



### **The secret diary of Adrian Librarian MOLE.**

*The value of using electronic reflective journals (diaries) to reflect on learning and professional development in the area of management skills development for LIS students.*

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### **Abstract:**

*This paper presents the experiences and perspective of the educator when working with students on reflective practice and skills development. It reviews the use of a reflective electronic reflective journal (or diary) used by MA Librarianship students at the University of Sheffield. The reflective journal is developed within the University's virtual learning environment (VLE), which is known within the University as MOLE – My Online Learning Environment. The benefits of reflective writing for the student are discussed showing how the reflective process within MOLE enables students to identify their key skills and development needs.*

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### **Introduction**

This paper presents the experiences and perspective of the educator when working with students on reflective practice and skills development. It reviews the use of a reflective electronic reflective journal (or diary) used by MA Librarianship students within a "Management for Library and Information Science" module, a core module on the MA Librarianship Programme at the University of Sheffield. The reflective journal is developed within the University's virtual learning environment (VLE), WebCT, which is known within the University as MOLE – My Online Learning Environment (Figure 1). The benefits of reflective writing for the student are discussed, in terms of becoming a reflective manager. Analysis of the reflections shows how the reflective process enables students to identify their key skills and development needs.

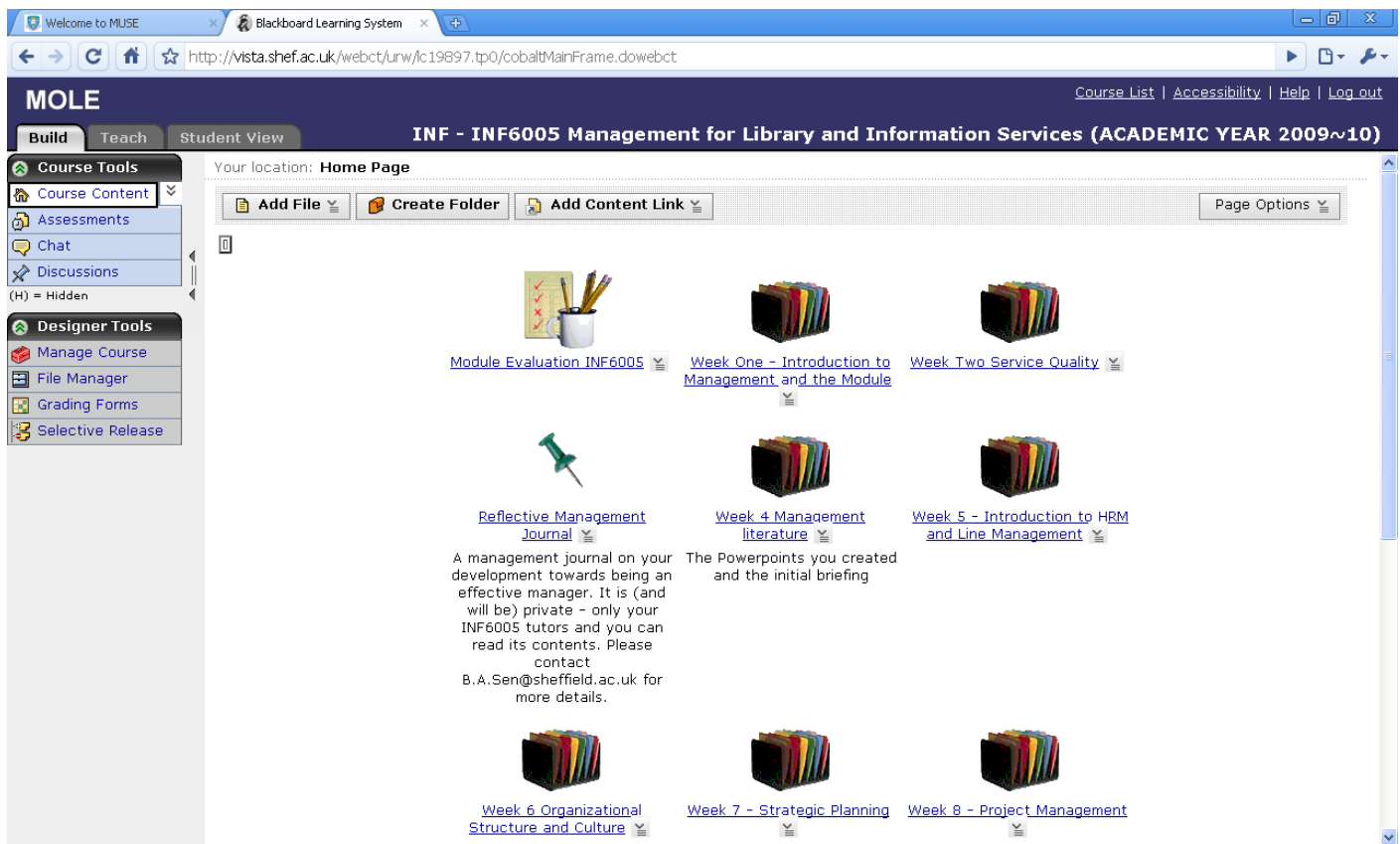
## Background

The University of Sheffield offers a wide range of information related programmes within its iSchool (the former Department of Information Studies), one of which is the MA Librarianship. This programme runs across a full calendar year, September to September, and aims to provide students with the skills required to develop their professional career in the field of librarianship. The student cohort consist of 30 plus students per year, most of which are full time home students complemented by a small number of international students, and also part time students. There are two pathways through the programme: (1) the *Professional Enhancement* pathway, which is targeted at experienced professionals who wish to “enhance” and possibly update their skills, and, (2) the *Professional Preparation* pathway, which the majority of students take. This pathway requires just one year of library or information related work experience prior to coming on the course. There is a good degree of module choice within both pathways, but the students with less practical experience have to take a set of core modules designed to give them a foundation of core skills, knowledge and understanding of the profession, and to support their choices for their ongoing study and career development.

