Digital storytelling to engage postgraduates in reflective practice

Faculty of Education | Department of Educational Psychology

Module: Learning Support 765
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Context

Background overview

The Department of Educational Psychology, amongst others, offers two BEd Honours programmes: Educational Support and Educational Psychology. The module in this case study – Learning Support 765 – is compulsory for all students registered in these programmes. The Honours in Educational Psychology leads to registration as a counsellor with the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA); this programme, however, is currently being phased out. The MEd in Educational Psychology is a professional programme that also leads to registration as an educational psychologist with the HPCSA. The Department furthermore offers modules in the BEd undergraduate programme from the first year to the fourth year.

Topic

The module Learning Support 765 focuses on the planning and provision of learning support within an inclusive pedagogy in which collaboration is a key factor. It explores various theoretical approaches and practical designs and strategies to address the needs of diverse classroom populations. A major outcome is that students develop as reflective practitioners and professionals.

Intended learning outcomes

By completing this learning activity, students should be able to provide reflective, effective learning support to learners with diverse educational needs within the context of an inclusive educational system.

Established practice

The module consists of a theoretical and a practical component. The theoretical component is assessed through a class test and the practical component through an assignment. Both contribute 50% each to the class mark. In the practical, students have to implement theory and reflection into their practices by identifying learners who experience learning difficulties at a school of their choice. The assignment requires them to assess the learners' reading, mathematical or perceptual skills and to plan and implement a learning support strategy. In previous years, students had to write up the assignment. They had to consider theoretical frameworks and pedagogical approaches while being reflective of their implementation of theory and practices in class. For the purpose of this project, they also had to do a digital story for the sole purpose of reflection.

The challenge

The Faculty of Education is encouraging the meaningful use of e-learning and teaching in both undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. It was therefore decided to use digital storytelling as a tool for reflective practice in addition to the written component of the assignment. Reflective practice forms a significant part of good teaching practice. In the past, it seemed as if students did the assignment purely for marks. While marks are an essential indicator of academic success, being able to reflect on theory and methodology in teaching is crucial for professional development.

Advantages associated with the integration of technology

Integrating technology into education is dependent largely on its ability to engage students in learning (Figure 1). It is therefore argued that engaging postgraduate students in their learning can contribute significantly to their professional development as teachers. Digital storytelling has the potential to engage postgraduate students through active participation in the creation process of digital storytelling (Jakes & Brennan, 2005) and to stimulate reflective practice. At the same time, digital storytelling can engage students in authentic learning and increase their understanding of curricular content (Sadik, 2008).

**Figure 1: Technology allows for more active learning

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BLENDED LEARNING CASE STUDIES 2016

Student overview

The students are postgraduate university students registered for a BEd Honours programme. All of them have a teacher's undergraduate qualification, this being either a BEd degree or a postgraduate certificate in education. The module Learning Support 765 is compulsory for students in both the Honours in Educational Support and Educational Psychology programmes. The students are a diverse group in terms of age, teaching experience, language and gender. They also have various levels of competency in technology.

Other relevant role-players

The blended learning coordinator from the Centre of Learning Technologies assigned to the Faculty of Education provided training for the students (the whole class) on how to develop a podcast using Windows Movie Maker. He further availed himself to answer any questions throughout the project and to provide support in other ways.

Learning and assessment activities

Educational approach

The lecturer follows a social constructivist approach to learning and assessment and students are expected to do the assignment within this pedagogical framework. According to socio-constructivist theory, human development and learning happen on two levels: a social level where the construction of knowledge takes place during shared activities and an individual level as the internalising process. What is learnt on the first level becomes part (with consolidation) of cognitive development. The learning and assessment activities are framed within the biosystemic theory. According to the biosystemic model of Bronfenbrenner and Ceci (1994), human development is shaped by social and cultural contexts. Learning and assessment activities thus have to be cognisant of the various systems in which learners live and function.

