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Reflective blogs: Supporting students' learning experiences while on work placement

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Introduction

Reflective blogs can be an effective tool to help students critically evaluate their learning and professional skills development in a work placement setting. This practitioner report investigates reflective blogs as a usable and authentic assessment tool for students on work placement in a Business Computing discipline. A review of the benefits of reflective writing for students is included, such as improving critical thinking and writing skills, while encouraging development of graduate attributes and professional skills development. The report outlines the importance of preparatory work on developing reflective writing practices within the curriculum, before students commence their work placements.

The work placement module under discussion is a 30-credit module for students of a BSc in Business Computing. The objective of the work placement is to give students an in-depth exposure to a range of learning experiences in actual business settings. Currently students on work placement complete weekly logs following a predefined template, which does not fully encourage the students to reflect on their experiential learnings. These weekly logs are signed by work mentors and emailed weekly to the placement coordinator. These emails and weekly work logs are an unsustainable method of recording work placement experiences and the students are not learning from and reflecting on their experiences.

Reflective blogs encourage student integration between module learning outcomes, professional experience and independent learning. Reflective practice is a dialogue of thinking and doing that turns experiences into learning (Boud, Keogh & Walker, 1985). Participating in reflective blogs should help students articulate what they have learned and link it back to college theory, while also improving their personal and professional development. This report examines three questions:

1. Are work placement reflective blogs an authentic and usable assessment alternative to the currently used weekly logs?
2. Is reflective writing helpful to students in the development of graduate attributes and professional skills development?
3. Can work placement reflective blogs improve Business Computing students' critical thinking and academic writing skills?

In investigating these three questions, this report sets out to give guidelines to teachers in Higher Education for the effective implementation of reflective blogs in work placement settings. The report includes an infographic that visually summarises the recommended guidelines and resources that can be used in practice to support students in developing their reflective writing skills for work placement blogs.

Literature Review

Reflections are a personal response to an experience or event, which incorporates a phase of analysing the experience or event. “Key to reflection is the notion of standing back from experience to derive meaning with a view to informing future action” (Garnett, 2012, p.165). Students try to connect the new learning experience with what they have already learnt in the past. They then try to put together an action plan for future experiences or what they would do differently.

In an educational context, reflective writing has its roots in constructivism theory where learners construct knowledge and meaning from previous experiences. Constructivists highlight the importance of experiential learning or “hands-on” experiences, where active learning takes place in real-life situations, such as work placements. Constructivists argue that the process of reflective writing facilitates deep learning, because it makes connections between new “hands-on” experiences and learnt theory (Carlile & Jordan, 2007). Reflective writing practices also aligns with social constructivism theories of collaborative learning, especially if students are posting their reflections on social media platforms like a web blog.

Reflective Writing Frameworks

Although we reflect on our experiences in our everyday lives, like any academic writing, reflective writing is a skill that needs to be practiced and developed. It is a very iterative process. A number of reflective writing frameworks have been developed to support students with the reflective writing process (Schön, 1983; Gibbs, 1988; Rolfe, Freshwater & Jasper, 2001). Schön (1983) identifies two types of reflections: reflection-on-action (occurs after the event) and reflect-in-action (reflection while doing). In the later reflection, the action can still make a difference to the event. In both modes, the students connect their feelings with the theory that they have learnt in college. Gibbs’ (1988) reflective cycle constructs experiences into 6 phases. It starts with a description of the event and moves clockwise to feelings, evaluation, analysis, conclusion, action plan to return back to description (Figure 1).