One of the core modules on the MA Librarianship is INF6005 *Management for Library and Information Services*, a thirty credit (double) module that runs across two taught semesters, September to June. The module is an important module for students as it covers a range of key management topics, issues, and skills. Students have had very little or no management experience prior to coming to the University. The module covers service management and self management. It is critical in supporting students in their understanding of management concepts as well as helping them learn about themselves and any development needs they might have to enable them to progress on their chosen career paths. There are a range of assessments on the module both formative (no formal assessment but feedback given) and summative (formally assessed) that challenge the students as individuals and also give them experience of working in teams (Table 1). One of the assessments on the module is a reflective management journal which is written with the University’s virtual learning environment, MOLE or My Online Learning Environment (Figure 1). This assessment is worth thirty percent of the total module marks.

INF6005 Assessments	
Service quality exercise (formative). Group work.	Students select a local service to evaluate and chose a method to assess the service quality. They give a presentation on their findings.
Critique of the management literature (summative 30% of the total module). Individual assignment.	A concise critical review of the literature on a chosen management topic. In the review, students are expected to draw on the wider management literature as well as the specialist library and information literature.
Reflective management journal (summative 30% of the total module). Individual assignment.	A management journal which comprises of a reflective report on the student’s development towards being an effective manager.
Selection and recruitment exercise (formative). Group work.	The students are given jobs to apply for by submitting CVs. They short list the applications, interview applicants, and select.
Communication audit report and presentation (summative 40% of the total module.) Group work.	A presentation and report on a group task. Students are given a case study which requires them to act as consultancy group to assess the organisational communications and to make recommendations for improvements.

