E-learning in medical education
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The use of technology to enhance reflective learning by undergraduate students

Context

The rise of Digital Storytelling is well documented (Barret 2006; Stephenson 2006) with increasing interest into Digital Stories (DS) as a teaching and learning tool and resource starting to appear in accredited journals. Without doubt, the digital age is upon us, with undergraduate students from a wide range of disciplines accustomed to, and proficient in, using digital software for recreational and social use (Sandars & Schroter 2007; Sandars et al. 2008).

Digital stories, however, push the teaching and learning boundaries further, incorporating as it does, the practical, i.e. photographs or images, with the technical, i.e. inserting, manipulating images and narratives, with the necessity for academic observation, evaluation and reflection. Thus, reflective DS are more than a narration of past events or encounters, but a resource which enables students to reflect upon their experiences and to select, create and channel those judgments, experiences and ideas into a visual and audio project, and in this case, only 3 min long.

At the University of Leeds, we have been able to run a pilot scheme that encourages students to do just that, thanks to a JISC funded project, Reflect 2.0. The project set out to investigate the use of DS as a tool for encouraging reflective learning, using post- and undergraduate students from two institutions (University of Leeds and Leeds Metropolitan University) and across four disciplines (Dietetics, Education and ICT, Medicine and Performing Arts). The project stems from the work and findings of the Enhancing Learner Progression 2.0 Project (ELP2), which launched DS to first-year Medical students as part of their Personal and Professional Development (PPD) core unit in October 2007.

Activity

Two hundred and thirty first-year MBChB students took part in a pilot study aiming to assist and engage Medical students in reflective learning processes by using DS to articulate experiences of their first patient visit. Of the 230 students, 12 were given access to PDA's equipped with a 2.0 mega pixel camera and free internet access. Although this enabled students, if they so wished, to download and manipulate their images into a DS, the primary reason for issuing PDA's to a small cohort was to provide students with an opportunity to create and capture their own images rather than rely upon images taken from the web. All 230 students took part in a paper questionnaire and four from the cohort of 12 took part in a semi-directed focus group.

The students presented their DS using Power Point in their tutor group sessions and although the DS were not formally assessed, the students gave feedback after each presentation. Guidance in creating DS as well as technical support and training were given to all participating students.
Evaluation

A paper questionnaire was given to all 230 Medical students with a 100% response rate. The focus group took a smaller cohort group of 12 students and asked a series of questions to ascertain the student view of DS and to explore how they had been created. This participation, both as an audience and as a creator, suggests that the sharing of DS enables students to become more engaged in the material and to retain more of the salient points being discussed.

The enjoyment of being allowed to be creative in an academic context was a key component of the focus group discussion, and images were felt to be an easily assessable resource. To create a story that incorporates events and evaluation was felt to be a more effective method of reflection and presentation, especially when compared to a standard Power Point presentation.

Despite not always using the photographs they initially took for their DS, students reported that the process of selecting images actually furthered their reflective process. Taking photographs before and after the event not only enabled students to have a visual, emotional and rational prompt, and some students commented on how they were able to use these prompts to remind them of events, but also to further reflect upon their own attitudes and actions in and after their visits.

Students reported concerns surrounding assessing DS and concerns about tutors looking for the ‘best’ picture as opposed to content were raised.

Conclusion

Digital stories are an effective tool to engage both the viewer and the creator in the retelling of events and experiences involved in patient’s first visits. Going beyond a straightforward narration of events, the Medical students’ DS encouraged and incorporated academic critical evaluation and reflection. Those students who were unwilling or unable to do this effectively, would often mistake empathy for reflection and reflection for contemplation, or when choosing or using images, use signs instead of symbolic images. Those students who created the most effective DS were, in the main, those who created or took their own images and used them to inform or direct stories that attempted to convey a critical understanding of their own personal learning journey and challenges.

References


Notes on Contributor

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