Case Study

From little things, big things grow: The organic propagation of PebblePad

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The Faculty of Education is located across all five La Trobe University campuses. La Trobe University (LTU) offers programs at graduate and undergraduate levels for students to qualify as primary and/or secondary teachers. There are around 1,800 students enrolled at any one time across the Faculty. This case study reports on the implementation of PebblePad across the Faculty in 2008, 2009 and for 2010.

The current practice

Education courses at LTU have previously incorporated some use of portfolios as devices to map prior learning, frame learning experiences or to showcase learning events for the purpose of employment. However, prior to using Pebble-Pad, we relied on the construction of paper-based portfolios or perhaps the development of basic digital portfolios by building html pages in Dreamweaver. Any use of portfolios was largely dependent on individual lecturers and these tasks usually resided within a particular subject. Our students were not supported or encouraged to construct a comprehensive portfolio for their learning.

The challenge

We wanted our students to be able to create a professional portfolio in order to reflect on and represent their learning journey as a pre-service teacher. This portfolio needed to transcend subjects and year levels across their course.

Reflective practice is recognised as an essential element for successful teaching. Through the process of reflection, a teacher considers his or her own performance and the experiences of his or her students in order to improve both teaching and curriculum design. A portfolio that encourages reflective writing provides a catalyst for students to develop an understanding of who they are as teachers and how they might grow and extend their capabilities. Our previous attempts to develop reflective practices with our students tended to focus on the micro, for example, a lesson within a subject rather than as a sustained ongoing process.

The approach

In 2007, the use of digital portfolios in the Faculty of Education was quite limited. At that stage we were using a Learning Management System to support teaching and learning but the electronic management of artefacts was virtually non-existent. In the Bachelor of Education, the students participated in an introductory ICT subject where they developed a digital portfolio as an HTML page, however, the focus was more on the ICT skills for building web pages rather than the content. Our goal is to progressively introduce digital portfolio tasks into our curricula in order to move to a portfolio-based program.

We chose PebblePad as our platform early in 2008 and the Faculty of Education participated in the software trial for the University. We began the trial by simply replacing the existing digital portfolio task in the Bachelor of Education introductory subject with a PebblePad portfolio. In the second semester, with the same set of students, we replaced two additional tasks in two subjects with PebblePad based activities. The university agreed to allow us to continue our trial in 2009 and so we identifed further opportunities for using PebblePad.

Several staff members participated in Advanced PebblePad workshops in February 2009 and we redesigned the tasks from 2008 in light of what we knew about PebblePad and digital portfolios. Additionally a lecturer from a postgrad campus decided to use PebblePad in his program. In the second semester of 2009 we also introduced a reflective portfolio task to the 4th year of the Bachelor of Education as a "capstone" experience.

During 2009 the interest in PebblePad grew as PebblePad experiences were shared in both formal and informal contexts.

Students who had used PebblePad in 2008 requested to use a webfolio to submit work for an elective subject that was normally submitted on a CD. Academics who usually used traditional methods of assessment and submission began to consider how they might use PebblePad and asked for accounts so they could explore the possibilities.

Interest in the course wide digital portfolio concept was also growing. A lecturer from the Faculty visited Alverno College in Milwaukee, US to attend a workshop on integrated assessment that incorporated an integral digital portfolio to showcase obtainment of outcomes. By the middle of 2009 it became apparent that the use of digital portfolios and PebblePad was a direction that the Faculty was prepared to commit to.

The Graduate Diploma of Education, a one-year post degree qualification, was due for major course review and the design team decided that in 2010 PebblePad would be used as a portfolio tool across the course.

Further in 2009, the university launched wide sweeping curriculum reform under the "Design for Learning" banner and so the Faculty of Education decided to incorporate the concept of a digital portfolio in alignment with the Alverno philosophy as part of the Design for Learning response.

In 2010, every student and every lecturer in the Faculty will have a PebblePad account. Students in the Graduate Diploma of Education will use PebblePad as a device for recording, reflecting and presenting across their year program. In the undergraduate courses, lecturers will be actively supported to use PebblePad for both formative and summative assessment tasks. By 2011, digital portfolio tasks will be mapped across the courses. It is expected that the students will have at least one task per semester that contributes to their learning portfolio.

The issues

The concept of an encompassing digital portfolio is massive and if this project was proposed without signifcant lead-in, it is likely that it would face considerable barriers. In this model though, the gentle "propagation" of PebblePad tasks is giving academics time to consider the concept and find a niche where they might operate comfortably.

Of course, early adopters did face difficulties, including technical problems that come from being in trial mode and cynicism from students who perhaps had limited experience with Web 2.0 technologies. In general though, the project has been well accepted and is supported positively at all levels across the university.

The result

This project has stemmed from the work of a few enthusiasts who felt comfortable in trying new technologies to support learning and teaching. While positive outcomes were always anticipated, the extent and widespread integration of the digital portfolio concept across the faculty is perhaps unexpected.

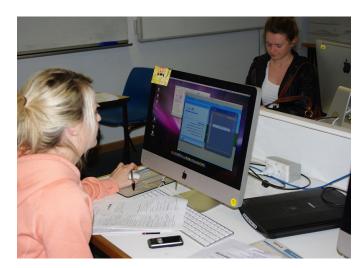Some of the successful implementations so far include:

- The establishment of an embryo 'preprofessional' portfolio for first year preservice teachers
- An 'applied learning' portfolio where final year Primary Education students reflect on and present non-formal learning experiences
- A daily reflective blog for students in an early years curriculum intensive
- The redesign of the one-year graduate teacher qualification to incorporate digital portfolios as a thread throughout the program.
- Establishing PebblePad as a reflective tool for students with a trade background in the Graduate Diploma in Technology Education

Although the full implementation of digital portfolios is still to be realised, the alignment of Faculty and University priorities have proved timely for this initiative.

The learning

While we often assume that large-scale projects with generous funding stand the most chance of success, this case study has shown that cycles of modest but persistent achievement can also provide positive outcomes.

The implementation of PebblePad across the Faculty of Education has followed a familiar pattern of technology implementation (Rogers, 1995) where early adopters lead with innovative ideas, which are then harnessed by the majority when demonstrated outcomes are evident. This model of effectance has proved to be a manageable and sustainable way to integrate digital portfolios across our programs.

In brief

- The implementation of PebblePad in the Faculty of Education at La Trobe University may be likened to organic propagation.
- Cycles of implementation with demonstrated outcomes have helped to persuade academics to consider the digital portfolio as a useful mechanism for supporting teaching and learning.
- The integration of digital portfolios and PebblePad has been adopted by the Faculty of Education as a common and worthwhile goal.

References

Rogers, E.M., 1995. *Diffusion of Innovations* (4th ed.). New York: Free Press

Acknowledgements

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