Chapter XVI

Using Online Discussions to Provide an Authentic Learning Experience for Professional Recordkeepers

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Abstract

Providing authentic learning in a distance education course that leads to a professional qualification is challenging. However, working in a totally online environment on ill-defined problems provides students with opportunities to seek and evaluate their own learning resources and to collaborate with others in their learning. This chapter provides an example of a performative assessment strategy for students in archives and records management studies, requiring them to find on the Internet, analyse and evaluate examples of policy documents and standards, just as they would...
in the workplace. Student evaluations of the exercise were unanimously positive. Discussions helped to overcome isolation felt by remote students; depth of knowledge gained was improved and students’ reflections developed awareness about learning through the assessment.

Introduction

The strategies discussed in this chapter aim to meet two challenges. One is to provide authentic, situated learning for students who will graduate to become professional archivists and records managers. The other is to overcome the isolation of distance learning by providing opportunities for collaborative learning. Consequently, I have put a great deal of effort into building effective learning communities for distant students to help them develop generic skills such as effective communication and interaction with peers, teamwork and constructive critical engagement with others’ work. I also use these strategies to help reduce the sense of isolation often suffered by distance education students and thus reduce attrition. I have been guided by the work of Salmon (Salmon, 2000) and Palloff and Pratt (1999, 2001) in particular.

The subject Electronic Recordkeeping is taught online concurrently to undergraduate and postgraduate students. One of the advantages of this teaching strategy is that it mixes two groups who bring different skills and knowledge to their studies. Most students in both groups are mature-aged. However, students in the postgraduate course are often already employed in archives and records services and seeking an appropriate qualification as they work. They usually have at least some practical experience and bring knowledge of the “real world” to class discussions. Undergraduate students, on the other hand, tend to be gaining a qualification pre-service, even if mature-aged. However, because their course is broader, incorporating a major that frequently includes studies in communication and information technology, they often bring better knowledge and skills in technology to the discussions.

All unit materials and resources are provided online and students submit their assignments electronically. Although challenging to some students, the totally online environment provides opportunities to encourage distant students to seek and evaluate their own resources and to collaborate in their learning, both of which were inhibited by paper delivery.