Case Study

From an eportfolio to a PLS: Integrating an eportfolio into a Post Graduate Certificate in Learning & Teaching in HE

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The background context

In March 2007 the Centre for the Development of Learning and Teaching (CDLT) received JISC funding to look at ways in which an eportfolio or personal learning system could support staffs'

Flourish encouraged staff to:

- Use the PebblePad personal learning system to aggregate records of learning and achievement into eportfolios to be used for professional purposes, including professional accreditation and academic qualification;
- Store and reflect upon evidence of their development.

continuing professional development. The overall aims of Flourish (the JISC funded project) were to ease the administrative burden experienced by learning, teaching and research practitioners at the University of Cumbria through the use of PebblePad, who were project partners.

One of the key aims of Flourish was to embed the use of PebblePad into our Postgraduate Certificate in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education (PgCinLTHE). The PgCinLTHE is a three module course offered to all new academic staff (for whom the course is compulsory) and learners from a number of health care providers who support students in practice. It is run by the CDLT.

The university is highly dispersed geographically and the course runs on two sites, with the tutors travelling to deliver the course sessions on the different campuses. The types of assessment for this course are based upon participants reflecting on their own practice. Each year there are approximately 30 students who start the course and complete the first module, although not all of these students go on to the second or third modules.

In the PgCinLTHE we have been requiring use of PebblePad for at least some parts of assessment since 2008. Embedding the use of PebblePad has taken a few years, but we are at a stage now where all the participants' assessments have to be completed through the PebblePad system, and by the end of their course of study, all participants have a record of their work and a portfolio of evidence of their learning.

The Challenge

Before introducing PebblePad all the learners' records of learning, either through the Personal Academic Record or through assessments, were paper based. In addition, there were very few opportunities for consistent formative feedback on assessments. We wanted to seize the opportunity that this emergent technology offered.

> " We wanted to increase efficiency through on-line submission of assignments and avoid the enormous paper-based portfolios of evidence that were being submitted. "

We felt that PebblePad had the potential to increase communication between tutors and learners, particularly formative feedback. We wanted our students to have a body of evidence that they could show their colleagues or if necessary line managers or employers at the end of their study. We wanted this particular group of staff to experience an eportfolio first hand so that they would be prepared if they used an eportfolio with their own students.

The purpose

We were aware of external drivers such as the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) e-learning strategy and the Department for Education and Schools (DfES) strategy. We felt it would be remiss of us to continue to use paper based systems when our remit is to

prepare staff to teach and support learners in a 21st Century world. We wanted to model best practice in the area of on-line submission and the existing systems didn't suit the portfolio style assignment that learners had to submit.

The approach

The eportfolio was introduced on a small scale and users were not required to use it. However, when we identified a lack of engagement by users, we decided to require the use of the eportfolio for at least one assignment. The course team were keen to be able to give formative feedback on assignments and had struggled to do this before the introduction of PebblePad.

The stakeholders were the PgC participants, the tutors, the administrative support staff and to a small degree the external examiner. We anticipated that if we introduced the eportfolio with staff, then they would be encouraged to use it with their own students and have first hand knowledge of the software and how it should be used to support learning.
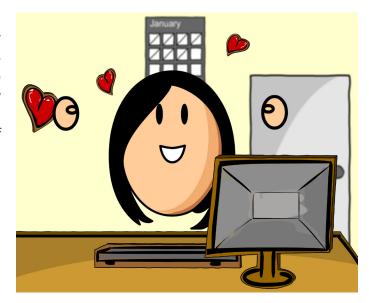
The timeline was at first non existent but when we received JISC funding under the Flourish project, we had to embed the use of the eportfolio into the PgC within two years.

We introduced the learners to PebblePad at the very start of their studies and repeated workshops on how to use the software throughout the first two modules.

The issues

The barriers were numerous. We battled against the perception that this was a one off project. This attitude allowed users to think that it wasn't worth investing time to learn a new piece of software and use it to record and reflect important aspects of their studies.

In addition the tutors involved on the course had to be convinced that, whilst this was a new way of working, the risks were minimal and opportunities to enhance practice would emerge. The users themselves were hesitant about a new way of recording and reflecting on their learning. We had to resist their desire for continued use of Microsoft Word and email.

The result

We now are at a stage where every student and every member of staff at the University of Cumbria has a PebblePad account. This has sent out a clear message that we are no longer running a small-scale project. In fact the software is now regarded as one of the three key institutional technologies installed to promote and enhance learning.

PgCinLTHE participants now have to use PebblePad for every assignment throughout the course. Peer observation 'paperwork' is completed in PebblePad. One of the assignments is a 'patchwork text', which requires learners to write around four teaching and learning themes and then 'stitch' the work together with a reflexive commentary. Learners were encouraged to draw upon evidence from peer observations and reflective diary entries to substantiate their claims. This assignment is presented in a webfolio format with hyperlinks to the evidence.

Other CPD processes and recognition are now aligned to the PgCinLTHE. For example the university's professional standards are aligned to the HEA Professional Standards and all applicants have to use PebblePad to apply for accreditation.

We had anticipated that use of the eportfolio for their own studies would encourage use of the eportfolio with their own students. There isn't much evidence of this yet. The main motivating factor for this particular group of staff to use PebblePad with their own students seems to be seeing other staff use it with students.

The Learning

It took much longer than anticipated for the eportfolio to become embedded in the programme. Some learners (and some staff) struggle to differentiate between the VLE (in our case Blackboard) and PebblePad so this needs to be addressed at the start of a course of learning.

Inevitably some learners will resist using PebblePad but it is recommended that the course team adopt a consistent approach ensuring that all learners use PebblePad for assignments. Using the software has prompted a revision of how technologies are used within the course and even a discussion about whether we have an eportfolio system or a 'personal learning environment'.

It has also changed the nature of assignments, allowing us to design assessment such as the patchwork text which now has to include non text-based artefacts such as audio files or video clips. Some tutors are using the PebblePad blog to support learners as they write their assignments – I would argue that this is not an eportfolio activity but a good learning and teaching method facilitated through a personal learning system.

There is strong evidence that using PebblePad has saved a lot of administrative time and effort. However, this has to be balanced against the amount of support and encouragement this particular group of learners needs to use PebblePad. Long term it is worth the effort and we do feel that we offer the PgCinLTHE participants a range of technologies to support their learning, and that the course team have demonstrated how useful an eportfolio can be to support assessment for and of learning.

In brief

- Have a clear purpose for using the technology.
- Link the use of the technology to assessment.
- Provide tip sheets for the users to get them going.

Acknowledgements