Learning and assessment activities

Students had to develop a digital story of the support that they provided to the learners, reflecting both in and on-practice. This required them to take pictures (ensuring ethical conduct) during the weekly support lessons that they had with the learners. They could include text and music and, if they were confident, a short video clip. In order to help the participants with the process of reflection, the following instructions were provided as a guide:
1) Explain the process of support.
2) Engage in reflective practice during the process of support.
3) Show evidence of adapting or changing methodology and/or techniques as result of reflective practice.

The digital story had to be three to five minutes long, with a minimum of ten slides. The completed digital story had to be uploaded onto SUNLearn (the Moodle platform of the University) as an .mp4 video at the end of the semester.

Figure 2: Screenshots from a digital story

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Feedback practice

Feedback was given to students during class as the practical assignment was discussed and questions from students were answered. The digital stories were evaluated on the three instructions for the assignment against the background of the seven elements of digital storytelling (Table 1). Some feedback was also given during focus group discussions, as this was a project supported by the Fund for Innovation and Research into Learning and Teaching.

Table 1: Seven elements of digital storytelling

1. Point of View	What is the main point of the story and what is the perspective of the author?
2. The Dramatic Question	Come up with a key question that will keep the viewer's attention and will be answered by the end of the story.
3. Emotional Content	Bring serious issues to life in a personal and powerful way that connects the story to the audience.
4. The Gift of Your Voice	Personalise the story to help the audience understand the context.
5. The Power of the Soundtrack	Music or other sounds can support and embellish the storyline.
6. Economy	Use just enough content to tell the story without overloading the viewer.
7. Pacing	Control the rhythm of the story and how slowly or quickly it progresses.

Source: http://digitalstorytelling.coe.uh.edu/archive/7elements.html

Student self-regulation

Students were given the opportunity to provide feedback on their experiences of making the digital story, including challenges and learning experiences that they could share with the group.

Learning environment

Collaborative settings

Although this was an individual assignment, students could collaborate and consult with classmates. They could also consult with the lecturer and the blended learning coordinator.

Content resources

The content available to the students for this assignment was uploaded onto the SUNLearn platform. This included PowerPoint presentations, articles and documents like policy papers.

Technology resources

As most mobile phones have a camera feature, all students were able to use the device to take pictures. It was decided to use Windows Movie Maker (version 2012), as it is available as a free app and very user friendly. Students were directed to the website from where they could download it and received a handout for beginners on how to use it. All students were familiar with the SUNLearn platform, as it is used to communicate and upload study material in all modules of the Department.

Support challenges

Although students could contact the blended learning coordinator, none of them did so. They did support each other, however, as some had made digital stories before in another programme. Many had technical challenges and some loaded the video in a format other than .mp4, with the result that the researcher could not open it.

Student experience

Student feedback on the learning experience

Some students reported that making the story (taking pictures while teaching) was very distracting and that they did not learn much in terms of being reflective. Others, however, said that it made them realise that they were not focusing on the methodologies and strategies that they were using in class, which is a reflective practice in itself.

Assessment impact

The digital story did not count for marks, as the main aim was to engage students in reflective practice as a valuable source for professional development. The impact that the assessment had on most of the students was that they did reflect on their teaching strategies, techniques and methodologies at one stage or another.

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General

Opportunities

Windows Movie Maker is a free software tool. Once students understood how to download and 'play' with Windows Movie Maker, they were more confident.

Challenges

Most students had technical problems, as illustrated below:
"Don't really know how to download software and how to install it and had trouble finding it once it was installed and then figuring out how the program works was frustrating."

They also struggled with keeping the video to the required length. Some had too many visuals and music, which made the file too big. Other challenges included adding music, losing pictures, the program (Windows Movie Maker) not being on campus computers, editing, publishing and the program shutting down unexpectedly. Some students did not have enough data and some had limited Internet access.

Advice

Firstly, this was an individual project and, although the support structures were set in place, it might have worked better if students had worked in pairs, supporting each other. Secondly, the project did not count for marks. The lecturer argues that, if it had counted for marks, more students would have participated in making the digital story and they would have asked for help sooner and more frequently.

References

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