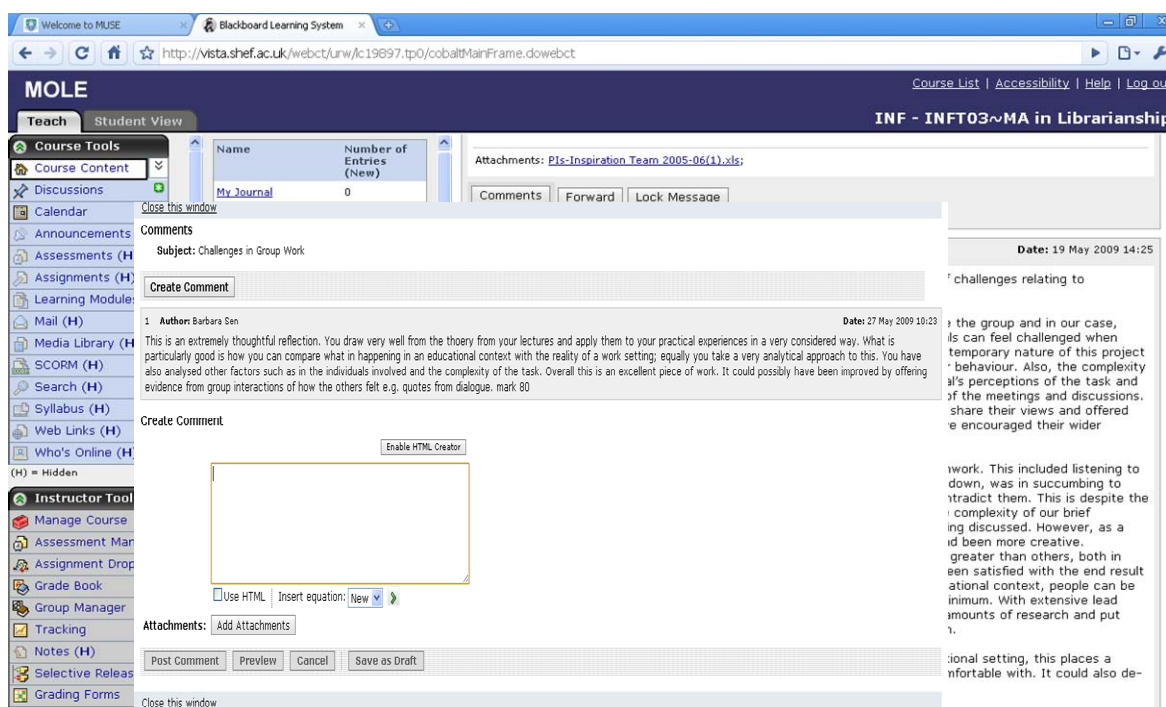
**Table 1.** Assessment in INF6005 Management for Library and Information Services



**Figure 1.** Screen shot of My Online Learning Environment – MOLE.

The reflective assessment requires students to create an online record of their development towards being an effective manager by posting entries each month to their journal. The first entry is a practice entry which does not count towards their final mark. This has been done to enable students to develop their reflective writing skills as reflective writing is new to most students. Practical guidance and support on how to build the journal is given in sessions throughout the module. This support takes the form of how to submit entries to the electronic journal, including loading up documents as evidence, sort entries, printing entries, and very importantly guidance on reflective writing. The entries can only be viewed by the students and the tutor. Each entry receives tutor comments as a means of further support and guidance. The online environment allows students a safe space in which they can challenge their own thoughts and perceptions, and identify personal and professional development opportunities. The completed reflective journal can be integrated with an e-portfolio (REAL PDP - Reflection, employability and learning, professional development planning portfolio) used a part of the students personal development and planning that can be made accessible to future employers. The assessment aims to develop the students as reflective individuals in the hope that they will become reflective managers and:

- To improve students' ability to reflect on their management skills, knowledge and performance and plan how to develop their skills further;
- To improve understanding of management principles and concepts by applying them to students' own experience;
- To create a document that can be used as part of Personal Development Planning (REAL).



**Figure 2.** An example of a student entry in the electronic reflective journal with tutor feedback.

This particular assessment has been running in this format for three years. In a typical year there will be approximately thirty students on the module, posting approximately 200 journal entries across the two semesters, the length of those entries ranging between 140 – 600 words.

### Analysing the journal entries

In 2007-2008 an analysis of the reflective journals was carried out and benefits were identified as a result of the reflective writing which included self-development, learning, empowerment, and improved decision making (Sen, 2009). A mixed methods approach was taken, with a qualitative analysis of the reflective writings to identify themes, and some descriptive statistics illustrating the relationships between reflective writing and identifiable outcomes.

Thirty one students were registered on INF6005 “Management for LIS” during the academic year 2007-2008. After ethical approval was gained for carrying out the study, 22 students agreed to allow their reflections to be used for the research (71% take-up). There were 7 male and 15 female students, who were all mature students (i.e. over 21 years of age). All having library experience, but with a mixed range of management experience, limited mainly to supervisory roles not necessarily in the library domain.

The students submitted a total of 116 reflective journal entries over an eight month period across two semesters from October 2008 to May 2009. Prior to the exercise, all students were unfamiliar with reflective writing. The fewest number of journal entries submitted by a student was 4, the most was 7. The average (mode) number of journal entries per student was 5. The word count for the reflection ranged from 141 words to 597 words, with a mean average word count of 324 words. Word guidance was applied in accordance with University regulations though students could supply additional material through uploaded files (additional file material was not included in the study).

The reflective journal entries were submitted electronically in the virtual learning environment used in the University known locally as MOLE. After each posting students received tutor feedback on the quality of their reflective writing based on Moon’s (2007) four levels of reflective writing (Table 2). The students had been introduced to Moon’s (2007) levels of reflective writing and other theories on reflection prior to being asked to submit work to their reflective management journals. They had also been given tutor support, lectures and practical workshops on reflection and reflective writing.

