Website assignments:
an inclusive medium for developing transferable skills

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jon P White

Lecturer, Oxford Brookes University

j.white@brookes.ac.uk

This article focuses on website assignments and their potential as an inclusive medium for developing foundation students' digital transferable skills. Application and challenges on foundation, pre-sessional and degree courses are presented, with discussion of employability skills, assessment and inclusivity.

Introduction

As digital media and technological tools have reshaped the way we communicate and work it is imperative that graduates in all disciplines develop the transferable digital skills needed for their future careers (Simatele, 2015; Chartered Institute for IT, 2021). These skills can be honed through digital media assignments, such as podcasts, blogs, e-portfolios, videos and blended media websites, which have become more common in higher education in recent years (Reyna & Meier, 2020; Reyna 2021). Accessibility to digital assignment creation has also widened, with website builders such as Google Sites, Wix and WordPress making the process easier for students without specialist IT experience.

Application and challenges

Oxford Brookes University has supported the introduction of website assignments in foundation, pre-sessional, hospitality and nursing programmes. On the International Foundation Arts, Humanities and Law programme, students create a blended media group website using Google Sites. Student evaluations have been positive, highlighting the combination of practical and creative elements, and the opportunity to develop website building skills.

Multi-media website assignments have also been piloted on the Pre-master's Certificate. The task consolidates students' understanding of key concepts and skills involved in undertaking research at master's level. Students produce an individual Google Sites website, which includes a draft stage with video screencast feedback. Evaluation from students and quality assurance has also been very positive, identifying elements such as level of interest and innovation, detail in the formative feedback and development of new transferable skills.

In terms of challenges, these have primarily related to register and referencing. Stakeholders have raised pertinent questions about genre, with topics ranging from theoretical underpinnings to formality and appropriacy of writing style and referencing. On the above-mentioned courses, the justification for requiring a formal academic style and Harvard referencing has been that academic web content is sometimes written in this register and includes referencing. One alternative is for students to adopt a more personal reflective writing style and replace Harvard referencing with embedded url links to sources.

Employability skills

There may be an assumption among foundation and pre-sessional teaching communities that employability skills are not a priority when designing curricula. Naturally, tasks and assessments tend to focus on enabling students to complete assignments on destination courses. However, from these pilot schemes it appears that digital media assignments provide an opportunity to focus on transferable skills from the outset.

Significantly, development of these abilities often aligns with universities' strategic planning. For example, at this institution the education and enterprise 5 year strategic plan aims to ensure the provision is 'current, accessible and adaptive to [students'] evolving career goals' (Oxford Brookes University, 2022, p.32).

On undergraduate and postgraduate programmes blog and e-portfolio website assignments have also been introduced. Events management students have linked their websites to subsequent job applications and public health nursing graduates have continued to use e-portfolios after graduation to inform professional qualifications. In these cases, a possible limitation of continuing to use a website for career purposes is loss of access, so students are encouraged to create them using an external website builder (e.g. Wix or WordPress) or tied to a personal gmail account (Google Sites).

Assessment

When assessing cloud-based digital assignments an important consideration is whether or how to limit students' ability to work on their websites once an assignment deadline is reached. On the foundation and pre-master's courses a new Google Site is created for each student, but the lecturer remains the owner and the student designated as co-editor. The student's access rights are then changed to viewer on the deadline. They are also required to upload the text to Turnitin for similarity checking, attachment of rubrics and return of summative feedback.

Creation and application of assessment criteria also raises a number of important questions. These include the extent to which digital skills should be assessed, how they can be described and implications for teaching. Responses will depend on many factors, such as course subject, learning outcomes and nature of tasks. On the pre-master's website, digital literacy is assessed under the umbrella term 'presentation', which is weighted at 20% of the assignment mark and split into organisation and presentation of materials,

and use of multi-media content. Regarding instruction, to help students familiarise themselves with website building tools there are plenty of freely available video tutorials, but dedicating class time to work on projects has been beneficial in these and other contexts (Vandermolen and Spivey, 2017).

Inclusivity

An unexpected positive outcome on the foundation and pre-master's programmes was achievement for students who were less successful in conventional assessments. The students enjoyed curating various media and the opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding in different ways. These early results suggest that website assignments may provide a more inclusive format for students to engage with their programmes of study, especially those who may have less experience or expertise with long-standing written genres like essays and reports.

Conclusion

Overall, the above website assignments have motivated students to create work of high quality and creative diversity, and in some cases to use them for employment related purposes such as job applications and professional qualifications. As an emerging assignment genre, websites appear to have great potential for widening participation, harnessing creativity and developing students' vocational skills.

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