowly focusing on cognitive skills acquisition (Haggis, 2003) to considering tutor and student understandings of academic writing within a wider context of course design and different circumstances that encompass dimensions offered by new technologies for hearing the student voice (Lea, 2004). The student entering Higher Education encounters discourses which may be alien to them, and feels particularly excluded if previous experiences appear of little value in this arena, leading to confusion (Ridley, 2004). Building dialogue opens up meaning-making to what counts as knowledge and convention (Lillis, 2003). By facilitating the students to use their experiences of and understandings of effective healthcare, they were able to build on practice knowledge to begin to meet academic conventions of developing an argument. For the student returning to study this is of prime importance to enable them to function in this new arena successfully.

Students find feedback methods particularly helpful especially if, as has been suggested by Holroyd (2000), meaning and significance are attached by individuals. But, such feelings may also potentially translate into perceptions of elitism that begin to build a sense of being 'other' in not meeting academic convention. Inclusion of writing to learn as an evolving work in progress is suggested by Dobie and Poirrier (2000) as a way of building abilities, independence and relevance. Increasing knowledge of academic discourses also enables making informed choices that might challenge convention to develop in new directions (Ridley, 2004). Experimental writing through the virtual medium helps to legitimate student cultural expression, whilst at the same time demonstrating potential alternatives to accepted norms.

Information technology can assist learning by not only helping to widen access, but also the flexibility of instructional methods through translating the role of the tutor as more facilitative of student discovery and the forming of own ideas (Hewitt-Taylor, 2003). Relevance is likely to be fostered if the student is exposed to diverse opportunities which include different media that are also encountered in healthcare practice. Technology, as is seen here, assists learning by promoting independence, accountability, and is adaptive to students needs (Sit, Chung, Chow and Wong, 2005). However, with some viewing technology as too impersonal, the potential for interaction and feedback are also vital components to engaging students. The argument that technology can deliver nurse education courses to a wider spectrum of nurses, is not unproblematic.

Nurses' experiences of on-line learning suggest the need to alter ways of thinking that may be challenging for both students and their facilitators (Kenny, 2002). Technology is perceived by some of the students as yet another hurdle to be overcome in trying to get to grips with learning, potentially creating a barrier instead of helping. Research into attitudes of students towards the use of information technology, while acknowledging that students prior experiences of using technology are variable, also finds that locus of control is a key factor in the generation of fear influencing positive or negative attitudes to technology (Wishart and Ward, 2002). Using information technology in learning without adequate support or pedagogical purpose is likely to confuse and potentially undermine student confidence which is why such support is

built into the course using this methodology. While information technology may be assistive in developing new learning processes, it should be remembered that it does not meet learning outcomes without the internalisation work of the student which still requires facilitation (Kirkwood and Price, 2005).

Conclusion

Academic literacy, as has been noted, is an alien concept to many nurses who are starting out on a study journey. Fear and perceptions of difference, are likely to get in the way unless ways can be found that enable practical engagement and the building of confidence, in seeing how personal compositions of writing are acknowledged and affirmed. Technology has the potential to open up new dimensions to learning that enable the student to visualise their contributions and constructions, and that of their peers. Such facilitation may be integrated into course design by incorporating student virtual written discussion work into class based instruction. By enabling students to express an opinion and then consider related and counter themes, they have been facilitated in a 'real' way to practically engage with the writing process with simultaneous instant feedback. This may help to limit the abstraction of written, or lecture guides, to study.

Keywords: Academic writing, academic development, academic literacy, information technology.

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