

Using the Online Learning Diary Approach with International Distance Learners

Talking About... Learning and Teaching: Technology for Instruction Case Study 003

University of Birmingham

Programme of Study:
International MScs in DL

Modules: Critical Approaches to Development (CAD); and Leadership and Development Management (LDM)

Discipline: International Development

Start Date: 2006

Students: between 25 and 35 students for each module

Type: Distance

Technology: Discussion boards on WebCT

Approach: eLearning,

Learning Hours: 10-15 hours per week including reading time

Duration of Activity: throughout the course of each module

Indicative Moderation / Facilitation Hours: tutors expected to read and comment on at least the first diary entry for each student

Assessment Link: Final learning diary submitted as 50% of the module mark.

Rationale

For students undertaking a postgraduate programme they need to develop their critical writing skills. Learning diaries are a way to do this.

Practice

At the beginning of the module, students are told that the learning diary will form a large part (50%) of their summative assessment. They are expected to make one entry per week for the first five weeks out of the six week module. This entry is based on a reading of their choice from the course material and is a short reflection of what they have got out of their chosen reading, what they learned that was new to them; and how the reading related to the content of this or the previous week.

Students upload their diary entries into the journal topic which has been created in the discussion board area of WebCT. Their entries are only visible to the student and the tutor – who can then give feedback. The tutor would only expect to post comments on the first entry for each student, unless the student was in need of more guidance.

The screenshot displays a WebCT interface for a Learning Diary. On the left, a table lists student entries:

Name	Number of Entries (New)
My Journal	4
Peter Griffin	2 (2)
Glenn Quagmire	1
Danielle Hinton	2
Demo Student	5
Geraint Evans	1
Cleveland Brown	2
Danielle Hinton	2 (2)

The main area shows the details for 'Glenn Quagmire's Journal'. It includes a 'Description (click to expand)' section with the following content:

Select All Deselect All Sort by: **Date**

Subject: Module 1 Date: 11 June 2011 12:49 PM

It's a wonder that I got to this point!

Comments Forward Lock Message

(1 Comments)

At the bottom, there are links for 'Create Printable View' and 'Delete'.

E-Learning Advantage

The learning diary encourages the student to take time to reflect and take notes as they read – which gives them something to draw on for their later summative assessments. It also gives them practice in writing critically. Using the learning diary tool on WebCT keeps everything in one place and makes it more accessible.

Key Points for Effective Practice and Barriers

Linking the learning diary to summative assessment gives students the incentive they need to engage in this form of reflective learning, particularly if they know that they will get feedback from tutors, which will help them to hone the diary for the final submission. If students have not encountered this form of assessment previously, they might be feeling really nervous about undertaking it, so keeping it private by only allowing tutors to see individual entries is essential – apart from the aspect of avoiding copying of ideas. There are arguments for and against setting word limits on LDs (keeping diaries manageable lengths as against stifling creativity) but it is advisable to give an overall word limit for the submitted diary.

Conclusion

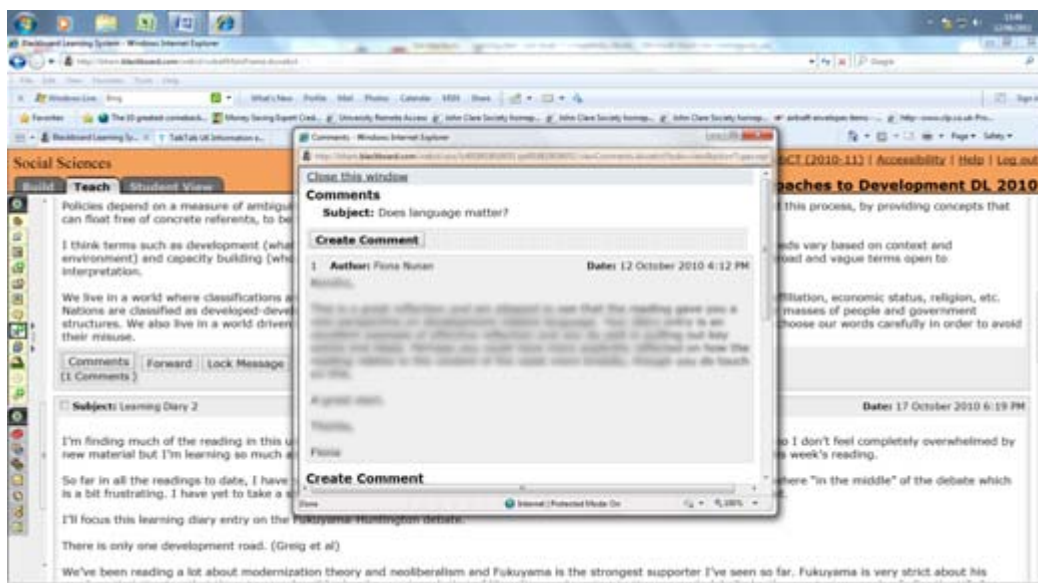
Learning diaries are a good way to encourage student reflection but there has to be sufficient guidance, given that some students will not have encountered this mode of learning previously.

Showcase: Learning Diaries

This module is the first one which students take on the MSc in Poverty Reduction and Development Management (and the new pathway programmes being introduced in September 2011). It is therefore the theory module.

The majority of students coming onto these distance learning programmes will not have studied for some time and may be uncertain about writing at Masters level. There is therefore some emphasis during this module on honing critical writing skills.

They are asked to keep a learning diary for each of the first five weeks of the six week module. A space is provided on WebCT by setting up a journal topic in the discussions tool on WebCT. Entries can only be viewed by the student and the tutors. The tutors are asked to comment on at least the first entry.



The learning diary is a record of a critical reflection on one reading of the student's choice per week. It reflects on what they have got out of their chosen reading, what they have learned that is new to them, and how the reading relates to the content of the week (and previous weeks if appropriate).

The diary can be formal or informal. It is done in arrears at the end of each unit. There is no maximum word limit but no less than one A4 page is expected. Students are encouraged to be creative – including cartoons, related newspaper articles, drawings, web links, etc. Students are reminded that these creative items do not contribute towards the minimum A4 page and that creativity will not make up for poor content.

Programme of Study:
Distance

Module: Critical Approaches to Development (DL)

Discipline: International Development

Start Date for use of learning diaries: 2008

Students: around 30 – 35 p.a.

Type: Distance

Technology: WebCT

Approach: Reflection

Learning environment: Learning diary blog on WebCT

Design Team: Dr Tom Hewitt (module convenor) and Dr Fiona Nunan (co-tutor); and Linda Curry (e-learning manager)

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