<b>Moon's (2007) four levels of reflective writing.</b>	
<b>1. Descriptive writing.</b>	Descriptive and contains little reflection. May tell a story but generally from one point of view
<b>2. Descriptive writing with some reflection.</b>	A descriptive account that signals points for reflection while not actually showing much reflection. What little reflection there is lacks depth.
<b>3. Reflective writing (1).</b>	Description, but it is focused, with particular aspects accentuated for reflective comment. Shows some analysis, some self-questioning.
<b>4. Reflective writing (2).</b>	Clear evidence of standing back from the event. Shows deep reflection. Self-questioning but the views and motives of others are also taken into account. Observation that learning has been gained.

**Table 2.** Moon's (2007) four levels of reflective writing.

#### *Data analysis – qualitative*

Each piece of reflective writing was assessed against Moon's (2007) levels of reflective writing and categorised according to the criteria within the descriptions of each level.

Example 1. Descriptive Writing with some reflection:

"I feel very strongly that training is a very important part of managing staff within an organisation. At my current place of work there is a big emphasis placed in training but it appears to be a slightly superficial exercise as although staff are actively encouraged to take part in training, such as NVQ or Enquiry courses, staff are never given enough off counter time. The staff are so limited as there have been a lot of staff leaving, this has taken priority over training staff..." [S.18]

Example 2. Reflective Writing:

"I was asked on two separate occasions to train staff. Both experiences provided me with invaluable experience of supervising people who had differing abilities and were from diverse backgrounds...it made me realise that good training involves responding to the needs of the trainee and adjusting my approach accordingly. ...This presented me with a significant test of my management abilities. ..I felt under pressure... I was not carrying out the training as well as I might have. But looking back I now appreciate the experience and how it might prepare me for future training opportunities." [S.9].

#### **Discussion**

A significant relationship was found between 7 of 8 outcomes tested; (1) academic learning, (2) the need for self development, (3) actual self development, (4) critical review, (5) awareness of ones' own mental functions, (6) decision making and (7) empowerment and emancipation. There was some evidence of a relationship between non-academic learning and reflective writing, but it was not significant. A number of themes emerged from the reflective writings regarding reflection itself, with students seeing reflection as a positive activity, with benefits for the individual, groups and in the workplace, and identifying reflection as a skill that can be practiced and developed (See Table 2. This data was fully reported in Sen, 2009).

Outcomes of reflective writing	Examples of evidence from student reflections
Academic Learning	"The October lectures have made me aware of the importance of these formal systems of organization that enable people carry out tasks in the workplace." S13.1
Non-academic Learning	"What I learned from this was the value of building experience in an organic way." S19.1
Need for Self Development	"...I prefer to avoid confrontation, especially with people I know well. However, this is something that I need to overcome in order to be a successful manager." S17.5
Actual Self Development	"I also found that I was more confident with the work that I was producing." S18.
Critical Review	"In observing the management of others, I had failed to observe myself." S2.1
Awareness of Own Mental Functions	"I have reflected on this picture and concluded that I should not forget these experiences." S2.3
Decision Making	"Looking to my first professional post, I have decided that gaining teaching experience is my priority to develop my management skills further." S4.6
Empowerment & Emancipation	"While I found the position difficult while in it, I am grateful for the experience...The position also forced me to come out of my shell and be more opinionated and firm." S8.1

**Table 3.** Examples of students reflections linked to reflective outcomes identified in the literature. (S3.1 (31/10/07) = Student ID number. sequential entry number of the reflective journal followed by the date of the reflective journal.) Adapted from (Sen, 2009)

The students' reflections on reflection were assessed and ten themes emerged (Table 4).

1. The dynamic nature of reflection.
2. Reflection being useful in supporting career and professional development.
3. The benefits gained from reflective writing.
4. Reflective writing having potential in the student's future employment/workplace.
5. Encouraging reflective practice in others.
6. Reflection being a positive experience.
7. Reflection being suitable as an individual or group activity.
8. Reflection supporting the improvement of own personal awareness.
9. The need to explore different methods of reflection.
10. Difficulties experienced in focussing sufficiently to be able to reflect deeply enough.

