Using blogs as student learning journals

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Brendan Parke (Level 3) busking with friends from the Stranmillis Folk Society

The Module

The module Local Musicking is a new module that ran for the first time in semester 2 of 2012/13. It is a research-led module that explores local, amateur, community music-making through a series of cross-cultural case studies (church and community choirs, brass bands, youth garage bands, drum circles and percussion ensembles among others). There are versions of the module available to students at Stages 2 and 3.

The course is organised into a series of weekly topics in which theoretical discussions are complemented by practical experiences of community musicking and the documentation of local musical ensembles. Each week, there is a focus on a particular theme, for example, 'Musical Communities of Practice (Community Choirs)' and students are expected to complete the recommended readings on the theme and attend two lectures before completing a Learning Journal exercise on the blog. In tandem with this, students should also join a community performance ensemble for the duration of the module and keep weekly field notes relating to the activities of the group on the blog.

There is no summative test on the module and assessment is based on a record of student learning and reflection maintained as a blog. As the diagram indicates, there are two main strands to the assessment structure. One examines understanding of the theoretical discussions in the set readings and the other a practical understanding of how musical performance can contribute to the development of ethnomusicological thinking.

For example, after attending weekly lectures and reading the recommended texts, each student writes a short 300-500 word essay on the theme or issue of the week. Based on my comments, students are encouraged to revise their entries prior to the final assessment. This process is repeated each week with 40% of the available module marks allocated for the collection of 11 student pieces.

For the practical assessment strand, students are expected to keep weekly field notes of their experiences in a community performance group, for which 10% of module marks is available, and complete a 1500 word extended report close to the end of semester for 30% of module marks. A 1000 word book review worth 20% is also required to be submitted around the mid-point of the semester.

ICT Element

The embedding of ICT to the module was borne out of a necessity to provide visibility of student work in a manner which allowed me to monitor individual progress and provide continuous feedback. In previous modules with Learning Journals I had found that, while this mode of assessment is a valuable means of encouraging students to keep up with the reading and monitor their own learning, the provision of continuous feedback can be problematic, particularly in modules with large enrolments, given the number of documents involved.

I decided to incorporate the use of 'blogs' to help address some of these problems. Blogs or 'web-logs'

Assessment Structure
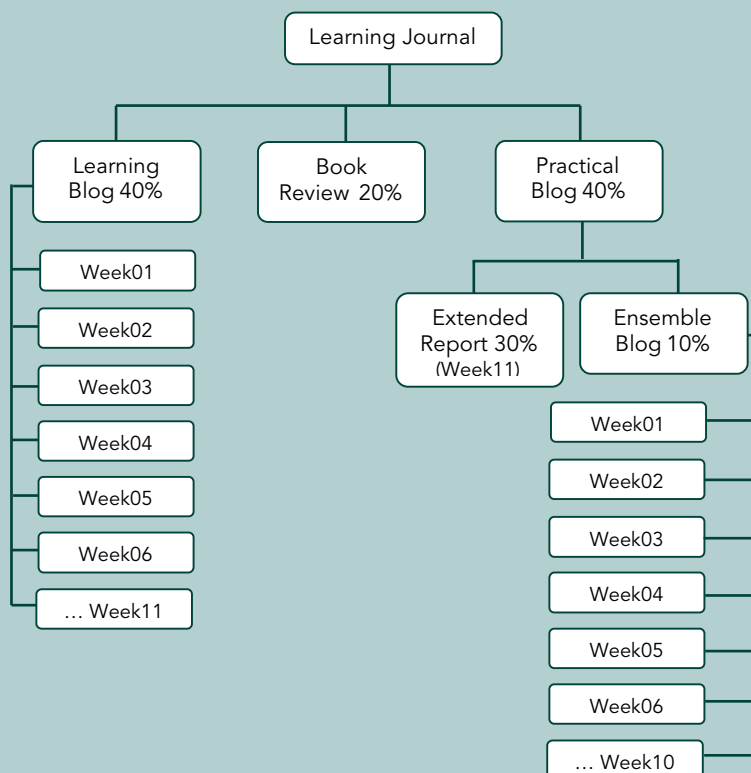
are online journals where an author can publish a series of editable entries incorporating text, graphics and other digital media on which a reader can comment. The use of a blog to host student Learning Journals has a number of advantages in this context. It acts as a central repository for student submissions which is easily accessible by both student and lecturer. The lecturer can access the blogs regularly and keep track of student engagement with the module. As comments are linked to each submission, it is easy to observe how they are being acted upon.

