

Case Study

Teaching old dogs new tricks: A strategy to promote innovative teaching and leadership using eportfolios

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The background context

The University of South Australia introduced the STEP 2010 project in 2008, to improve teaching and learning outcomes through encouraging innovation, and supporting excellent practice in teaching, particularly by incorporating experiential learning opportunities for all undergraduate programs. Over 4.5 million dollars was made available to support the development and it was expected that all Schools would share this money. Our School received funding to develop staff expertise in aspects of experiential learning as they applied to cross-disciplinary integration, work-based learning, service learning, teaching technical skills and teaching large classes. We incorporated the need to understand the

A fundamental underpinning of our approach to experiential learning was Kolb's Learning cycle (Kolb & Kolb, 2005) which emphasises the importance of reflection by the learner.

value of eportfolios as a way for students to record and reflect on their learning and incorporated this into our project. Teams of approximately ten staff members were tasked with developing expertise in one of the areas and disseminating that information to the wider school. The success criterion for the overall project was focused on how this information was translated to student teaching.

The current practice

In terms of eportfolio use, there was no pre-existing practice within the School. However, there were a number of staff using reflective writing, generally in the form of reflective journals. Rather than a problem with the current situation, we looked at eportfolios as an amazing opportunity where we could do what we wanted to do (eg. critical reflecting) but in a way that related to students (e.g. blogs), that provided a better scaffolding for what we wanted (i.e. many needed prompts to focus their writing and avoid a “dear diary” description of events and personalities), acknowledged students desire to use multimedia approaches (i.e. silly photos from their mobile phones!) and provided lots of “extras” that we knew would be useful in guiding their learning (e.g. action plans).

The approach

As said, the main issues were cultural. People were busy, often satisfied with their teaching approaches and cognizant that there were more rewards in improving research outputs than in improving teaching. We approached the project by working with the willing.



The project began with an awareness program about reflective learning that included visiting scholars, workshops and seminars. This was designed to create an appreciation for reflective learning and expose staff to a suite of tools that could assist in improving this aspect of their teaching (one being PebblePad).

We then developed a specific eportfolio team. We actively encouraged our best teachers and new young teachers to be part of this team but certainly welcomed and promoted the “training and education opportunity” to all staff members.

We had three main aims when we began the eportfolio project:

1. To educate academics on the value of reflective thinking;
2. to provide staff with confidence and a degree of expertise in the use of PebblePad so they didn't feel they were only “one page in front of the students”; and
3. to develop a pedagogically sound and strategic approach to implementing and integrating PebblePad across the whole degree program.

The driver for this change was the University mandated Step 2010 project. However, the true motivator for the project was when we began to see the opportunity eportfolios could provide to both staff and students.

To “sweeten the deal” and acknowledge the time people would need to provide to be engaged in this project we also offered \$1500 that could be spent on professional development related to teaching.

The plan is that these core group of staff now skilled in the use of PebblePad will be able to provide encouragement and guidance to a larger network of staff who may need further “proof” of the usefulness of the system to come via a trusted colleague before they themselves are willing to adopt it. As students become more skilled in the use of PebblePad, it is anticipated that expectations from students will also drive adoption of eportfolio in other programs in the future.

Now that we have a base knowledge of the value of eportfolios we are using a whole of program curriculum planning process to identify the most appropriate courses and assessment pieces where PebblePad could be introduced.

The issues

We had great support politically because the DVC Academic was a strong advocate for eportfolios. However, this in itself creates some cultural resistance from staff who are sceptical of top down initiatives. From a technical standpoint, we had satisfactory support.

Our teaching and learning team were brilliant and the IT staff tried to keep up with everyone but were learning a new program themselves and often spending less time with it than the academics involved. The main IT issue related to the institutional technology and how it supported PebblePad. In a nutshell, the system operated like a really old version of Word – much too slow for time obsessed staff.

