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CASE STUDY

Using ePortfolios as a reflective teaching tool

Featuring: Julie Hughes, University of Wolverhampton

Context	- *Approximately 100 students and 5 teachers working in a Postgraduate Certificate in Education in Post-Compulsory Education (PGCE PCE)*
Description	- *Blended classes using online supported learning strategies*
	- *Students document their learning process in an online portfolio*
Technology	- *PebblePad personal learning system, including blogs and ePortfolios and online discussion forums*

Written by Simon McIntyre

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Aims and overview

This case study examines how ePortfolios used in conjunction with blogs, can encourage students to become more critically reflective learners. The benefits and challenges of using ePortfolios are discussed, along with strategies for providing sufficient technical and pedagogical support, to enable teachers and students to confidently use the technology as a collaborative learning tool.

What is an ePortfolio?

An ePortfolio, is simply a website that enables users to collate digital evidence of their learning. Each student can maintain and expand their own individual ePortfolio over the duration of a class, a degree or career. As it is a growing documentation of achievement, it can make an excellent tool for reflective learning practices, easily allowing students and teachers to look back over previous work, assumptions, discussions and processes that they have archived. It may contain a wide range of digital files, including but not limited to, text or PDF documents, videos, sound files, images and links to other websites or online resources.
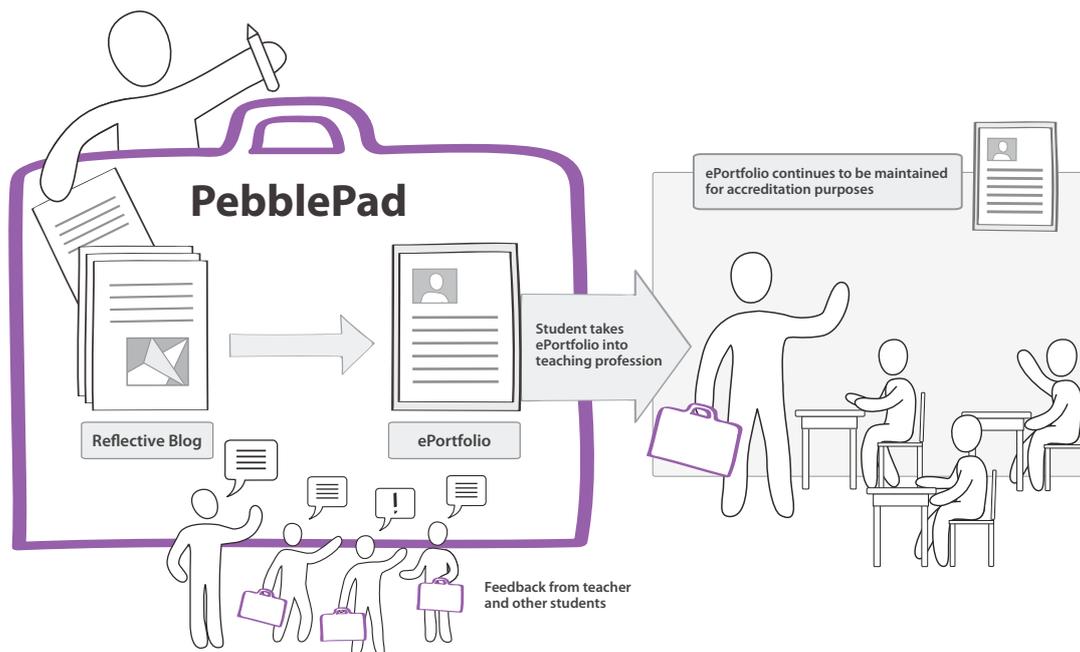
In this case study, students are asked to maintain both a blog and an ePortfolio in a system called PebblePad. The blogs are used for daily reflection about the students' learning experiences, and facilitate a high level of communication with peers and teacher feedback. Various learning milestones are documented by the students in their ePortfolios, and submitted for final assessment. When students graduate, they are able to take their ePortfolios with them to help support their professional careers.

