Social good in DIY "Essay"

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1. WEB 1 (2)

Web1 (1 because it is in first year, the subject matter is Web2.0) has a large project that generates 50% of the marks. Another 30% is for achievement of weekly learning outcomes – this is entirely self and peer assessed through a collaborative learning approach – all their work is on a wiki. We're keen to get the students to improve their critical thinking so the last 20% is an "essay". Two years ago we took the essay out on the grounds that a traditional essay doesn't really fit the Web2.0 paradigm. But we were disappointed in the level of critical analysis in the written work they did do – in their personal reflections and so on. So the essay is back. Sort of.

The course also has an explicit requirement for consideration of social implications of computing.

2. DIY ESSAY

Students complete a formal work in the area of the social implications of an aspect of communications technology. The form of the work is not specified. The work may take the form of a formal essay, research article, Wikipedia contribution, a radio feature or any form that the student can justify as being scholarly. Here's the brief:

> You will write a short proposal that includes 200 words on your thoughts on each of four peer reviewed papers related to your topic area. The proposal must finish with an outline of your "essay". Students can present the work in any format that:
> - Supports the development of an argument with justification and evidence based examples. In the proposal, students have to justify how this form provides a vehicle for creative and evidence based development of an argument.
> - Supports citation of at least four peer reviewed articles. APA6 referencing must be used (although appropriate to the form should be used, deviations from APA must be agreed beforehand).
> - Can be submitted via your wiki, webpage or blog. (ie if you perform a song, you'll need to video it).

Assessment is by supported self-assessment, with the final grade being negotiated between the instructor and student. For scholarly works with performance aspects (eg a taught class), peer feedback was sought. The marking schedule varies according the form of the submission, based upon the following: development of argument, justified 12 marks; content and style appropriate for agreed format (includes language, clarity, spelling). 5 marks; Appropriated referenced 3 marks (APA6th unless otherwise agreed). There is also a bonus 5 marks available for innovation in approach – aiming to give credit for people pushing the boundaries.

Students can get quite a shock that not only the question but also the form of the work is undefined. Sample topics are given, chosen deliberately to drive students to readings even if to find out what they mean. Sample questions include:

- How might Web2 principles promote democracy?
- How can computing make the invisible visible?
- How did the internet affect the "Arab Spring"?
- What is the impact of participatory media on local government?
- What are the employment implications of time spent playing online games?
- How might radical transparency affect business?
- How can we harness humanity's cognitive surplus for social good?

3. OUTCOMES

The scholarly works are all explicitly social good. About half the students write an essay (with a slew of social implications of online gaming), the others a surprisingly wide range of topics and approaches. Examples from 2011 and 2012 include:

- A report on an experiment into modern media effects on the importance of physical beauty in self-image.
- A video documentary on the online personas of body builders.
- A radio documentary on internet addiction.
- A radio documentary on community building through wireless networks.
- A video documentary on the relationship between animal welfare and computing in the dairy industry.
- A class seminar on the social implications of online gaming.
- A class seminar on the negative effects of social networking.
- A book aimed at engaging 12 year old girls in computing.

4. INTERPRETATION

The purpose of the assignment is twofold: to encourage development of critical writing skills; and to encourage students to deeply engage in the nature of computing as a profession.

This DIY essay is firmly student directed. Both the question and the form of this work are individually negotiated between the student and instructor. Such learner control aides engagement and is considered a fundamental aspect of values based education (Sterling 2004). Some students require guidance in ensuring the scholarly aspects of non-traditional formats. Once students get over the shock, the coolness factor is very high. Students enjoy the freedoms to work on an area of their choosing and the braver ones relish the challenge of exploring this in song or dance.

REFERENCES

Sterling, S. (2004). Higher Education, Sustainability, and the Role of Systemic Learning. Higher Education and the Challenge of Sustainability: Problematics, Promise and Practice. P. B. Corcoran and E. J. W. Arjen. NY, Kluwer Academic: 50-70.