

[P13] Development of ePortfolio for reflective learning

Joyce Overfield¹, Carol Ainley¹ and Rod Cullen²

¹School of Biology, Chemistry and Health Science, Manchester Metropolitan University

²Centre for Learning and Teaching, Manchester Metropolitan University

j.overfield@mmu.ac.uk

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Abstract

Reflective practice is increasingly used for identifying and assessing competence and employability skills. However, paper copies can be very large and unwieldy to manage. There is also a need to develop and embed employability skills and support lifelong learning within taught courses. The ability of students to appreciate their skills and achievements and the relationship between these skills and personal development planning is recognised as a challenge.

The aim of this project was to explore the place of the ePortfolio in personal development planning and reflective practice, highlighting the benefits and challenges of use, and identifying future directions for the assessment of the ePortfolio in raising students' awareness of their achievements and skills in the workplace.

Taught postgraduate students in Healthcare Science (n=24) trialled building a portfolio using PebblePAD, commercial software which can be used for a variety of e-learning activities. Guidelines for completion of tasks using PebblePAD were developed and provided to students, along with detailed examples of activities which can be used in reflective practice. These included a graduate skills assessment questionnaire, presentations, case studies, laboratory health and safety, quality assurance and other work-based learning activities. Students used PebblePAD to create their CV and were required to complete a blog to describe their experience of using PebblePAD. Feedback was obtained by contribution to focus group discussions and by structured questionnaire.

The study is on-going, however it is expected that the outcomes of the project will be of use in identifying both the mechanisms and the barriers of use for electronic engagement with portfolios for personal development and planning. In future, it is intended to extend the engagement with ePortfolios to include assessment.

Introduction

Reflective practice is increasingly used for identifying and assessing competence and employability skills. The focus on employability and widening participation has meant increasing numbers of part-time and/or mature students are undertaking higher education and there is a need to develop and embed employability skills and support lifelong learning within taught courses. Dearing (1997) identified a requirement for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to provide a means by which students could "monitor, build and reflect upon their personal development". The QAA (2008) define PDP as "a structured and supported process undertaken by an individual to reflect upon their own learning, performance and/or achievement and to plan for their personal, educational and career development". The Leitch report (Leitch, 2006), describes a focus on the development of 'world class skills', particularly those linked to an occupation or activity and which can be measured by academic qualifications. The ability of students to appreciate their skills and achievements and the relationship between these skills and PDP is recognised as a challenge. As a result of the Dearing Report (NCIHE, 1997), personal development planning has been actively encouraged in HEIs. This often takes the form of a file or portfolio, and paper copies can become very large and unwieldy to manage. In the age of Web2.0 educational technology it would seem beneficial to adopt an electronic means of building a personal development portfolio to engender and record reflective practice, employability skills and continuing professional development.

Aims

The aim of this project was to explore the place of the ePortfolio in personal development planning and reflective practice, highlighting the benefits and challenges of use, and identifying future directions for the assessment of ePortfolios in raising students' awareness of their achievements and skills in the workplace.

Objectives were to:

- design a questionnaire to evaluate student experience of PebblePAD
- interview a volunteer focus group
- analyse questionnaires and findings from focus group
- introduce students to PDP via an electronic repository using PebblePAD
- produce feedback to MMU PebblePAD evaluation team

Methods

This pilot study is one of nine mini-projects exploring different aspects of PebblePAD across the Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU). The PebblePAD pilot project has been evaluating the potential of the PebblePAD toolkit to support the range of approaches to ePDP and ePortfolios that are evolving at MMU. Taught postgraduate students in Healthcare Science (n=24) trialed an ePortfolio building activity using PebblePAD, commercial software (Pebble Learning in collaboration with the University of Wolverhampton). Access to the PebblePAD software was embedded in a 20 credit module at level 7 (Research Methods) via the MMU managed learning environment using Blackboard WebCT. The unit took place during the autumn term, although continued to be available throughout the academic year. Guidelines for completion of tasks using PebblePAD were developed and provided to students on week 3 of the unit, supported by a face to face introduction to the pilot study.

