

Keeping Warm

A case study

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Background and Context

The Keeping Warm Case Study took place at Leicester College¹ with a group of twenty one Foundation Degree Photography and Video Learners. These learners attend a full time course across thirty weeks in a year, with a total of fifteen and half hours class contact per week. Prior to the project one learner kept a blog.

The two Programme Leaders (PLs) for this course felt anxious about the retention of learners during the long summer break of three months. The PLs contemplated giving the learners a “Summer Research Project” with no summative assessment. The PLs wanted the learners to approach this formative activity in an alternative way to a word processed document, using Web 2.0 technology to show that the research was carried throughout the duration of the summer break and not simply a word processed document produced on the penultimate day. It was felt that by using the College’s new e-Portfolio tool, Mahara, learners could Blog throughout the break. In collaboration with the e-Learning Coordinator, it was agreed that the learners should also receive a theory lesson on Reflective Practice, giving the learners the opportunity to learn about reflective thinking with a view to improving their writing skills.

The word “retention” refers to the process of keeping a learner for the duration of their course and does not relate to achievement of their end qualification. Retention rates are an aspect of the Office of Standards in Education’s (Ofsted’s) Learning and Skills remit with common inspection strengths being *“High Retention rates on all course”*, *“Good and improving retention rates”* and *“Effective range of strategies to*

¹ The College with a student population of over 26,000 has three main campuses across Leicester City Centre including the newly built Abbey Park Campus and the extensively refurbished Freeman’s Park and St Margaret’s Campuses,

improve retention". (Learning and Skills Improvement Service (LSIS), 2010) By initiating this Case Study it was hoped that the learners would "Keep Warm" throughout the summer break and return for their second year.

Intended outcomes

The Aim of the "Keeping Warm" project was to keep learners interest in their subject over the summer break through the process of reflective thinking and creation of a blog.

The objectives of the Case Study were for learners to:

- Understand the importance of formative assessment activities to deepen their learning
- To gain an understanding of the theory associated with reflective thinking
- To be able to write in a reflective style
- To be able to create a blog in Mahara
- To be able to share a profile and blog with a wider audience

To achieve these objectives, two sessions of one and half hours were delivered to the learners:

The first session introduced the learners to the process of thinking and writing in a reflective style. Learners were given an insight into the history of

reflective practice including the work of Dewey (1952), Schon (1983), Kolb (1984) and Gibbs (1988). (Appendix A: Writing in a “Reflective” style lesson handout).

The second session was a practical lesson on the use of Mahara. Learners were asked to upload their profile, create a blog, form a group, invite friends to join, and to create a “View” where the learners chose who they want to share their information with. As part of this lesson, learners were made aware of the differences between the College’s curriculum and tutor driven Moodle Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) and an e-Portfolio, a tool that they could use and take with them to their post course destination. (Appendix B: Supporting handouts from Mahara practical session).

The Technology

Mahara is an open source, e-portfolio tool often used alongside a Moodle VLE. This is a relatively new system in Leicester College which was installed on a test server in April 2009. The expectation was that Mahara would be installed on its own server – a process that was dependant on the ‘virtualisation’ project within the institution and the subsequent release of a server. Unfortunately Mahara is still on a test server and it was not possible to roll out Mahara to the Higher Education Lifelong Learning Opportunities (HELLO) Project learners, of which the “Keeping Warm” learners are part of, until January 2010, making the “Keeping Warm” learners some of the first in

the whole of the institution to use Mahara. The learners were told that their feedback and the findings were integral to the development of Mahara and the use of it with future learners.

A number of social elements have been created on the Moodle VLE sites including: chat rooms; discussion forums; and, messaging. However, it was anticipated that the learners themselves would drive the development of these Mahara communities – a space on where they could form their own groups and invite their friends to join. These could be curriculum based or related to individual interests such as social groups or hobbies.

All HELLO Project learners were initially invited to participate in the Mahara community by means of messages sent out on Course Common Room pages and on the Higher Education (HE) Student Community Site with links to the Mahara site. These messages included instructions on how to sign in and additional resources. Unfortunately, only one learner accessed it and then expressed disappointment that it had not been populated with activity. Alternative methods of populating Mahara with activity and engaging learners with the software were considered, the “Keeping Warm” project seemed a good opportunity to achieve this.

The Research

Research was carried out in two forms, observation of activity on the Mahara site, on the basis that the learners had chosen to include the e-Learning Coordinator, who was carrying out the analysis, as their online “friend”.

