

# USING ONLINE JOURNALS AS A TOOL FOR LEARNING

**Humanities Teaching and Learning Showcase**  
**10<sup>th</sup> January 2012**

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# Introduction

- ❖ **Focus:** our ongoing monitoring of the use of reflection in our u/g and p/g students' learning processes [reflection as currently being mediated by Bb9's journalling tool]
- ❖ **Question:** are these unassessed student reflection processes at u/g and p/g levels working effectively given the kinds of reflection involved and the ways in which we structure these reflections?

# BA Language, Literacy and Communication (u/g)

Two pre-existing journal tasks employing BB9 journal tool for the first time in 2011-12:

1. Group processes (10 credits)

- ▣ Weeks 1-6, Year 1, Semester 1
- ▣ Assessment includes individual journal task with two group tasks – poster and presentation

2. Research project research journal (10 credits)

- ▣ Mainly S2, Year 2
- ▣ One of a suite of three units and associated assessed tasks (research proposal and report)

## Group processes (u/g)

During the course (wks 1-6) students invited to post (unassessed) journal entries on BB:

*‘Throughout the course you will maintain an on-line journal. After classes, group meetings and on-line interactions, use the Blackboard journal tool in the Group Processes unit to record what happened (what you were trying to achieve, how the group behaved/interacted, what the outcomes of the meeting were etc)’*

# Group processes (u/g)

Students sent reminder emails via BB after sessions, (with links to topic area?), and the instructions replicated in announcements and weekly folders within BB9 unit content

Students are encouraged to

- make their entries as rich as possible to give them material to work with in writing their assessed commentaries
- Return to their journal entries and annotate as they learn more about the theory of group processes

# Group processes (u/g)

After the course, students prepare an (assessed) reflective commentary:

*‘Read your journal entries, preferably several times. Identify examples of how group theory applies or does not seem to fit with your group experience. Find a suitable way of structuring your commentary (eg using one or two recurring themes such as leadership, group norms, group roles, conflict etc; or through analysing key events; or through examining the evolution of the group over time; or through taking different perspectives on the same event). Your commentary must draw on your journal entries and academic literature, be fully referenced ....’*

# Group processes (u/g)

BB9 offered practical benefits for this unit

- ▣ Belt and braces – easy to repeat important information for students in emails, announcements, weekly content folders
- ▣ Possible to embed a direct link to the journal within announcements
- ▣ Can monitor who is/isn't uploading entries

# Group processes (u/g)

## Questions/tensions remain:

- ❑ Students find the commentary task difficult – is the course too short/early in the programme for adequate reflection?
- ❑ If students don't invest effort in the journal entries, their commentaries will also tend to be weak
- ❑ Produced *guidelines* about no./length of entries for 2011/12 as support but can be interpreted as requirements
- ❑ Would assessing journal entries have positive washback effect? Is it appropriate?

# Research project journal (u/g)

(Unassessed) research journal entries:

*'As a guide, final journal entries will probably include:*

- *A date*
- *A sentence to provide context (what event/activity are you writing about?)*
- *A detailed factual description of what happened and how it affected your thoughts and/or feelings*
- *Interpretation and analysis (What do I now know that I didn't know before (i) about this aspect of research practice and/or (ii) yourself and your strengths and limitations in this area?)*
- *How can I apply this new insight in concrete ways in future research, study or professional contexts?'*

# Research project journal (u/g)

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(Assessed) Reflective commentary:

Guidance given about possible foci, structuring the commentary, use of evidence and sources (if relevant).

# Research project journal (u/g)

Outcomes as yet unknown, but functional benefits and dilemmas exist as for Group Processes unit

In addition, research project journal:

- ✓ BB9 may facilitate standardisation of marking/ feedback across team of examiners
- ✗ BB9 restricts adoption of alternative formats (handwritten entries, scrapbooks)
- ✗ Some students (and some examiners) remain to be convinced of the value of this type of reflective work

# Developing Researcher Competence (p/g)

- ❖ **Reflective-practitioner programme orientation**
    - ❖ participant reflection on their existing praxis in light of the theorising of practice enabled through MA study
  - ❖ **Reflective** (and reflexive) **course unit orientation**
    - ❖ explicit, course-embedded use of ongoing participant reflection on an initial research(er) experience
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- ❖ explicit, assignment-linked post-experience participant reflection on their DRC learning

# Curriculum Design and Reflection

- ❖ Reflection is embedded in the course unit ...
- ❖ ... supporting participants as they develop their researcher competence through a Pilot Study
- ❖ Reflection takes place during the experience of “doing” research [ i.e. reflection is linked to experiential learning/EBL ; reflection as a means of monitoring the process and progress of their pilot study]
- ❖ Further reflection takes place after the experience [as a means of identifying researcher competence insights]

# Participants' understanding of the course rationale for reflection

- ❖ *“The RJ has been very useful in reflecting on my professional development during the module. I feel I have a greater understanding of educational research and how it relates to me and my context.”*
- ❖ *“... my process has been a bit disorganized and there have been contingencies etc. throughout, so it's useful to be able to look back at how I originally thought I would tackle a particular stage (and usually chuckle).”*

# How participants gained from reflection

- ❖ *“The idea of having these journal entry formats has sparked a great deal of reflection from beginning to end. I tried to post after every step and now I see how useful this task will be for my assignment.”*
- ❖ *“I think it definitely helped me to get my head clear so as to what was expected of me during this research process.”*
- ❖ *“I believe I will refer to the RJ when I write up my assignment and particularly to jog my memory about what I thought at the time and what problems I encountered.”*

# How participants undertook reflection

- ❖ *“I found the prompts really helpful as well. I think they were straight to the point and really thought provoking. I like to be guided, so for me they were really useful to know what was expected of me and to notice the process I was keeping.”*
- ❖ *“The prompts seemed a little tangential at times, which is why I think I tended to write what I wanted and then try and use the prompts for structure afterwards.”*
- ❖ *“I've used the online journal and made lots of entries, although just a small proportion of those are specifically related to the Steps. I decided I wanted to keep everything in the same place, so made entries on articles I read, thoughts I had, in fact anything that occurred to me that was vaguely DRC related.”*

# Participants' responses to journalling in Bb9

- ❖ *“Practically I find it easier to write on Word than on BB9, I can just cut and paste.”*
- ❖ *“I like the way it is organized by dates and I can look back and find things easily using the titles I have chosen.”*
- ❖ *“I had problems printing out some parts of the RJ and I would have liked to make handwritten notes on it.”*
- ❖ *“... my only concern is there is no editing and no spell checker on RJ. If these two features were added, I would be more than happy to use it will all my input.”*

# QUESTIONS

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Language Teacher Education Blog

<http://edtechandtesol.info/phd/>

Doing Research Multilingually

<http://researchingmultilingually.com/>

School of Education PGR

<https://pgrschoolofeducation.wordpress.com/>



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