

Case Study

It's more than an eportfolio: Using PebblePad for online submission and assessment

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The background context

The nature of the institute is one of Higher Education delivering undergraduate and post-graduate education. At the time, the Centre for the Study of Higher Education (CSHE) had responsibility for educational development and the professional development of academic staff across the wider university. This new Masters level course was launched in December 2008 to provide an introduction to new teachers, in particular PhD students and part-time lecturers, who had not taught in a HE context before. The program was piloted with two cohorts and formed a module within the PhD framework. The learners consisted of PhD students who were required to complete the module as part of their

studies and new lecturers, teaching part-time, who had joined the institution from professional practice. None had formal teacher training at HE level and had not used an eportfolio before as a personal record of achievement or for recording professional development. The cohorts consisted of a wide demographic to include UK and International learners as well as a mix of adult, mature learners all with various experiences of educational systems.

The current practice

This course was a new module and it was being piloted as an additional provision to the current portfolio of academic staff development programmes. The current assessment practice used paper-based formats where students submitted hard-copies of teaching portfolios for summative assessment at the end of their programme of study. Learners were required to submit portfolios containing typical contents such as activities, reflections, materials drawn from practice to provide evidence, peer observations and reflective commentary. Predefined submission dates were given for hand in via the reception desk during normal opening hours.

The A4 portfolio folders varied in size and content because of the creative nature of the learners and their interpretation of the instructions and/or learning outcomes. A manual process existed where administration staff would record and issue a receipt.

A group of assessors were advised to collect the coursework from the administration office and to use paper-based processes for marking, grading, student feedback and validation. The assessed submissions were stored for the required time period in archives before being returned to the learner, taking up storage space.



The underlying problems and risks for this new course surrounded the heavy reliance upon paper-based systems, processes and formats which did not provide the flexibility needed by these cohorts or for supporting a blended learning programme where virtual team teaching would occur. The issues included the fact that some of the learners were international research students who may not be in the UK on the submission date and therefore unable to follow the manual process of physically handing in their portfolio. The part-time lecturers were not on campus every day either. This could have brought about an increase in extension or deferral requests and had a negative impact on retention through students not completing the course.

The challenge

The anticipated challenge was to improve the aspects of current practice by moving from paper-based formats to flexible online submission and assessment. Teaching portfolios were historically assembled for a variety of purposes with summative assessment being one of these but technology was not being used.

The challenge was to enhance submission, assessment and the development of teaching practitioners by using an eportfolio that was designed to be capable of integrating formative assessment, summative assessment, self-assessment, engagement in reflective practice and for personal development planning (PDP).

The added challenge came from stakeholders who expected the course to lead to external professional recognition by enabling individual students to become members of the Higher Education Academy (HEA) at Associate level. This was a first for CSHE and for me.

I hoped the changes would enhance current practices to provide flexible assessment methods and submission processes; allow access

from anywhere in the world at any time; provide a clear structure and guidelines for the portfolio content; enable virtual team teaching, working, and assessment; engage new teachers in the practice of self-assessment and continued professional development (CPD); improve the timescales for marking and the provision of stu-

dent feedback; and to enable internal moderators to validate assessment online and to offer this opportunity to external examiners. Also, there would be a reduction in the need for storage and classroom space which was at a premium.

The purpose and approach

The requirement to design a blended learning course and knowing that the students would consist of UK and International learners (who might not be on campus to submit their work) meant that it became necessary to consider the impact of this during the design stages of teaching.

Also, there was a reduced availability of new teachers being able to attend educational programmes that took them away from their research studies or the workplace. The drivers for change arose from stakeholder expectations, the need to move away from paper-based formats to flexible online systems supportive of blended learning and the fact that a successful pilot could lead to the module becoming part of the existing academic staff development portfolio.

“ I had used PebblePad both as a learner and a reflective practitioner. This enabled me to see the distinct advantages and possibilities for this eportfolio in providing a solution to the challenges faced and to create an efficient online submission area that was also capable of recording continuing professional development/achievement. ”

The initial approach to solving the issues associated with the traditional methods for submission and assessment required me to become more familiar with the PebblePad eportfolio system. I needed to understand the ways it could be used to program and implement a more user friendly approach for the learner, the teacher and assessor. This required me to design an outline for the content structure from my own pre-existing knowledge of PebblePad. An outline that integrated a learning outcome approach, reflective practice, self-assessment, uploading/generat-



ing of evidence to satisfy learning outcomes, personal development planning and reflective commentary to encourage deep learning.

It was necessary for me to work with and receive advice from e-learning experts, especially those who had a deeper knowledge and expertise of using PebblePad as well its capability. I developed a pilot eportfolio for testing and use. The purpose was to use this as a framework that allowed my thoughts to be shared with others, critiqued, changed and enhanced by the expertise of e-learning and educational developers within CSHE.

It was essential to work in collaboration with specialists and closely with my peer who would be assessing the submitted coursework also and who was knowledgeable about the extended functions available to PebblePad system administrators.

The timeline for development was only three months which was due to the changing times-

cales for the launch. Having no previous models to work from the need arose to innovate and design specifically for this course. Working collaboratively with others, and using the initial design as a basis, resulted in the creation of an online e-teaching portfolio that morphed into its current format - a non-paper based format that can be used for online submission, assessment and internal moderation.

