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Centre for Active Learning
A CENTRE FOR EXCELLENCE IN TEACHING AND LEARNING

UNIVERSITY OF GLOUCESTERSHIRE
at Cheltenham and Gloucester

I want to tell you a story....

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SKILLS4SUSTAINABILITY AND ACTIVE LEARNING

Environment courses at the University of Gloucestershire encourage the use of active learning, based on Kolb (1984) and Performances of Understanding (Blythe & Assoc, 1998). Developing reflective practice is an important, yet challenging part of this approach. An active learning induction, developed in conjunction with the Centre for Active Learning (CeAL), and the pedagogic approaches in the Skills4Sustainability module seek to introduce and embed these skills.

1 - THE DEVELOPMENT

The student induction provides a good student experience but we need to build on this to develop their skills for active learning.

The compulsory skills module can be re-developed into an enquiry based learning module that integrates the induction.

We could also pilot podcasting to provide additional information, from the staff and even the students, on sustainability, the disciplinary theme of the module

We could get the students to work in groups for their induction field activity and they could produce a 'digital story' as a way of encouraging them to engage and reflect on their activity.

DIGITAL STORYTELLING AND PODCASTING

Reflection is not an individual process and can be improved when others are involved (McDrury & Alterio, 2002). It is also recognised that providing contextual information can improve the learning experience. Drawing on the use of storytelling as a learning tool (McDrury & Alterio, 2002; Brown, 2005) the use of this technique through the use of digital stories, created by students, and podcasts has been piloted as part of an combined active learning induction to higher education and first year skills development module. This approach also acknowledges the claim that many new students now learn differently and seeks to use technologies they are already conversant with (Prensky, 2001: Oblinger, 2003; Brown, 2005).
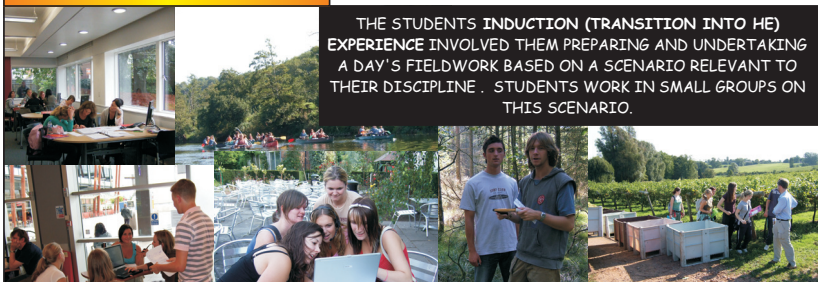
2 - INDUCTION

THE STUDENTS INDUCTION (TRANSITION INTO HE) EXPERIENCE INVOLVED THEM PREPARING AND UNDERTAKING A DAY'S FIELDWORK BASED ON A SCENARIO RELEVANT TO THEIR DISCIPLINE . STUDENTS WORK IN SMALL GROUPS ON THIS SCENARIO.

AT THE END OF THE DAY THEY HAVE TO PULL TOGETHER THE COMPONENT PARTS FOR A DIGITAL STORY; SCRIPTING AND RECORDING A SHORT AUDIO PIECE REFLECTING ON THEIR ACTIVITY AND SELECTING IMAGES FROM THOSE TAKEN DURING THE DAY.

3 - THE MODULE

The use of podcasting will allow staff to make available additional information, including personal book reviews and information about their immediate environment.

PODCASTS WERE CREATED BY INTERVIEWING STAFF. TOPICS COVERED INCLUDED PERSONAL BOOK REVIEWS, GOVERNMENT REPORTS OR GETTING INFORMATION ON THE ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITIES OF NEW BUILDINGS.

This is a new module combining both the old skills module and introducing the students to sustainability.

4 - THE EVALUATION

We can get feedback on the use of digital stories through the evaluation of the student induction; making use of student questionnaires and staff surveys.

For feedback on the use of podcasting we can get feedback through the module and use the student focus groups and staff interviews for the IMPALA podcasting project we are involved in.