A focus group session was run after the learners had returned for the start of their 2nd year. Learners were asked questions about the “Keeping Warm” project using the process of Gibb’s (1988) Reflective Cycle. Working through the six stages of this process encouraged the learners to think critically about the experience as well as considering what improvements could be made in the future from the sixth Action Planning stage. This differs from Kolb’s (1984) four stage model which finishes with Active Experimentation, trying out what you have learned. This was an opportunity to revisit and review the teaching that had occurred at the start of the project.

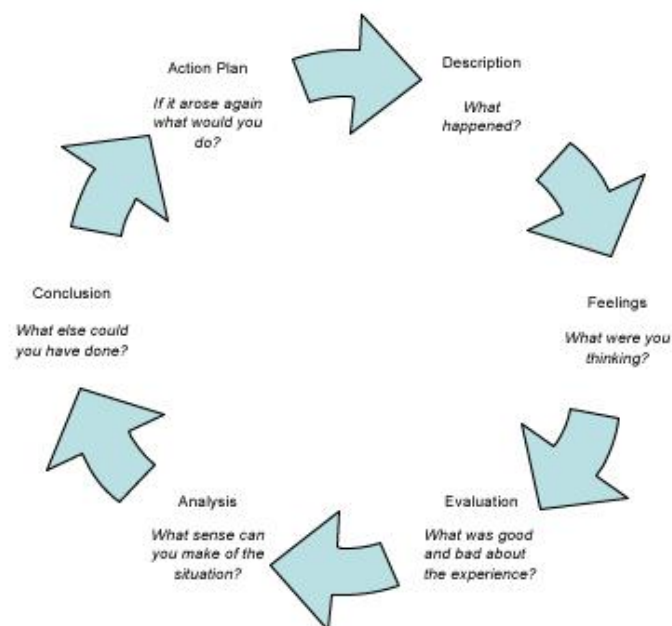


Figure 1: Gibbs (1988) Reflective Cycle

Findings

Description	
<i>Inactive</i>	10 learners did not engage although 3 continued to do the work in their “normal” manner. Learners commented that it did not help them with their work or learning highlighting need to encourage engagement with formative assessment and recognise value.
<i>Proactive</i>	7 learners engaged with the Blogging activity. 1 learner tried to blog but found difficult to “sum up events” highlighting need for further development of reflective practice skills
<i>White flaggers</i>	2 learners where “white flaggers ² ”, and did not attempt the activity at all

Feelings	
<i>Positive</i>	5 learners had positive feelings towards the activities, with one learner saying “ <i>After the first two sessions, I felt I could be more descriptive with my writing</i> ”.
<i>Mixed</i>	5 learners had mixed feelings about the activities. 1 learner in particular commented that “ <i>I didn’t see any different from the way I would usually write, so I carried on as I usually would. I thought reflective writing was instinct in blogging anyway</i> ”
<i>Negative</i>	7 learners had negative feelings towards the activities. This ranged from learners who did not see the “ <i>necessity</i> ” of the activity to learners who just carried on with their own Blogging and reflective method.

Evaluation	
<i>Good</i>	16 comments were positive about the Keeping Warm activity. Learners commented that “ <i>it was good to learn about Blogging and getting the chance to do it</i> ”, “ <i>It helped me to organise myself and proved that I had done something over the summer</i> ” and “ <i>I found it interesting to know what other people had done</i> ”.

² The term “white flagger” was identified during the JISC funded Worked Based Learners in Further Education (WoLF) Project as someone who “surrenders immediately as soon as they encounter a problem”

<i>Bad</i>	25 comments were negative and predominantly focused on poor interface of Mahara, accessibility issues and the inability to upload pictures and videos. However 1 learners commented “ <i>Bad as I am not a descriptive write but still like sharing thoughts and images</i> ”, offering feedback on the process of reflective writing as opposed to the technology to enable that.
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Analysis	
<i>Positive</i>	8 learners commented on it being a positive experience enabling them to record what they had done, improving memory, organising themselves mentally and academically as well as a tool to communicate with each other
<i>Negative</i>	7 learners commented on the negative experience identifying that it offered no “benefit” to them. 1 learner felt the technology was not “creative” enough in comparison to recording thought processes in a more traditional sketchbook.
<i>Can see the benefits but...</i>	5 further comments were made about the interface and use ability of Mahara with some suggestions that improvements would increase engagement. Suggested use of more widely known, public Blogging sites, for example, Blogspot, Tumblr