The tasks included:

- Introduction (to self, discipline, hopes and fears)
- SWOT Analysis
- Personal Development Plan
- Initial Microteaching Experience
- Reflective Diary (Blog)
- Reflection on Sessions and Activities
- Task 1 - Design for Teaching and Learning (Learning Outcome)
- Task 2 - Design for Assessment (Learning Outcome)
- Task 3 - Reflective Account
- Self Assessment (Summative Assessment)

This was trialed and tested before launching to cohort 1 and suggestions from end-of-module evaluations used to enhance the design for cohort 2. These changes included an additional area for learners to reflect on their individual growth during the twelve week course by encouraging double loop learning. In turn, this informed the renewal of an ongoing professional development plan and encouraged the development of teachers as professional practitioners.



The issues

The main barriers that I faced related to my own technical ability, that is, my own in-depth knowledge of PebblePad, its system administration capabilities and its power to deliver an online resource that could be used successfully in teaching practice, especially for online assessment/submission. I was constrained by the predefined launch date and the need to develop an entire blended learning course within given timescales and costs.

This change would mean moving teacher education and learning away from the traditional methods used in CSHE by replacing paper-based formats with online methods. This was not a problem because the Teaching Development Fellow Network (TDFN) was keen to embrace change and to implement best practice for teaching and learning. Leading the module enabled me to be in control of the design of learning from the module outline to the end-of-course evaluation and to innovate knowing that support was available to make this happen.



The result

The overriding results from the launch of the programme (Introduction to Teaching in Higher Education) was the implementation of online submission, assessment and internal moderation using PebblePad. The course returned positive feedback throughout delivery from various stakeholders having ensured that the potential barriers/issues were overcome during the design stages.

The achievement has produced an e-teaching portfolio specifically assembled to combine different purposes and to demonstrate to other teaching practitioners how PebblePad can be used to improve the learning experience for students through online submission and assessment as well as for lecturers, assessors and internal moderators.

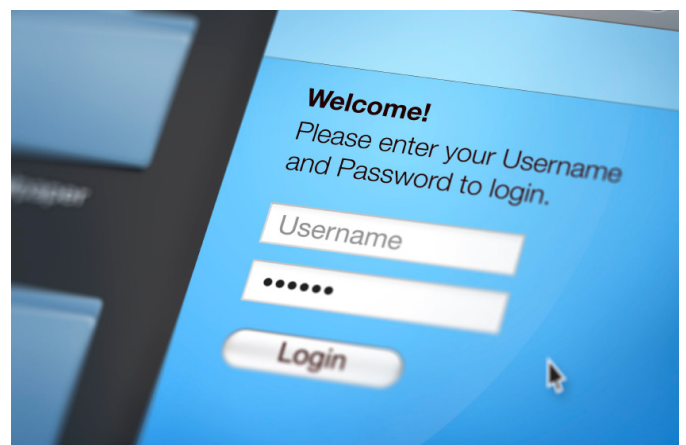
“ It has proven
to be a success
with the two pilot cohorts
completing and an excellent
retention rate. ”

Student feedback was positive and suggestions will be used to enhance future delivery to another cohort. By using the eportfolio, engaging in reflective practice, observing the ways in which existing technology can be used in teaching practice these new teachers are able to go on to share their insights with others. The use of online submission and assessment has been recognised by internal and external stakeholders as a model for teaching practice for other staff development programmes. Initially, the pilot involved two assessors working closely together to trial this new way of virtual working and online marking. The result is that this model is being considered for use across the other PgCert modules.

The learning

I learned that PebblePad is more than an eportfolio and that in collaboration with others a simple idea can be turned into an effective online system that provides flexibility to students and lecturers engaged in the assessment process. Spending time upfront, during design, to develop online assessment returns an efficient system that is virtually free from paper-based formats.

I have learned also how an e-teaching portfolio can be designed to incorporate many different purposes such as formative assessment, summative assessment, part of a qualification, to provide a structure for learners, to help others to become members of other institutions, to allow for development through reflective commentary, and as a guide to help students evidence and cross-reference the achievement of module learning outcomes. Investing time upfront pays off through flexibility and the fact that assessment is not allowed to be constrained by traditional working hours which, in itself, is supportive to blending learning as well as to virtual team working. I intend to learn more about the system administration of PebblePad and how it can enhance teaching and learning practice for workplace/related learning and education.



- “Lock Down” – enables students to view the content after submission but not to change it.
- Extended Submission Time – students can submit their work online up to midnight extending their hand-in time beyond the traditional opening hours of an administration office.
- Users’ IT Skills – provide early support to help students learn how to use PebblePad, to become orientated and offer further support later, normally prior to submission.
- Train Assessors – especially those not involved in the design to understand the purpose, structure, content, assessment criteria and processes for quality assurance.
- Provide Clear Instructions – regarding self-assessment, submission and assessment expectations by developing an exemplar for students to view. This helps visual learners to understand and provides examples of the different ways in which evidence can be presented and cross-referenced.

Acknowledgements

Case study by Louise Wilson
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