5 - THE OUTCOMES

5A - DIGITAL STORY TELLING FEEDBACK

STUDENT

Student feedback on the use of digital stories was positive. Responses to the induction evaluation showed that 53% were positive; 29% neutral; with 18% disliking this approach.

What did I least enjoy? 'The digital story we were forced to do at the end seemed rushed and pointless'
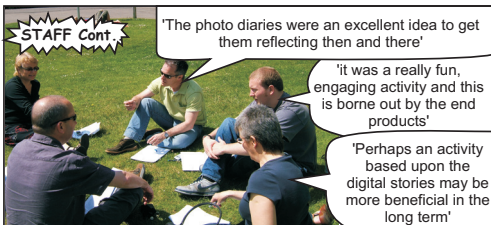
STAFF

'I would have liked the digital storytelling to have been slightly more embedded'

What did I most enjoy 'The production of the digital story and reflection of what we had done during the day, because I found it really enjoyable and a new take on an evaluation for the day'

What did I least enjoy? 'Creating the digital story, I don't think it helped me to learn'

'more time could have been devoted to making the digital stories'

'battery power on the laptops isn't great'

STAFF Cont.

'The photo diaries were an excellent idea to get them reflecting then and there'

'it was a really fun, engaging activity and this is borne out by the end products'

'Perhaps an activity based upon the digital stories may be more beneficial in the long term'

The use of digital stories is seen to have wider potential by most staff. However, by encouraging a focus on the reflective element and process has challenged some staff views.'we tend not to have any marks allocated to this reflective element ... because the fundamental module content is not about the learning process - its about subject content ...'

5B - PODCASTING FEEDBACK

Flexibility

STUDENT

Convenient

Variety of voices

STAFF
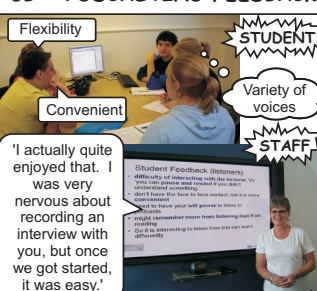
'I actually quite enjoyed that. I was very nervous about recording an interview with you, but once we got started, it was easy.'

6 - REFLECTION

Through this pilot podcasting, as used in this case, has been shown to usefully provide students with a flexible and convenient additional resource. However, use has been limited and feedback from focus groups highlights the need to develop in students the 'habit' of accessing podcasts.

The use of digital stories has demonstrated the potential for this technique to engage students and encourage reflection. As one member of staff noted '...despite being tired, those that I heard did think the story telling exercise was very useful to help their reflection and they had the benefit of peer discussion'. This pilot has though shown that its use does need to be carefully integrated and sufficient time allowed.

7 - FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS
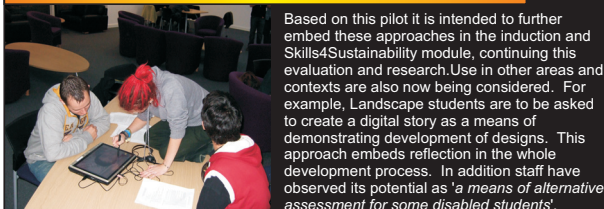
Based on this pilot it is intended to further embed these approaches in the induction and Skills4Sustainability module, continuing this evaluation and research.Use in other areas and contexts are also now being considered. For example, Landscape students are to be asked to create a digital story as a means of demonstrating development of designs. This approach embeds reflection in the whole development process. In addition staff have observed its potential as 'a means of alternative assessment for some disabled students'.

REFERENCES

The authors would be interested to hear of examples of the use of digital stories or podcasts and would welcome the exchange of ideas and experiences.

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Centre for Active Learning (CeAL)http://www.glos.ac.uk/ceal CeAL is nationally recognised Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning at the University of Gloucestershire

IMPALA - IMPALA is a UK Higher Education Academy funded eLearning research project led by the University of Leicester, and including Gloucestershire, Kingston and Royal Veterinary College, London http://impala.ac.uk

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