Conclusion	
<i>Identified a way forward</i>	7 learners identified a way forward. Learners expressed the desire to share their work and to have opportunities to constructively criticise each other’s work ³ this was also apparent in the Analysis section
<i>Issues with Mahara</i>	<p>13 learners expressed issues with Mahara however 4 recommended solutions to the problem.</p> <p>Owing to the nature of the course learners expressed a need to be able to upload video and photos more easily. Some learners added links to external sites including Flickr.</p> <p>Learners suggested using other social media for example Facebook, however, College policy stipulates that staff should not access learners’ profiles on Facebook.</p>

³ Examples of discussion Show and Tell discussion forum used in HELLO Project where learners constructively criticised each other’s work on a weekly basis (<http://hello.lec.ac.uk>)

<i>Task justification</i>	2 learners commented on the lack of justification of the activity
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Action Plan	
<i>Improvements to Mahara</i>	<p>17 learners made comments about the Mahara software. In particular “accessibility” and the “user interface”. One learner made comments about not having anywhere to go if they encountered problems with the system. Learners did contact staff with problems and these were resolved although there was a time delay as the activity was held during the summer break and staff were away.</p> <p>One learner suggested a survey being carried out to identify if it would be of benefit to the learners. It is felt that the process of the lessons, the Keeping Warm activity and Focus Group provide far more in depth analysis of whether this is of benefit to learners in the future.</p>
<i>Using another software</i>	3 learners recommended using an alternative, public Blogging site.
<i>Other recommendations</i>	2 learners made other recommendations including keeping to a traditional Sketch Book as this was more appropriate for this subject.

(Appendix C: All focus group feedback)

Discussion and Analysis

Learners had a desire to share their work with their peers and the wider public. Six of the learners in the group commented about sharing links to Flickr and other similar sites *to “upload video so that you could show others examples of what you are talking about for example camera shots, lighting etc.”* Another example of learner’s desire to share their work and seek the advice of others was found in the HELLO Project where a similar group of part-time learners used a discussion forum on the College’s Moodle Virtual Learning Environment for “Show and Tell”. At first the tutor was tentative

about providing an on-line forum as a vehicle for peer criticism, and he monitored the discussion forum for signs of potential problems especially evidence of any unnecessarily harsh and hurtful comments. This did not occur, the learners choosing instead to share complex technical information with each other that was on the whole correct, so much so that the forum became an important vehicle for large amounts of peer coaching and learning. The Show and Tell discussion forum became self-managing and self-sustaining with very little need for action/intervention on the part of the tutor.

Some learners were “white flaggers”. They were faced with technical issues early on in the process. They had a tendency to stick their hands up and say *“I couldn’t do it; the technology did not work for me”*. If they had engaged with the Reflective Thinking process they would have increased their possibilities of success in the activity, perhaps producing a word processed alternative, creating an externally hosted Blog or completing the activity in a traditional Sketch Book. This finding shows that further emphasis should be made of the importance of seeing both the theory lesson on reflective practice and the subsequent lesson on the use of the blogs in Mahara as a “package”. Consideration could be given to embedding the “softer” skills of reflective practice, problem solving and working collaboratively within the Curriculum delivery. Are lecturers and curriculum designers making an assumption that learners automatically have these skills? Only one learner commented that *“I thought reflective writing was instinct in blogging anyway”*. Many more learners commented on the difficulty of writing reflectively with one learner stated that they found Blogging *“difficult to sum up the events”*, highlighting a

need to encourage learners to look at events in a reflective style and to consider further extending the Reflective Practice lesson.

As we encouraged learners to chose who they shared their Blog with, it is difficult to evaluate the extent to which learners engaged with the online part of the activity. One student commented "*the fact nobody used the system was disappointing*", however, there were pockets of continuous usage and good practice. It may be the case that this learner was not invited to view those particular Blogs. Consideration should be given as to whether or not we allow learners that level of choice. Perhaps it should be made mandatory that all posts are shared within the cohort. This may take away the element of "ownership" the PLs are encouraging the learners to have over their own e-portfolio space.

Learners commented about doing a practical Photography Course and too much writing involved in the summer activity. This raises issue of learners having adequate skills after attending a practical based, Foundation Degree delivered in Further Education (FE) to have a successful transition into HE. It has already been identified by Elander et al. (2009) that learners experience difficulties in the transition to HE owing to different experiences in the type of learning across the education sector, in particular in post-16 qualifications in FE. One key issue highlighted are the differences in experience and ability of academic writing.

Some learners commented that the Keeping Warm activity “*did not help me with my work on learning*”. Unfortunately it became apparent that some learners still cannot put a value on the importance of formative assessment activities as a tool to keep their engagement and improve their skills. One learner commented that it felt like homework so they did not bother to start. Another learner suggested that rewards should be issued on completion. However, some learners identified the benefits of keeping track of what they did over the summer break, opportunities to communicate with each other to discuss work and share ideas.