Evidence from student reflections on reflection	Analysis of the student comments
"I have started a reflective e-journal to be sure that I am exploiting teaching and work experience to the full...I feel this experiment is working well." S3.1	Reflection as a positive experience.
"Sometimes with competing demands there can be a tendency to panic and get stuck into the theory superficially - at the expense of making learning personal and reflective." S3.3	Difficulties experienced in focussing sufficiently to be able to reflect deeply enough.
"I expect that some of the insights from this year will evolve and expand, as the situations which emerge in my future workplace continuing the process of reflective learning began here." S3.5	Seeing the potential for reflection in future employment. Dynamic nature of reflection.
"I felt that we were all, collectively and as individuals, reflecting on where we had gone wrong." S5.2	Reflection being an individual and group activity.
"The process of reflection has heightened my awareness of the skills I am currently obtaining from the MA programme and has highlighted ways in which these can be transferred to future employment." S6.3	Reflection supporting the improvement of own personal awareness. Seeing the potential for reflection in future employment. Dynamic nature of reflection.
"The second session I attended was a lengthy session on reflective writing,...we were asked to work with a partner to discuss a recent experience that we had learned something from and to ask questions to each other as if in the role of a mentor... This method of asking questions to help someone else reflect is one that I plan to employ ... in management as it will help other library staff to reflect on their experiences." S8.2	The need to explore different methods of reflection. Seeing the potential for reflection in future employment. Encouraging reflective practice in others. Dynamic nature of reflection.
"I enjoyed the idea of using web 2.0 techniques, which would create a more dynamic and participative form of reflection." S15.1	Dynamic nature of reflection. The need to explore different methods of reflection.
"In my future employment I believe it will be vital to maintain records of my achievements ...This process will allow me to reflect on my achievements and also identify areas for training or improvement and will ultimately make it easier for me to apply for other positions in the future." S16.3	Benefits of written reflection. Reflection supporting career and professional development. Seeing the potential for reflection in future employment.

**Table 4** Student reflections on reflection. (S3.1 (31/10/07) = Student ID number. sequential entry number of the reflective journal followed by the date of the reflective journal.) Adapted from (Sen, 2009).

Benefits have been identified from this exercise of reflective writing, but what evidence is there for value in terms of working in an electronic environment?

### Benefits and drawbacks of working in an electronic environment

The exercise ensures that students engage with the virtual learning environment from the outset which gives them confidence as the VLE is used for all modules. There can be benefits from working within an electronic environment (Stefani et al, 2007). The literature suggests that working in the electronic environment can enhance a students' reflective ability (Wetzel, K. and Strudler, N., 2006). It gives the flexibility of being able to attach evidence to support the reflective statement. Evidencing statements is something that is encouraged as it helps the students to think more deeply about their learning.

The reflective journal can be integrated into the students' online professional development plans (REAL PDP) which students can then give access to future employers. This has not proved popular, with only one or two students ever engaging with the REAL portfolios fully, *"I will update my REAL portfolio to generate examples of valuable library*

experiences. S3.3. Tosh et al (2005) identify the main barrier for using e-portfolios to be the “look and feel” of the technology. No research has been carried out as yet at Sheffield for this lack of student engagement with the REAL PDP portfolios, though assumptions have been made regarding the portfolios not being integrated with assessment and therefore not amongst the student’s most immediate priorities, time being an issue on this very intensive programme of study.

The students are used to communicating electronically through email, social networking, text messaging so this is an environment that they relate to well, and it means they can also submit their work remotely. The entries have access control so that only the tutor and the student can have access. The assurance of confidentiality helps gain the student’s trust which is particularly important as the student reflections can often contain sensitive content.

From a tutor perspective many of these benefits are shared e.g. the flexibility of remote access. There are also additional benefits such as being able to give feedback quickly and frequently which is helpful for student development. There is also reduced administration as the work does not have to be physically handed in.

There are a number of drawbacks which relate to MOLE itself which is somewhat dated (the system is currently under review and upgrading is imminent). The system looks old fashioned, and is somewhat “clunky”. It is not easy to customize feedback. At Sheffield a standard feedback sheet is used for the student assessments and a way has not yet been found to integrate this into MOLE. This then leaves two options: (1) for students to print off their journal and hand them in physically. (2) the work to remain electronic, not hand it in physically, but then not have the standard feedback form.