Incentives to Innovate

The main reason for experimenting with blogs was that it seemed to be an effective means for the presentation of Learning Journals, but it could also provide a platform for keeping 'field notes', a central methodology in ethnomusicological research. Alongside research training, blogging contributes to the development of a valuable transferable skill in a world in which the internet is part of everyday life.

Support

One of the main developments in the University which has made this mode of learning and assessment possible has been the creation of blogs.qub. ac.uk, which uses the WordPress template. The technical support team at Information Services creates the sites for each student. The lecturer can be made a co-administrator for the site with each student so that it can be set up in accordance with the needs of the module. In this case it involved preparing a page for the Learning Blog, the Book Report, the Ensemble Blog and the Ensemble Report, all placed under password protection so they could only be viewed by the student, myself and the examiners.

Evaluation

Initial evaluations were very positive (4.1) and the module finished with 12 students in a cohort of 32 performing in the First Class boundary classification. One factor contributing to this was that students were required to work steadily over the course of the semester by writing something every week. The advantages of this were clear to many of the students, as demonstrated by comments they made in their module evaluation forms when asked to identify elements of 'good practice':

 "Spreading the workload across the semester rather than lumping it all together into one piece of work or exam."

"Use of Learning Journal helps avoid accumulating material to cover later in the semester."

"A chance to improve your work through on-line technique."

"Emphasis on week to week assignment; gradual workload; good breakdown of module requirements."

"The module was interesting and I really liked the way it was assessed."

"Good assessment – better than having an exam."

But one student had this to say: "I didn't like the system of examination. I would have preferred a more topical essay and exam style module."

Benefits

There are a number of obvious benefits to the system including:

All student work is stored in the one place, making it easier to track the process of learning. Added to this is that every interaction with the work including the original submission, the lecturer's feedback and student response to feedback is stored and date stamped. This helps students to see the continuity and progress in their work over the course of the semester and also allows them the opportunity to include other media with their submissions via embedded clips from YouTube or other Internet sites. The system also helps to reduce the amount of administrative work involved in collecting and stamping student submissions.

Effects of Embedding Blogs

I found that I got to know individual students right from the onset of the semester. Many of them chose to follow local musical ensembles with which they had some prior familiarity, so their blogs revealed aspects of their musical lives. As the semester progressed I could draw on this information to provide examples in lectures and also turn to specific students to further elaborate the point in relation to their experiences. This created a dynamic class environment, despite the size of the group. Indeed, this too received comment in many student module evaluations.

The shift to blog sites allowed for the construction of a module structured around the underlying theoretical model underpinning the module itself: the theory of 'communities of practice', which is premised on the notion that learning takes place

Belfast Community Gospel Choir

through practice. By asking students to produce two entries each week – the first calling for explications of course readings and the second that links these readings and lecture material to experiences with local musicians – students gained a fuller understanding of how ethnomusicological knowledge is generated, but they also acquired a more critical gaze upon their everyday musical activities.

Alongside the discipline-specific developments, the students gained confidence in the use of ICT, encouraging them to explore other fields. For instance, some students created elaborate personal profiles on their sites.

Looking Forward

Blogs are very versatile platforms that accommodate a range of different uses in teaching and learning. The weekly journal model used in this module is only one possible alternative. Given that the way it was used allowed students to revise their entries, the assessment process for the lecturer can be very labour-intensive. It may, therefore, be more appropriate for modules with more a manageable enrolment. Level 3 students were more able to cope with the blog structure than Level 2 students. They found it difficult to keep up with both a Learning Journal and Field Notes. Should the module be offered to both Levels again, Level 2 students will be instructed to conclude each entry of their Learning Journal with a paragraph indicating how the issues in the reading might be related to their observations of their ensemble.

Anyone interested in looking at some of the student blogs, contact Suzel A Reily (**s.reily@qub.ac.uk**).