Other examples of ePortfolios

There are a range of different ePortfolio systems available. Below are some examples:

- *ePortfolio* www.eportfolio.org
- *PebblePad* www.PebblePad.com.au
- *Desire2Learn* www.desire2learn.com/eportfolio/highered

Case study outcomes quick summary

Key benefits

- *Increase in peer and collaborative learning amongst both students and teachers*
- *The flexibility of an ePortfolio accommodates a range of learning styles, allowing students to use text, video, audio, images etc to express themselves and their ideas*
- *Teachers have reported being able to better monitor students' progress, and the ability to more easily form supportive relationships with students over the course of their study*
- *Students have reported higher levels of feedback from their teachers, which has encouraged deeper levels of self reflection about their own learning and professional practice*
- *Both student and teachers have commented that the quality and levels of collaborative peer learning have increased compared to when paper based portfolios were used*
- *All of the students process work is recorded in their blog and ePortfolio, making reflection easier*
- *Students develop a professional ePortfolio during the class that they can export to the professional ePortfolio system used in the UK as part of teacher accreditation, giving them a working understanding of the professional accreditation system, and a head start in the industry*

Key issues to consider

- *Many students were apprehensive about using technology at the beginning of the class, and needed a high level of support to get started, and throughout the semester*
- *Staff also needed a significant amount of training and support to become familiar enough with both blogs and ePortfolios to teach confidently and effectively*
- *Care must be taken to examine how using an ePortfolio supports the learning outcomes and activities with the class. The technology should enhance the learning experience, and not become a barrier or disincentive*

Motivation for adopting an online teaching strategy

Julie Hughes is the Head of the Department for Post Compulsory Education at the University of Wolverhampton. A number of years ago, a colleague of Julie's developed [PebblePad](#), an online ePortfolio and personal learning system, and asked her if she would test it in one of her classes. The Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) in which Julie teaches, had previously been taught using paper-based portfolios. Students would put together paper documents throughout the semester, passing them between their teacher and peers to receive hand written comments on their work. Julie was interested to see if this new technology could better facilitate the process, and also encourage greater levels of peer engagement, collaborative learning, and critical reflection among her students.

Planning

Careful planning was essential for the implementation of ePortfolios within the PGCE. Julie highlighted the following issues as being of primary concern during this process:

- *Initially, it was important to examine the existing curriculum and identify activities that were already based around collaboration, or could benefit from peer feedback and discussion. From this point it was assessed how the technology could help facilitate these processes effectively*

- *The structure of the ePortfolio was designed to mirror the format of the old paper based portfolio. This was done so that the method of learning would be familiar for both staff and students, and to help ease the transition from paper based to online learning and teaching*

- *Supporting staff and students in the development of technical competencies was a top priority. To this end special workshops were designed to assist staff in developing both technical and pedagogical skills to use the technology effectively, and to develop confidence in their own abilities*

- *In addition, a peer with existing online teaching experience is assigned to new staff to mentor them throughout the semester by modelling best practice, offering support and advice and team teaching.*

Teaching

Each student is given their own blog and ePortfolio within PebblePad, supported by a series of online discussion forums. The blog, used in the first semester, is where students engage with each other and the teacher in conversation and critical analysis to build ideas, develop understanding and reflect upon practice *(for more information about the use of blogs, please refer to the case studies '*[Using Blogs for peer feedback and discussion](#)*' and '*[Teaching with web 2.0 technologies: Twitter, wikis & blogs](#)*')*. The ePortfolio is a customisable space where students document their progress and present their work for final assessment during the second semester of the program. Julie highlighted the following aspects of the teaching experience as being worthy of note:

- *The PGCE is an intense nine month class, and it was important that the technology did not become a frustrating aspect of the learning experience for students. Therefore it was a priority to support them in developing an understanding and trust of the technology*

- *To this end, face-to-face classes about using the technology are built into the curriculum. Every six weeks, students and their teacher work with a technical support staff member in an IT suite on campus, practicing and undertaking activities using the blogs and ePortfolios to build their confidence*