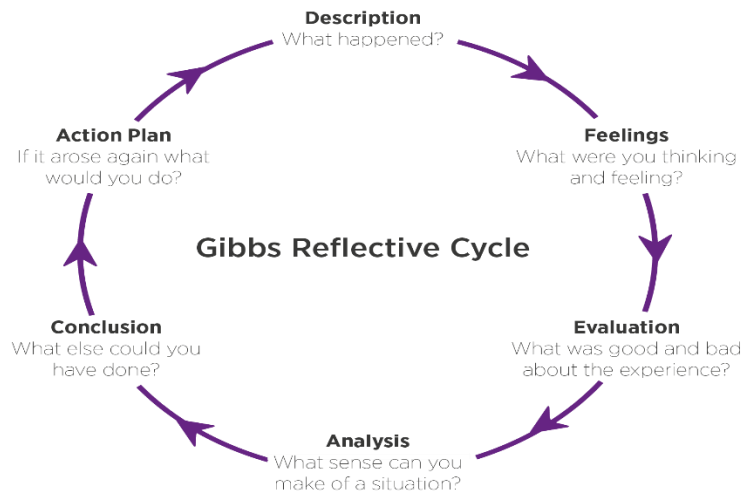


Figure 1: Gibbs Reflective cycle (Image from Plymouth Marjon University)

A more simplified model for reflection is proposed by Rolfe et al. (2001). This model breaks reflection down into three parts: “What?”, “So What?” and “Now What?” (Figure 2). Using this model, reflective writers start with the event or issue and why it is important. Following this they move onto the “So What?” phase, where they analyse the event often using references to theory from college. In the final phase (“Now What?”), the core reflection happens and the writer considers what the event means for them and for their future professional development. The work placement module under discussion incorporated this framework into its practice to help the students frame their reflective writing and to write more structured, critically reflective pieces.



Figure 2: Adapted from Rolfe et al.’s (2001) Reflective Framework

Reflective writing is an analytical practice that provides rich responses and experiences to events. It is a way for students to explore their thoughts and feelings on an event, while connecting it back to their college theory. However, the reflective writing process with no

guidance or practice can turn into unstructured, descriptive diaries (Hughes & Moore, 2007). Dunne and Ryan (2013) collated a handbook of 32 effective exercises to help students improve their reflective writing practices. Six of these exercises have been incorporated into the work placement module under discussion and are included in the report's "Reflective Practice Blog Tips" infographic. The six exercises are:

1. Explanation of what reflective writing is.
2. A series of activities to demonstrate the principles of reflection applied to a work placement experience.
3. Examples of 'good' and 'needs improvement' blogs.
4. Detailed assessment rubric to clarify to students the requirements of blog type assessments.
5. How to apply an assessment rubric to samples of reflective writing.
6. Examples of suitable vocabulary for reflective writing.

Incorporating these pre-work placement activities into practice will encourage students to develop their reflective writing skills and shift their reflective writing from descriptive pieces to deeper, more critically reflective writing pieces.

Question 1: Are work placement reflective blogs an authentic and usable assessment alternative to the currently used weekly logs?

An authentic assessment should closely reflect real world, professional tasks. Reflective writing is a popular authentic assessment practice as it encourages development of student's metacognition (Ashford-Rowe, Herrington & Brown, 2014). Smith (2014) points out that there are three classes of learning outcomes for work integrated learning curricula: experience of the work-world; the development or refinement of skills; and the application of disciplinary knowledge in work contexts. However, assessment of work placement outcomes is a contentious issue. Ferns and Zegwaard (2014) argue the need for balanced assessment that reflects, the highly variable and diverse experiences that each student encounters while on work placement. Therefore, assessment tools that are authentic and follow best practices are essential to capture these diverse experiences. The benefits of reflective blogs as an authentic and usable assessment practice is discussed using the Assessment OF, FOR and AS learning model.

There are three key purposes of assessment: Assessment OF, FOR and AS Learning. Assessment OF learning is normally summative, expressed in a grade and usually happens after the task. For example, "high-stakes" graded exams, essays or projects. Assessment FOR learning is normally formative and gives feedback on learning and teaching. It is normally "low-stakes" and includes activities like written and oral feedback. Assessment AS learning involves students critically assessing their own work or the work of peers. In a work placement setting, each of these assessment types may have different emphasis based on the time when they are completed

(i.e. pre-, during or post-work placement). In 2017, the National Forum (NF) for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education published a Forum Insight paper on assessing work placements. This report advises incorporating some of their recommendations into practice, summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: Work-Based Assessment OF/FOR/AS Learning:

