

Blogging Student Essays

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Type of Assessment

Formative

Keywords

Peer review, formative essays, blogs, academic integrity, informatics

Additional Resources

The class blog can be found at: <http://blog.inf.ed.ac.uk/sapm/>

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Description/ What was done?

In addition to writing two essays the students were also asked to write a response essay. The response essay was intended to be a response to one of their fellow students' essays. I find that reading other peoples' essays is a very good way to learn what does and does not work well. Hence the response essay was an attempt to force the students into reading at least some of their fellow students' essays.

Motivation and aims

One simple motivation was that students write essays and it seems a shame if I am the only one who ever reads what they have written. One point that I try to teach is that the effort spent in making an article readable is hopefully re-paid by the time saved by *many* readers. This is of course entirely lost if I am the only person ever to read their essay.

A further point that I try to teach them is regarding scope. Their essays are typically far too broad in scope. My hope in having them post to a blog was to show that the broad nature of their scope meant that they are not contributing much to the wider discussion. A post with a large scope is making a point that has been made before. A much narrower scope is contributing *towards* a point that has been made before.

In addition, many of the students feel that the point of the essay is to "demonstrate what they know" which is entirely **not** what I am hoping to teach them. The point is that being right and convincing others that you are right are two different things and usually one is not much use without the other. Having them submit essays to me emphasises too much the "demonstrate what you know" and I hope the wider audience places more emphasis on the "convince the reader".

Successes and lessons learnt

I think in general the students did enjoy posting to the blog rather than handing an essay in to one reader. Somehow the time spent writing their essay is a little more worthwhile. But I do not have much data to back up this claim.

I did try rewarding the students for the discussion generated by their essays in comments section and also for contributing to the discussion in other essays. I basically found this did not work terribly well. Students seem to regard this as a chore, rather than more of a group activity. The second year in which there were no marks for comments still actually had a number of comments on some of the more popular posts. Arguably the discussion was more interesting as well.

I believe that plagiarism is also further discouraged by this approach. Since it is much more likely that someone *other than me* notices plagiarism and reports it, hence it seems like a bigger risk to plagiarise and post to a blog than to plagiarise and submit to one marker. Again though I'm not sure I have much data to back this up.

In their response articles I emphasised that they should respond to the point being made, not to the manner in which it was made. Unfortunately having received the feedback I gave them to their first essay, many students noticed the same kinds of flaws in the other students' essays. But that was not supposed to be the point. However, if I were running this again, I might very well deliberately ask the students to 'grade' each others' essays on the quality of the argument.

Scalability and transferability

This practice is as scalable as marking a set of essays given only to the marker. It only involves setting up the blog in the first place and without that you need some mechanism for the students to submit their essays.

Further information

The class blog can be found at: <http://blog.inf.ed.ac.uk/sapm/>

A couple of quotes from the course survey:

"Great course, the lecturer introduced a new style of homework (blog posts), which was awesome"

"Coursework was an awesome idea, really encouraged lots of reading on topics that you may not have read about but students had written"

and the negative:

"the lectures/readings have great content, but I disapproved of the coursework"