100% of the learners did return to attend their second year of the course. This compares to previous years return as; 2006-2007 two learners withdrew, 2007-2008 one learner withdrew, 2008-2009 two learners withdrew. It is believed that the Keeping Warm project has contributed to this retention after the summer break.

According to the PLs, the biggest impact has been noticed during one to one tutorial and the issuing of two subsequent assignments (Appendix D: All assignment briefs). In the Collaborative Production formative assignment learners are asked to develop a plan of action between October and November in preparation for two activities; a collaboration activity and a negotiated study activity. The PLs involved in “Keeping Warm” believe that the reflective practice and blogging has given learners more independent study skills that will enable them to carry out and achieve these two activities. They believe that the exercise has added to their “resilience” in responding to

and being resourceful when faced with obstacles that will prevent them from achieving the outputs and to working collaboratively.

They believe too, that the skills developed through formative assessment activities like “Keeping Warm” will enhance the transition and better prepare the learners for life within Higher Education on their ‘top up’ course. ⁴

Extensive searching took place on supporting evidence of building skills with learners to make them “resilient”, giving them the skills based required to face adversity, problems encountered, and to overcome hurdles and obstacles often presented in this current economic climate. However, there seems to be no research available on “general” resilience in all learners. Research is focused on marginal groups, for example Teachers BERA (August 2010), Physical Education, Environmental sustainability and ethnic minorities. The literature available is predominantly focused on schools.

The biggest finding was the lack of engagement as a result of the use of Mahara. Through the focus group process learners continually commented on the inaccessibility, inability to upload images and video (this has since been resolved), and the poor interface. Learners appear to compare the system to external blog sites, in particular, Blogger or Tumblr and in one case a learner had the expectation that the Mahara system should be as

⁴ Learners at Leicester College attend two years on a Foundation Degree and can have the opportunity of completing a 3rd year in the validating University to convert their Foundation Degree to a Bachelor Degree

“*appealing*” as those. Recommendations for improvements and suggestions were made by many of the learners.

Recommendations

The “usability” of Mahara and its fitness for purpose needs to be considered. The institution needs to consider whether or not to further develop Mahara, wait for new developments within the Open Source community, consider an alternative “bought” e-portfolio tool, for example PebblePad or to encourage learners to blog using an external site. If considering using an external Blog site, for example Blogger, Tumblr or similar, consider to what purpose. It was identified that the learners wanted to receive feedback from their peers and tutors, to achieve this it will be necessary for individuals to create personal accounts to comment. The advantages of using Open Source software are the sharing of developments across the wider, educational community. Whilst the use of Mahara is in its infancy at Leicester College, the example of how Moodle has been developed since its introduction in 2003 is encouraging and reflects the possibilities that Mahara can be made more accessible, and enhanced to sit beside Moodle and become an integral part of student learning.

The need to support practitioners, in the case of Keeping Warm the PLs, by ‘contextualising’ the use of e-learning tools such as Mahara so that it is easy for them to be adapted and used. This means recognising the realities of particular situations, tackling problems identified by staff and students,

drawing practitioners into the development process so that they have a sense of ownership of the innovation.

The need to encourage staff to adapt, reuse and repurpose their own resources in order to fully exploit the potential offered by Mahara and to support them in that process.

Summary

It is believed that the Keeping Warm project contributed towards the 100% return rate of learners on the Foundation Degree in Photography and Video. The Keeping Warm project achieved its Aim of keeping the learner's interest in their subject over the summer break. The findings show that the theory lesson in Reflective practice benefited the learners in their writing skills, enabling them to keep track of what they did and organise their thoughts. Dissemination of this finding will now occur across the institution and the theory lesson shared, in particular within the HE provision to better prepare learners with their academic writing skills for the transition from FE to HE.

In practical skills terms, the project outputs were also achieved. However, the use of Mahara as a blogging tool was effective for only two of the twenty one learners involved, however, the majority of learners felt that the blogging "process" was beneficial, it was simply the software that was not accessible. The learners offered alternative ideas for the institution to move forward when setting a similar task for future learners.

It is believed that the Keeping Warm project helped learners to tackle further assignments, in particular, self organising collaborative work.

Through the project the outcomes of improved writings skills, changes in approach to recording information, engagement in subject area, and increase retention have impacted on the learners.

Further research needs to be carried out in the area of building skills to ensure “resilience” in all learners.

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Appendix A: Writing in a “Reflective” style lesson notes

Appendix B: Supporting handouts from Mahara practical session

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