	Pre-Work Placement	During Work Placement	Post Work Placement
Assessment OF learning	-CV Preparation. -Mock interview. -One blog entry before placement, where student reflects on their experience of securing a work placement.	-Regular reflective blogs via ePortfolio.	-Presentation by student to peers and academic staff on their learning and performance.
Assessment FOR learning	-Feedback from work placement co-ordinator on student CV, mock interview and reflective blog. -CV and interview workshop with career services. -Reflective writing workshop with input from the TU Dublin academic writing centre.	-Placement visit by work placement co-ordinator.	-Completed student evaluation form and questionnaire by employer.
Assessment AS learning	-Students use a CV rubric to assess their own CV and a peer CV. -Students use a reflective blog rubric to assess their first blog.	- Regular reflective blogs via ePortfolio (reflection and evidence).	-Reviewing reflective blogs feedback via ePortfolio.

As highlighted in Table 1, the work placement reflective blogs via ePortfolio should be the key assessment tool used in the student work placement. According to Boud (2010, p.151) these assessment methods need to have a “Sustainable assessment that encompasses the knowledge, skills and predispositions required to support lifelong learning activities.” The challenges of effective assessment methods are increased in a work-placement where outcomes are unpredictable, variable, and socially constructed (Garnett, 2012). By following the

recommendations of the National Forum and by using the Assessment OF, FOR and AS learning model, we are ensuring that our assessment methods are authentic, sustainable and usable.

Question 2: Is reflective writing helpful to students in the development of graduate attributes and professional skills development?

Employers expect graduates to be able to demonstrate not only discipline knowledge, but also knowledge and skills that are valued by the employer such as graduate attributes. In TU Dublin, graduate attributes are an agreed set of five key attributes – enterprising, engaged, enquiry-based, expert and effective. These five key attributes are measurable and assessable. Oliver and Jorre de St. Jorre (2018) broaden out graduate attributes further to be attributes that increase student employability, global citizenship, teamwork and communication. As Higher Education teachers, we need to prepare our graduates for employability, but also help them to become more engaged, social citizens. Work-integrated learning such as work placement modules help students be engaged, global citizens, while also helping them to contextualise graduate attributes into professional skills.

Work placement interviewers expect students to be able to articulate their transferable skills from their college discipline and their personal experiences and be able to apply them into a workplace setting. Reflective writing should help students frame these conversations using graduate attributes. A study carried out by Julie Dunne (2017) investigated the effects of emphasising graduate attributes within a curriculum on student pharmacy technician work-placement reflective assessments. The study found an increase in reflection associated with graduate attributes in the research group compared to the control group. Activities that emphasised graduate attributes within a curriculum in advance of entering an internship, helped students frame their work-placement experiences in their reflective assessments. Therefore, emphasising graduate attributes within the curriculum can not only help students articulate their transferable and professional skills in interviews, but also help them frame their reflective blogs during work placement.

Question 3: Can work placement reflective blogs improve Business Computing students' critical thinking and academic writing skills?

Critical thinking and academic writing skills are essential to professional development. Writing in third level computing disciplines is typically writing to communicate to a professional audience also known as “writing in the discipline (WID).” (Hoffman, Dansill & Herscovici, 2006, p.117). Unfortunately in some computing disciplines, the importance of getting the opportunity to “write to learn (WTL)” for active learning is often not recognised or emphasized in the curriculum. WTL is viewed as a tool that is more suited to the humanities, rather than to computer programming disciplines. This report proposes that using reflective work placement

blogs can help Business Computing students bridge this gap between “Writing in the discipline” and “Writing to learn”.

Reflective writing in work placement as a “Writing to Learn” practice has benefits for active learning, problem solving and development of critical writing and thinking (Moon, 1999). However, there are a number of barriers to reflective writing for students such as lack of sufficient time for reflection during work placement (Otienoh, 2009) and lack of understanding of what reflective writing is (Moon, 2007). Therefore, the importance of supporting the reflective writing process both pre-, during and post-work placement is critical. In the module under question we have incorporated this into our practice using the Work-Based Assessment OF/FOR/AS learning model as outlined in table 1.