The biggest issue we faced was a cultural one. We have a university environment where the main focus is research output so many logical academics after weighing their costs and bene-

fits, were not interested in changing their teaching styles because they knew it would take time away from their research, which was more rewarded. In addition, some were simply not interested in changing, and some wanted others to use it first, work out the problems, and assess the benefits.

“ Developing a culture where quality teaching is prized and innovation encouraged is an ongoing challenge despite it being part of the institutional mandate. ”

The result

We now have a small core group of academics introducing PebblePad into specific parts of our degree program from first year.



They are skilled in how to use PebblePad and motivated by the value it can bring to both student learning and their own professional development. In addition to teaching, these individuals are using PebblePad for performance management, developing research plans, and reflective journals of their own teaching.

We have a larger group of academics aware of the concept of eportfolios and a respect for the place of eportfolios within the degree programs. Importantly, academics from across the school have grown in their awareness of the value of reflection within the learning cycle and this has

already translated to more thoughtful student assessment tasks and an increasing sophistication among students in the way they reflect on issues.

The learning

We learned that despite Universities upholding an image of “change agents” and “dynamic thinkers” who are committed to challenging students to “think beyond the box”, many academics are reluctant to change the way they have been teaching for decades.

However, and not surprisingly, we also discovered that they were much more receptive to change once they understood PebblePad was not just another University initiative they were being mandated to adopt, but rather one of a range of pedagogically driven tools that they could consider to help student learning outcomes.

In terms of the approach we took, in hindsight, we would have planned our introduction slightly differently. Firstly, the slowness of how the system operated was related to our University server but introducing the program to staff before this problem was rectified gave some staff an excuse to dismiss the usefulness of the program before they actually trialled it. Secondly and more importantly, we made an erroneous assumption at the beginning of the project concerning the knowledge staff had in terms of teaching practice (and perhaps even interest in teaching). We should have committed more time to making staff aware of the value of critical thinking and the role of reflection in the learning cycle. This underpins the values of PebblePad.

A third “lesson” was to ensure those training your staff have adequate experience and training themselves before they embark on training others. Although this sounds common sense, tight time frames and being involved in multiple projects meant our school trainers were still grappling with various functions and the overall potential of PebblePad when they began training. This situation of novice teaching novice was exactly what we deliberately try to avoid with students. While it had some advantages and most people were sympathetic, this resulted at

times in the early adopters being dumbfounded by a negative criticism of the program that given another month of training they would have been able to justify succinctly and politely explain that the criticism was not so much a problem with the program as a lack of understanding of the optimal way to use an eportfolio (e.g. there were constant comparisons of what various Microsoft products could do better, which were often conversations that missed the point in terms of the purpose of an eportfolio). The lack of ability to quickly respond to criticisms also seemed to provide a suitable excuse for some staff to avoid trialling the system.



Finally, we should have realised the power of cold hard cash and not tied it up to a time frame or specific expenditures. We gave staff \$1500 for participating in the project but said it had to be spent within the financial year on an expense related to professional development in teaching. We may have got better staff uptake had we said instead, it could be spent on marking, conference attendance, a research assistant, anything related to your work, as long as you attend the training courses and develop at least one piece of your course that uses PebblePad.

In brief

- Introducing any eportfolio system needs to begin with a staff who appreciates the need for reflective learning so use pedagogical research rather than policy to drive the introduction of an eportfolio.
- Staff introducing a specific eportfolio system, such as PebblePad, will be more successful if they already have experience and some level of sophistication in using the software.
- Focusing on leaders within your school and early adopters is a useful way to introduce eportfolios.
- The benefits of eportfolios need to be demonstrated to the staff member, not just the students. Providing a financial incentive to entice people to “experiment” is a worthwhile bribe.

References

Kolb, A. and D. A. Kolb, 2005. Learning styles and learning spaces: Enhancing experiential learning in higher education. *Academy of Management Learning and Education* 4(2), pp193-212.

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