The electronic environment provides a suitable means for student to reflect on their learning and development through the use of electronic journals (diaries). Tables 2 and 3 give a range of comments that show the direct benefits of student reflections, and the importance of capturing those reflections. As one student noted:

*“Reflective writing can prove to be particularly beneficial for future reference and can lead to possible changes in behavior. I think that for future professional posts, it would be most helpful for me to keep a reflective journal. This journal could be used for my future reference, but the process of writing in is itself beneficial and much more can be learned from it, as writing things down tends to make one accept responsibility for one’s thoughts and actions in a more concrete way than by reflecting without writing.”S.21.4*

The students liked experimenting with different methods of capturing their reflections:

*“In observing the managing of others, I failed to observe myself. My response had been to manage myself more formally. This means experimenting with electronic, audio and print diaries. I have started a reflective e-journal to be sure that I’m exploiting teaching and work experience to the full. So far I feel this experiment is going well.”S14.2*

*“I enjoyed the idea of using web 2.0 techniques which would create a more dynamic and participative form of reflection.” Perhaps using web 2.0 reflection would become an inclusive and more interesting practice within a library. This could be achieved by setting up a library blog for staff and encouraging comments and useful suggestions to reflective postings”. S15.2*

*“I intend to play around with more web 2.0 technology and attempt to continue some sort of reflective diary throughout my career.”S15.2*

These comments illustrate the possibility that there is no best one option, and that each individual has to find a method that work for them. The web.20 environment is seen as having potential for personal and work based reflections, and web 2.0 is seen “as the possible future form and use of e-portfolios” and e-reflections (Stefani et al., 2007: 2).

## Conclusions

The students mainly saw reflection as a positive experience, seeing uses for personal and professional development and in future employment; *"The process of reflection has heightened my awareness of the skills I am currently obtaining from the MA programme and has highlighted ways in which these can be transferred to future employment."*[S6.3].

The benefits that can be obtained from reflection in terms of self development are documented by Trickey (in Watson. 2008: 29) who sees potential gains from *"a much more useful perspective on my [his] thinking."* An example of professional development using reflection is the reflective report completed for professional Chartership of the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP). Often in the workplace staff are required to produce reflective evaluations of projects or produce reflective written work as part of staff performance and appraisal reports.

In this case study reflective writing has been shown to have a positive relationship with a number of outcomes, academic learning, the need for self development, actual self development, the ability for critical review, an awareness of ones' own mental functions, support decision making and empowerment and emancipation (Table 3). The most benefit was apparent when students were most analytical in their reflection and expressed that in deeply analytical reflective writing (Sen, 2009).

Students demonstrate meta-cognitive abilities through their reflective writings and their comments on the reflective process itself. The process of reflective writing itself having enhanced the students' awareness of the situations, experiences, themselves and others involved. This showed the dynamic nature of reflection taking into consideration past, current and future possibilities for the individual or individuals involved in the reflective process. Their comments showed that reflection is a skill that can be practiced and developed to gain the most potential from it, but when it is mastered to its deepest level, then benefits are seen for personal development, professional and/or career development, and practice in the workplace. Students identified the need to explore different methods of reflective practice including the use of web 2.0, print diaries, and e-journals to meet individual learning styles and needs and they saw the potential in encouraging others to reflect, and to experiment with learning in electronic environments.

The students at Sheffield are given a lot of support in terms of using electronic journals or diaries, academic reading, lectures, and practical reflective writing workshops and the opportunity to develop their skills. It is likely that this support helped their understanding of the concept of reflection, its potential, the value it might have for them in the world of work, their career development, their engagement with technology, and with their engagement of the task. The student's engage with MOLE the University's VLE for assessments such as the reflective journal and enjoy using web 2.0 technologies. They do not readily engage with e-portfolios for professional development in MOLE. Further research would be needed to investigate why, though from anecdotal evidence, time seems to be a factor.

From the educator's perspective, the reflective e-journal has benefits. Working in an electronic environment allows for speedier feedback. Using the VLE, allows for the integration of the journal with e-portfolios, and other module content. Analysis of the journal content has enabled module and curriculum development to take place. The teaching of reflective practice has been improved as a result of information gleaned from the journal entries. An increased emphasis has been given to on continuing professional development. The experiences have also provided opportunities for academic research that has been disseminated throughout the LIS community. Further development is needed to improve feedback to students to be integrated into the VLE.

Reflective practice is not a clear concept to understand at first, it is also challenging to teach and can be demanding. The amount of student support that is needed, but with that commitment, the students can benefit from the skills they develop. Library organisations can benefit from these skills, with the reflective manager being more aware of others, themselves, their work situation. Future employers will benefit from the mature critically reflective capabilities that students will bring to the workplace. Web 2.0 gives opportunities for exploring reflective writing which give greater flexibility than traditional written reflections.

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