- *Students and staff are also taught about acceptable* [netiquette](#) *(how to behave and communicate online) at these face-to-face sessions to improve their ability to collaborate effectively*

- *A peer support system is also used with students, where those that have recently graduated from the class can become 'Pebble Pals' or 'Blog Buddies'. These graduates work with new students, or those having difficulties using the technology, and have this time credited towards their professional teaching hours*

- *Upon graduating from the program, students become members of the* [Institute for Learning](#)*, the UK professional body for teachers in further education. They are required to maintain an ePortfolio to*

document their teaching experience and <u>professional development for accreditation purposes</u>. It was important that the PGCE prepared students for this method of working by exposing them to ePortfolios and teaching them best practice is using them effectively in a supportive environment, before they must do so professionally

- *The ePortfolios are used to map a career trajectory for the students. The format is based upon that used in the professional sector so that students develop an understanding of the documentation and accreditation processes required for professional practice within the industry*

- *At the conclusion of the program, students are able to export the contents of their class ePortfolio directly into the professional ePortfolio system, giving them a head start on building the documentation they require to become accredited practitioners.*

Conclusion

Using an ePortfolio is ideal for any discipline where teachers have an active interest in monitoring and assisting in the process of students' construction of knowledge and abilities. The technology affords students the opportunity to easily maintain a record of their learning journey, providing them with a means of critical reflection, and giving them an opportunity to engage in peer feedback. We hope the framework exemplified in this case study will provide a conceptual basis for further exploration of how ePortfolios or blogs could be used in your own teaching practice.

Additional information

PebblePad website
<u>www.PebblePad.com.au</u>

Moving forward with e-portfolios: challenges, tensions and inspirations (an ePortfolio by Julie Hughes)
<u>http://PebblePad.wlv.ac.uk/viewasset.aspx?oid=883648&type=webfolio</u>

Additional reading*

Botterill, M., Allan, G., & Faulkner, M. (2009). <u>Implementing a trial of a scalable enterprise ePortfolio system at RMIT University: a case study</u>. Paper presented at the Learning Forum London, ePotfolio 2009, London.

University, London, June 22-24. See conference proceeding. Housego, S., & Parker, N. (2009). <u>Positioning ePortfolios in an integrated curriculum</u>. Education + Training, 51(5/6), 408-421.

Hughes, J. (2008). <u>Letting in the Trojan mouse: Using an eportfolio system to re-think pedagogy</u>. Paper presented at the Hello! Where are you in the landscape of educational technology?, Melbourne.

Hughes, J., & Purnell, E. (2008). Blogging for beginners? Using blogs and eportfolios in Teacher Education. Paper presented at the Sixth International Conference on Networked Learning, Networked Learning, Halkidiki.

Malita, L. (2009). E-portfolios in an educational and occupational context. Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences, 1(1), 2312-2316.

Miller, R., & Morgaine, W. (2009). The benefits of e-portfolios for students and faculty in their own words. Peer Review, 11(1), 8-12.

__Note:__ *Some readings are held in subscription only databases. In most cases accessing the link from your institution's network will enable access.*

Acknowledgements

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To find out more about the Learning to Teach Online project, or to view the video component of this episode, please visit the COFA Online Gateway.

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About the project

The Learning to Teach Online project is a free professional development resource designed to help teachers from any discipline, whether experienced in online teaching or not, to gain a working understanding of successful online teaching pedagogies that they can apply in their own unique teaching situations. It hopes to encourage dialogue, discussion and the sharing of ideas about online learning and teaching across disciplines and between institutions around the world.

About COFA Online

COFA Online is an academic unit at the College of Fine Arts (COFA), The University of New South Wales (UNSW), Sydney, Australia. It has been innovating online pedagogy, academic professional development and effective online learning strategies since 2003.

About The University of New South Wales

UNSW has an enrolment of approximately 40,000 students, and is the leading international university in Australia with over 10,000 international enrolments from over 130 nations. UNSW was also ranked as the top university in 2009 in the Australian Government Learning and Teaching Performance Fund for the quality of its teaching.

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