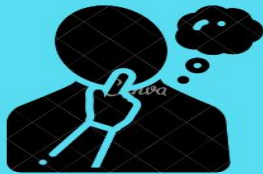
Recommendations

This report recommends introducing reflective writing practices early into the curriculum. This can be achieved by implementing reflective writing exercises with the student in a number of pre-work placement workshops. These workshops should provide an explanation of what reflective writing is, supply an assessment rubric for reflective blogs and provide examples of ‘good’ and ‘needs improvement’ reflective blogs. Giving students a framework to follow for these blogs, for example, Rolfe et al.’s (2001) model, provides scaffolding for the students to structure their reflections and prevent their reflections from turning into descriptive diaries. By introducing reflective writing exercises early into the module students will get the opportunity to develop their reflective writing practice before they begin their work placement.

Secondly, emphasising graduate attributes within the curriculum can help students articulate their transferable, professional skills both in interviews and with framing their reflective blogs. Finally, following an assessment framework like the Assessment OF, FOR and AS learning can ensure a usable and authentic assessment of the work placement experience occurs while empowering students in the assessment process. This report recommends engaging with an academic writing centre within your University as this can be an extremely useful resource for helping students with the reflective writing process and developing their writing skills especially in disciplines like Business Computing where “write to learn (WTL)” activities are often not recognised. These recommendations have been summarised in the below “Reflective Practice Blog Tips” infographic.

Reflective Writing Practice Blog Tips

HERE ARE 6 WAYS TO IMPROVE STUDENTS REFLECTIVE WRITING SKILLS
PRE-WORK PLACEMENT



1.) GIVE AN EXPLANATION OF WHAT REFLECTIVE WRITING IS AND ITS BENEFITS

2.) FOLLOW A FRAMEWORK MODEL

- What? So What? Now What? (Rolfe et. al. 2001)

What?

- What was the event?
- Descriptive level of reflection.

So What?

- Analyse the event.
- Theory & knowledge building.

Now What?

- What did you learn or what would you do differently?
- Action-oriented level of reflection.



3.) GIVE STUDENTS A DETAILED ASSESSMENT RUBRIC OF REFLECTIVE WRITING

Include a breakdown of marks awarded for all parts of the blog assessment.

4.) USE GRADUATE ATTRIBUTES TO HELP STUDENTS FRAME THEIR REFLECTIVE WRITING



5.) GIVE EXAMPLES OF 'GOOD' AND 'NEEDS IMPROVEMENT' BLOGS

Use reflective writing exercises pre-work placement to do this. Engage with your academic writing centre for assistance.

6.) ASSESS REFLECTIVE PRACTICE USING ASSESSMENT OF, FOR AND AS LEARNING MODEL

	Pre-Work Placement	During Work Placement	Post-Work Placement
Assessment OF learning	CV preparation Mock interview	Regular reflective blogs	Presentation by students
Assessment FOR learning	CV & interview workshop Reflective writing workshop	Placement visits	Employer students evaluation form
Assessment AS learning	CV rubric Reflective blog rubric	Regular reflective blogs	Reviewing reflective blogs feedback via ePortfolio

Conclusion

The aim of this practitioner report was to investigate reflective blogs as an effective assessment practice for supporting students on work placement in a Business Computing discipline. This review of the current literature highlights that reflective blogs help students explore links between their theoretical knowledge and their experiences in the workplace. When integrated early into the curriculum and guided by best practices, reflective writing is a powerful and authentic assessment tool to help students articulate their diverse work placement experiences. The importance of supporting the reflective writing process both pre-, during and post-work placement is critical. In addition, using graduate attributes can help students frame their work experience learnings and their acquired professional skills into a reflective blog. This will help students to clearly articulate their employability and professional skills for future work related opportunities.

In the first iteration of this project, access to the reflective blogs was between the student and the work placement coordinator only in the TU Dublin VLE (BrightSpace). In the next iteration, it is hoped to expand this out to capturing the placement reflections through ePortfolios in the VLE and use it as a peer, collaboration space. This will give an opportunity for students to start to build up an academic ePortfolio of their college experiences. When students return in final year, they can also incorporate their final year project into this academic ePortfolio. As a follow-up study, an investigation into the exact impact reflective writing in work placement practices has on the students' academic writing skills and their critical thinking would be recommended to be explored.

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