

CASE STUDY

Blogs in E-Assessment: The Digital delivery of modular assignments on a BA Design Degree Programme

Sonia Di Gennaro, Senior Lecturer, The University Institute for Arts, Sciences and Technology, Glyndŵr University Wrexham.

Context and Rationale

Prior to teaching I worked as an experienced practitioner within the Animation and Games industries and was responsible for the recruitment of artists and animators into the film, television and interactive industries.

I now teach all levels of undergraduate and postgraduate students across a variety of subjects; Computer Game Development Students studying for science degrees and Creative Media Design students studying FDA, BA and MA programmes.

Today even the most traditional artist needs to consider how they can market themselves on the internet. In direct response I want to build more e-learning and digital content into my teaching.

Summary

I set out to investigate if the use of a blog as a fundamental aspect of an assignment would be a worthwhile addition to my teaching.

Blogs have proved to be an ideal catalyst for the electronic presentation of design and reflective comment.

I have also found blogs to be a very practical solution when compared to traditional sketchbook and portfolio for reviewing work electronically in assessment.

Introduction

I rolled out the use of blogs to a cohort of students studying on a programme titled "Digital Art for Computer Games" (DACG). It is an important aspect of this cohort's learning that they use web 2 technologies. The games industry they want to break into expects candidates to be conversant with technology, not just for artwork but also communications and in self presentation.

I also introduced blogs into an advanced computer animation summer school for students visiting from Escola Universitària Politècnica de Mataró in Catalan (Spain). The students undertake this module to build upon their prior animation knowledge acquired during our summer school in the preceding year.

In both cases, the blogs I introduced formed part of a wider design brief. They were graded on the standard and existence of all the required design stages, as well as the depth of reflection.

Methods

a) Digital Art for Computer Games Students

My students found our virtual learning environment difficult to navigate so I assumed they were not conversant with technology. This is a disadvantage for students on a "digital" programme and when "virtual" worlds are the norm in their chosen subject.

Self confidence and team skills are vital employment skills in the games industry. The principles governing the techniques I have used include the encouragement of a strong class community. The class discussion forum was used to instigate blogs. This also helped build individual student confidence levels.

I followed up this study by inviting students to undertake an optional survey. The findings can be viewed in the "Results" section.

b) Mataró Students

The use of blogs was appropriate as this is a digital module in which students are taught to produce an animated film over 10 days using 2D or 3D software.

The effect of introducing blogs has not been measured. However, I got the general impression that pre-production quality rose along with reflection and critical analysis.

I think it was influential that students had to upload their design work to a blog.

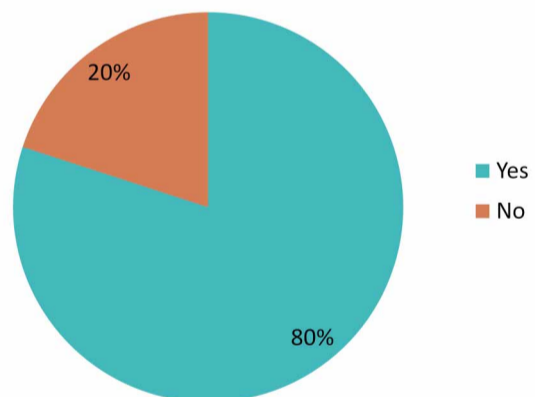
Why go to the bother of publishing something that you are not proud of...?

Results

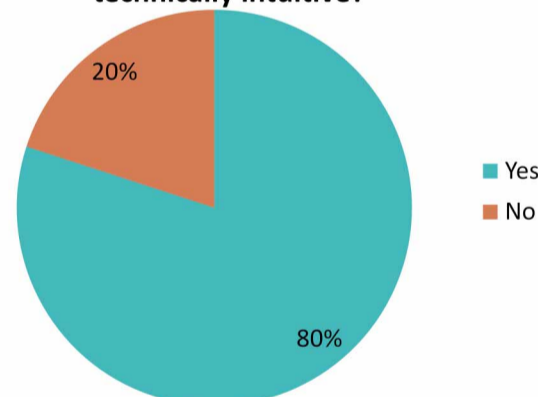
a) Digital Art for Computer Games Students

The results below reflect some of the opinions of respondents made up from just under half of the DACG cohort. Participating in this survey was optional and occurred 2 months after module completion.