Examples of activities commonly used in reflective practice were provided, including: a graduate skills assessment questionnaire, presentations, case studies, laboratory health and safety, quality assurance and other work-based learning activities. Students also used PebblePAD to create their Curriculum Vitae.

Feedback was obtained by contribution to focus group discussions at the end of the unit and by structured questionnaire.

Table 1. Questions provided to focus group students

Qu	Questions to focus group
1	What did you like about portfolio building using PebblePAD?
2	What did you dislike?
3	Where did you use PebblePAD? Please tick: At home/ At work/ At MMU
4	What technical problems did you experience in general?
5	What technical problems in accessing PebblePAD did you find?
6	How often did you use PebblePAD approximately? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Less than 15 mins per day • 15 – 30mins per day • 30 mins – 1hr • 1hr – 2hrs • Other - please state
7	Did you use the help facility or help movies?
8	Which of the following did you use: Please tick <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Profiles • Proformas • Gateways • None of the above
9	How did you choose to populate your e-portfolio? E.g.: photos, word docs, written reflective diaries, a blog.....?
10	Which of the features of PebblePAD did you find the most useful?
11	Did you consider using the discussion board to clarify or discuss anything?
12	Will you continue to use PebblePAD to build your PDP/ePortfolio for CPD?
13	Did you show PebblePAD to anyone else, e.g. manager, colleague?

Results

Only seven out of twenty-four students contributed to the focus group questions, however, their comments are deemed to reflect the views of the cohort. Figures 2 and 3 depict usage within WebCT and can be seen to indicate that a good level of engagement with PebblePAD took place. A summary analysis of focus group/questionnaire follows:

Likes and dislikes: Although the students did not engage with PebblePAD as extensively as was hoped, they did find it reasonably easy to use. The ePortfolio method was considered to be more time consuming than gathering a paper portfolio. Those who already had paper portfolios (2/7) did not feel that they would want to move everything over to the electronic form, but could see the advantages had they started out with an electronic portfolio.

Technical problems experienced: Students reported frustrations as the software tended to 'hang up' regularly making it time consuming to upload some files. Embedding within the University MLE required the student to go through too many stages/mouseclicks before accessing PebblePAD.

Features found most useful: The graduate skills profile and personal profile were utilised the most (7/7), with word documents the most common medium for populating the ePortfolios (4/7). The graduate skills profile in particular caused the students to think more deeply about their skills and areas for improvement.

How often/how long did students access PebblePAD? Time spent engaging in the ePortfolio varied from <15mins in total, to 2-3 hrs for each individual session.

Help facilities: Used by only 2/7 students, but found this facility to be very useful.

Discussion board: No-one considered using the discussion board to try to obtain help or clarity. In response to the question 'Will you continue to use PebblePAD to build your PDP/ePortfolio for CPD' six out of 7 students reported their intention to pursue this means of building a personal development portfolio. General student comments indicated that they would be more likely to use PebblePAD if it was embedded into the assessment of a taught unit. In addition, they would like the facility of graphical reflection of progress through the year.

