

# Flourish: the eCPD Project: Supporting the integration of eportfolios for continuing professional development.

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## **Abstract**

Recent years have seen an increased focus on the use of eportfolios within Higher Education to aid student progression and achievement. However, the potential benefits of eportfolios as a tool to augment the continuing personal and professional development of staff remain an under researched area. The University of Cumbria's Flourish project aims to partly address this imbalance by initiating the wide-scale implementation of eportfolios into the existing working routines of academic, service and administrative personnel. At the heart of this process is a focus on the training and support structures required to support the sustainable integration of an eportfolio within the context of an institution undergoing significant transition. This paper reports on the delivery of a two-day 'e-learning retreat', assessing its impact as an original approach to supporting deep integration of the eportfolio software. Building on a continuous process of research and evaluation, analysis suggests that the retreat successfully addressed challenges associated with the introduction of new technologies. However, issues remain in relation to the long-term integration of eportfolios that will inform future iterations of the support put in place.

## **Keywords**

eportfolios; continuing professional development; wide-scale implementation; support for integration

## **Introduction**

The Flourish project is a JISC funded study managed by the Centre for the Development of Learning & Teaching (CDLT) at the newly created University of Cumbria. The core aims of Flourish focus on monitoring and evaluating the potential benefits of eportfolios for staff within an institution undergoing significant change and expansion. During the project lifetime (2007-2009), Flourish will instigate the large-scale integration of an eportfolio system into the continuing professional development (CDP) of faculty and service personnel. To this end, five key areas have been identified where eportfolios have the potential to enhance existing work practices. These form the context within which Flourish aims to both embed the use of eportfolios and critically evaluate their impact:

1. As a fundamental element within the University of Cumbria's Postgraduate Certificate in Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (PgCinLTHE), a course for lecturers new to higher education;
2. As part of the annual staff appraisal process;
3. To enhance work with professional accreditation bodies (e.g. Higher Education Academy (HEA), and assess the efficacy of applications by eportfolio;
4. As a means of recording and sharing users' experience of attendance at conferences via a shared, central repository;

5. To aid the development and sustainability of cross-departmental working relationships within a newly formed, geographically dispersed multi-site institution.

While a majority of staff at the University are engaged with elements of these five areas, the incorporation of an eportfolio is a new and potentially challenging concept. As a result, a series of training and support processes have been put in place to underpin the gradual integration aimed for within Flourish. In response to the demands of a changing institution and the current lack of familiarity with utilising eportfolios for continuing professional development, these processes purposefully incorporate different levels of participation, time and expertise on behalf of staff.

A key example has been the initiation of a two-day 'e-learning retreat', which provided teams of staff with the opportunity to receive in-depth guidance in the use of eportfolio software. In comparison to ongoing support provided by a rolling programme of workshops, demonstrations and individual consultancy, the retreat presented an original means of developing both familiarity with the eportfolio and experience in applying it to CPD practices. During the retreat and following its completion, participants were asked for their reactions to the chosen eportfolio system and their thoughts on its potential implications for their existing work practices. Analysis of the participants' responses provides real insights into the barriers to wide-scale implementation and the relative impact of the e-learning retreat as a means to support such a process.

The following sections present the background to Flourish, its focus and methodology, before discussing four core themes developed from the analysis of the retreat. The final section builds on these themes to consider implications for the continuing support for eportfolio integration within our institution.

## **Background**

The use of eportfolios as an aid to student progression and achievement has attracted increasing focus within the Higher Education (H.E.) sector in recent times. Indeed, the use of 'personal online learning space(s)' is promoted by the UK Government in the latest DfES strategy for e-learning development (DfES, 2005, p.11). Accordingly, the processes by which eportfolios are embedded, the challenges facing their integration and the potential benefits their use presents, have been considered and evaluated from a range of perspectives (see Strivens 2006 on assessment; Mason et al 2004 on online assessment; Wickersham & Chambers 2006 on technology enhanced learning). As a result, it is now possible to reflect on the broader lessons that can be learnt from the integration of eportfolios into the procedures that characterize H.E.

In relation to the experience and practice of students, Lorenzo and Ittleson identify key questions that should inform institutional engagement with eportfolios, centred on their promotion, support and critical evaluation (2005, p.4). Such questions are timely and relevant. The potential benefits of eportfolios can only be fully realised by a carefully planned process of integration that targets their use where it adds the most value to existing work practices. Furthermore, the success of such integration must be evaluated in context, coloured by the experiences of those concerned. Finally, support networks and resources must be aligned with these integrated processes at the point of need.

## **Project Focus**

While these aspirations must be addressed from a variety of perspectives, the Flourish project emphasises the potential benefits of utilising eportfolios for the personal and professional development of staff. This rests upon the belief that such an approach delivers a number of inherent benefits.

By providing a central 'personal space' where resources and experiences can be collated, stored and reflected upon, the professional development of staff is linked to a defined, cohesive structure. As the related

applications become routine and familiar, structured development may more readily become integrated into existing practices. Furthermore, as staff levels of comfort with the technology increase, they are perhaps better equipped to support students in their use of eportfolios. Finally, this focus provides an opportunity to consider the wide-scale implementation of a new technology and how this needs to be planned and supported from a staff development perspective.

