Case Study

Developing the use of eportfolios to support the reflective learning process in early primary Initial Teacher Education

Kevin Ardron

School of Health, Community & Education Studies, Northumbria University, UK

The background context

Northumbria University is an 'A' category provider of Initial Teacher Education.
Our Primary provision consists of the following 3 programmes (cohort numbers in brackets):

- BA (Hons) Early Primary Education (120 students in each of 3 years)
- PGCE Primary Education (110 students)
- PGCE (flexible, distance learning) Early Years and Primary (46 students)

This case study focuses on the experience of the 120 students in the 1st Year (2009 Cohort) of the BA programme outlined above. The majority of this cohort are students aged 18 – 21yrs (80% female). The minority are mature students and career changers.

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The current practice

The core element of the undergraduate Initial Teacher Education programme is built around a reflective learning process that culminates in a submission of evidence in Year 3 against the Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) Standards identified by the Training and Development ing group and individual tutorial sessions and in support of their assessed academic writing. This approach to process based learning and how technology may enhance it, is well documented and highlighted by Granberg (2009). As part of the LTC strand in Year 1 students are

> " The concept of refective learning is introduced to students in Year 1 as part of their professional studies strand, Learning, Teaching & Creativity (LTC), at which point they are encouraged to begin keeping a 'learning journal'. It is envisaged as an informal approach but one that will involve students keeping a record of their learning throughout their university and placement based training over the course of 3 years. "

Agency (TDA, 2009). The typical format for this evidence is currently a collection of A3 Lever Arch files.

Students draw on their journal entries during

introduced to 'e-learning at Northumbria' and a core ICT module. The aim of this is to ensure all students are quickly able to communicate and work effectively using our institutional eLP (Blackboard).

The challenge

- All students in the 2009 Cohort have been informed that their Standards File evidence will be presented electronically (PebblePad QTS Profile) in May 2012. This presents a number of challenges as it represents a significant shift from the established paper based format.
- Staff and students will become established and competent users of PebblePad.
- Students will use PebblePad as a medium for their Learning Journal and will be using this in an increasingly independent manner.
- By 2012 all 3 year group cohorts of the BA programme will have adopted PebblePad.
- Students successfully completing in Year 3 will continue to use PebblePad as a reflective development tool in their NQT year.

The purpose

This initiative has been driven by a number of factors:
The Characteristics of ICT in ITT (TDA, 2008), developed in partnership with the Association for Information Technology in Teacher Education (ITTE) and the British Educational Communications and Technology Agency (Becta), are a set of criteria designed to help teacher training providers assess their own provision with respect to ICT. This work addresses those characteristics that specifically focus on the development of eportfolios, and the innovative use of ICT related to professional development (Characteristics 8, 9 & 10, TDA, 2008).

Students entering in Year 1 are increasingly competent users of ICT. They have an expertise in 'Office' applications and are adept Internet users, communicating and collaborating using social networking applications. The long established, introductory ICT module was no longer fit for purpose and needed re-examining in the light of this. PebblePad offers the opportunity to draw on these existing competencies and develop them further in a professional context. When collating their Standards File it is difficult for students to draw on paper based evidence stretching back over 3 years. The value of some experience is essentially 'lost' as students focus only on the evidence that has been generated during their third year.

The majority of Standards Files submitted are very similar to each other and the current format provides limited opportunity to fully reflect the depth of the students experience and training.

The approach

The timeline for this initiative is 3 years. The intention is to build on our experience and roll out to each subsequent new cohort. By year three we aim to have 360 students engaged with PebblePad as the central resource supporting their reflective learning profile. The methodology has been informed by the pilot phase project which was funded by the TDA in 2008 – 2009 (ICT in ITT Grant for eportfolios) and focused on the PGCE Primary cohort.

During this pilot phase, after the initial introduction, students were given the option of using PebblePad as a medium for their learning journal and as a means of ultimately presenting evidence towards the QTS Standards. Despite the majority of students being motivated to adopt this approach, numbers quickly diminished as the significant workload associated with the PGCE began to impact.

> **❝** Not being
> a compulsory element
> of their programme,
> students reported a reluctance
> to invest time in it. **❞**

This concurs with the findings of Kirkwood (2009) in his assessment of students' use of technology for learning.

However, a focus group of 6 students remained and these were able to share their experience and collaborate on how best to organise assets and evidence as they worked towards their Standards submission. All students in this focus group successfully presented using the PebblePad QTS Profile and were subsequently recommended for their award. Our work on this pilot phase helped to generate discussion about the development of eportfolios across the university and in 2009 an institutional commitment to provide access to PebblePad for all students was announced.

Based on this and the experience gained in the pilot phase we were able to target the undergraduate route as this would allow staff and students to adopt PebblePad over a 3 year timeframe, making the goal of 100% electronic submission more achievable. Embedding opportunities for students to use PebblePad in assessed modules and removing the optional element has helped to encourage initial engagement and will hopefully foster longer term independent use.

The issues

For all students to be able to submit electronic evidence confidently in Year 3 they must become established and competent users of PebblePad. This capacity will have developed over the course of their programme as they are encouraged to become increasingly independent in their use of PebblePad and use the tools available to support their reflective learning.

The challenges associated with this will be related to the need to modify aspects of taught modules in order to embed opportunities that require students to use PebblePad.

There are significant staff development issues to be resolved in order to effectively support this technology enhanced reflective learning process and ensure we have the capacity to accept up to 120 electronic submissions. The move to an electronic format for submission of Standards evidence represents a significant cultural shift, but one that is supported by the University's commitment to PebblePad. The experience gained through similar initiatives based in other institutions across the UK and presented in the publication, "Effective Practice with eportfolios" (JISC, 2008) has provided much needed guidance as we begin to address these issues.

The result

We are currently coming to the end of the first year in this long term project to embed PebblePad in the BA (Hons) Early Primary Education. All students in the 2009 cohort have engaged with PebblePad and used the Webfolio Tool as a Learning Journal and to submit an integrated presentation of their ICT tasks as part of the LTC Module.

> Students have provided useful feedback via a questionnaire designed using the Profile Tool and this will inform how we approach the next stage of our work.

As students embark on their Initial Assessed Placement they will be setting up a Webfolio that will become a weekly electronic learning journal aimed at supporting their reflective development. We have also received funding through the TDA ICT in ITT Grant to provide students with webcams and digital voice recorders for the duration of this placement to encourage the inclusion of 'video/audio diary' entries.

Examples of the initial webfolio work have been shared in whole cohort seminars and students will be invited to share their latest experience as part of the end of year Conference Week. Our initial aim was to establish a firm foundation in year one that would inform our approach as we move forward into the second phase of this initiative.

The learning

- How to implement and manage change in a HE environment.
- That although the aim might be for students to adopt an e-based reflective learning tool because they recognise its intrinsic value, this cannot be left to chance and initial engagement may well have to be structured and linked directly to assessed modules.
- There are significant cultural barriers that have the potential to inhibit the scale of success. These are likely to be associated with existing staff and academic practice.
- The student voice is the most powerful agent for change in this situation.

In brief

- Introducing students to PebblePad during their initial Induction Period is vital.
- A small team of staff (3 in this case) to lead on this kind of project builds capacity to overcome cultural barriers.
- Listen to students.

References

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