Figure 2. Tool usage report

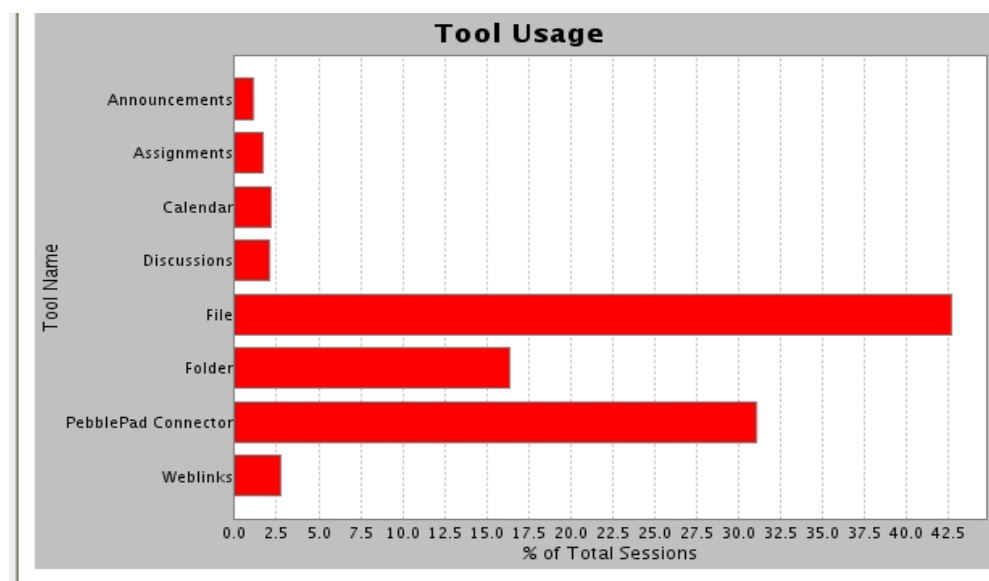


Fig. 2 shows that access to PebblePAD comprised 31.7% of the total number of sessions accessed for the taught unit via WebCT,

Figure 3. Course item usage

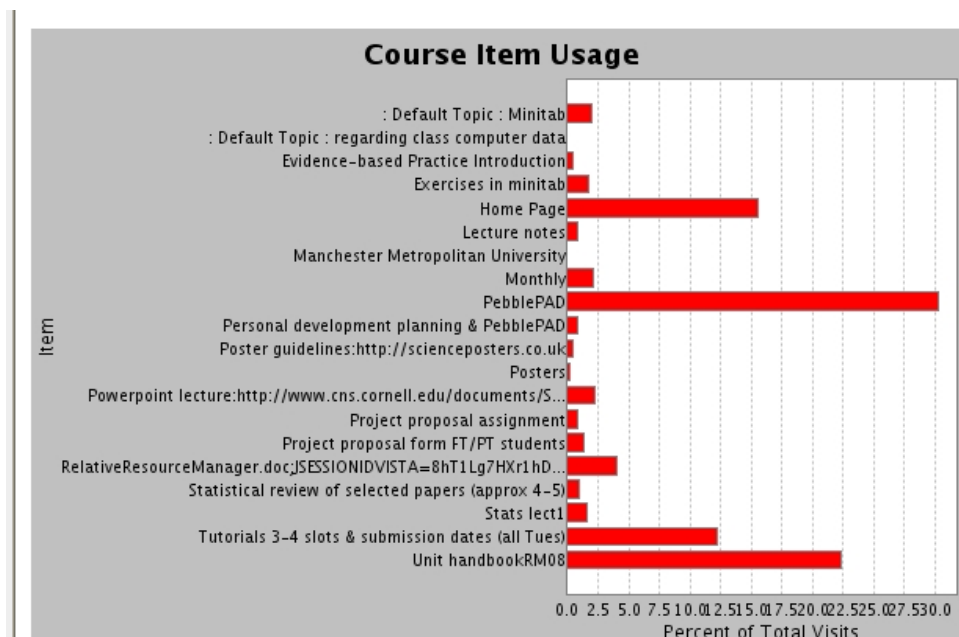


Figure 3 shows the % visits to PebblePAD

Conclusion

PebblePAD was found to be a useful means for developing an ePortfolio. Effective engagement was enabled by embedding the e-portfolio within a taught unit. Use of PebblePAD meant that the concepts of personal development planning and employability skills were made explicit to students. A future recommendation to improve usage would be to attach assessment of the unit to PebblePAD so as to encourage awareness and development of employability skills. The study is on-going, however it is expected that the outcomes of the project will be of use in identifying both the mechanisms and the barriers of use for electronic engagement with portfolios for personal development and planning.

References

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