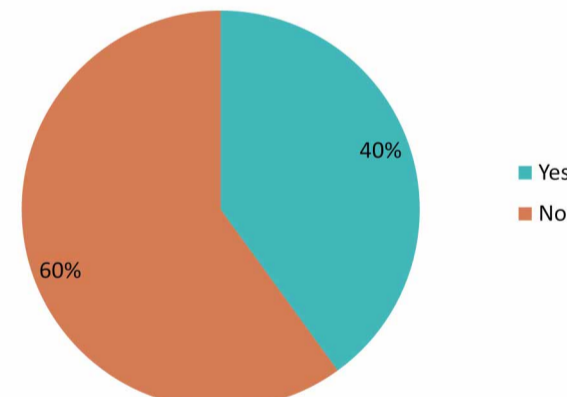
Did you find having your work on a blog assisted your design work development process?



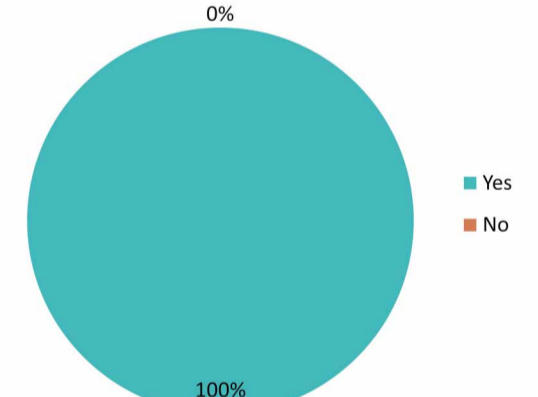
Did you find using a blog for presenting your work technically intuitive?



Have you referred anyone other than tutors or peers from your own programme of study to view your assignment blog?



Do you think you will take digital content from your blog to use when building an online portfolio?



DACG students were briefed to use blogs and an online group discussion forum. Students were initially reluctant to engage with the technologies, preferring to communicate in the studio instead.

However, as engagement with technology formed part of their brief most of the cohort eventually embraced it very well, producing blogs which were of a high enough standard to demonstrate their potential to possible employers.

a) Mataró students

The student blogs documented daily progress about how their pre-production and animations were developing. This included critical analysis of how narratives were unfolding and technical problems.

I felt the pre production quality had generally increased through the use of blogs in comparison to previous years. However as an overall mark is awarded for all stages of production including pre and post this was impossible to measure.

One student from Mataró was unable to attend the programme in person due to medical reasons. All assignment material was submitted electronically and the student already knew the software. We were able to facilitate study in Spain without teaching adjustment as the blogs were under daily review and feedback was given by email.

Conclusion

Using blogs and the forum helped the DACG students to become comfortable with communication technology.

In the case of the Spanish students overall marks did not improve but more effort went into preproduction, driving design standards higher but leaving slightly less time for production. This is not necessarily a bad thing; A competitive global market now sees most animation production outsourced to the Far East. Significantly greater importance is therefore placed on the quality of Intellectual Property - with pre-production still largely being retained by the West. The summer school teaching timetable was intensive because students had never produced traditional animation using software before. I was therefore fully employed during contact time with technical queries alone. Blogs enabled better time management of this module. I spent a short time at the beginning of each day and in the evenings reviewing blogs and emailing feedback if necessary. This helped students and improved assessment. The student in Spain was not disadvantaged due to the use of blogs which highlighted the possibility of delivering this module remotely if software knowledge is made pre-requisite.

Blogs enabled me to use focused time outside of contact sessions for tracking progress without geographical limitation. They are ideal for E-assessment as student self awareness and design work is evident. Blogs also offer second markers immediate overview to what a student has produced; with insight to how this was done and how the student felt about their progress.

It is a pity, but I do not think introducing blogs would have been as successful had it not been made a mandatory part of an assignment.