Flourish foregrounds the need for teaching and learning practitioners to engage with eportfolio technology first hand in order to understand its implications, recognise its advantages and plan well-evaluated forms of integration. Furthermore, the project supports the argument that use of an eportfolio should be seen as a 'logical step in the development of a teaching portfolio' (Kahn, 2004, p.36). While this is potentially controversial, others go further. Stefani states that 'the use of technology as the medium for reflective portfolios should not in fact require any justification' given that reflection on teaching practice should now be an explicit and recognised aspect of a 'scholarly approach to teaching' (Stefani, 2005, p.11). Despite such views, there is little evidence to suggest that eportfolios are being used to support CPD in H.E. in the UK at the current time, the focus of evaluatory work almost solely on the student experience.

While Flourish hopes to balance out the assumptions inherent in such work, the introduction of new technologies into the existing work practices of staff presents a number of significant challenges. These centre on the lack of available or additional time to learn fresh skills, apprehension at the introduction of new procedures and a lack of opportunity to engage with new technologies in a low risk environment.

## **The Flourish approach to these challenges**

Recent studies into the utilisation of eportfolios for CPD suggest that users who lack sufficient skills or confidence with information technology (IT) are less likely to persevere when faced with new innovations and may therefore miss the opportunities eportfolios can provide (Dagely & Berrington, 2005; Wickersham & Chambers, 2006). As a result, the creation of a positive, low-risk environment is crucial when encouraging staff to explore the potential benefits of online practices. Within this, recognition and reward for innovative staff should be aligned with technical support in order to encourage staff experimentation with alternative teaching and learning skills (Brown, 2002).

In response, the Flourish project has developed a series of support and training mechanisms that are aligned with a rolling process of research and evaluation. The aim of this iterative approach is to critically assess the relative impact of each form of support as it is trialled, in order to further understand the integration process and inform future patterns of support. At the current time, a number of approaches have been initiated and are under evaluation. These include the use of opt-in workshops and targeted consultations with users, demonstrations of specific applications to relevant University committees and teams of faculty staff and the gradual embedding of the eportfolio into compulsory responsibilities. The latter has centred upon the use of the eportfolio for assessment submission with the postgraduate certificate in learning and teaching for new staff and as a feature of the annual appraisal process.

However, perhaps the most innovative training approach trialled so far has been a two-day 'e-learning retreat' planned and hosted by the project team to encourage and support integration of the eportfolio. While developed in consultation with the software developer in direct response to the aims of the project, a similar technique has been used elsewhere to introduce staff to new ways of working. Simpson and Layne describe a 'teaching portfolio weekend' during which staff were taken away from campus and the 'demands and distractions of the office' (Simpson & Layne, 2004, p.96). In order to create an atmosphere in which staff could engage with the eportfolio, the Flourish approach has been to combine the benefits of time-away with a sense of reward and kudos at being invited to attend.

A call for applications from course and departmental teams interested in attending the retreat was distributed to all members of academic staff. Within their applications, teams were asked about to justify their participation in the event in relation to their interest in Flourish, their intended use of the eportfolio software and their contribution to the wider project. Furthermore, their submissions had to be approved by their Dean of Faculty, ensuring that the event and its objectives were acknowledged at a senior level. Following the application process, four teams of staff, comprising of 14 staff in total, were selected who represented a broad range of disciplines and practice areas, including the School of Business and Enterprise and Nursing and Midwifery. This variety added to the event and the project team's message that eportfolios presented real benefits within all areas of practice and personal development.

The venue of the retreat was purposefully chosen to provide the required facilities and act as a reward for the time being dedicated by the teams of staff. The choice of location linked to the detailed planning of the event itself. A positive, risk-free environment was aimed for, conducive to working with new technologies and systems, in which participants were freed from their everyday responsibilities and afforded the time to consider eportfolios in relation to their CPD. A series of hands-on sessions were facilitated by a team of educational and software developers from the University and Pebble Learning, the provider of the chosen eportfolio. Activities aimed to form links between the teams, with the intention that these would continue following the retreat and help to embed the eportfolio at the 'grassroots' level of practice. During the retreat and following its conclusion, evaluation of the impact of the event commenced, alongside analysis of the wealth of qualitative data provided by the participants. This research and evaluation is intended to provide insights into how integration of eportfolios should be managed and inform the next iteration of support put in place within the Flourish project.

## **Methodology**

The methodological approach taken within Flourish is based on a belief that the support for integration initiated within the project should be shaped by the needs, experiences and real-world contexts of staff within the University. As a result, the research team regard the collection of data and the continuing process of evaluation as an ongoing conversation, enabling the ideas, concerns and frames of reference of staff to direct each new phase of the project's development. In these terms, the collation and treatment of qualitative data gathered during the retreat is influenced by a Grounded Theory approach (Strauss and Corbin, 1998) to analysis. As such, the research team acknowledge that their role on the retreat and professional relationships with the participants potentially influence their interpretation of the data. To both counter this influence and recognise that the assimilation of technology is a long term process, the research design triangulates different forms of data collection over the life-span of the project and utilises external research assistants as appropriate.

Qualitative data was gathered during the retreat using various interview, reflexive and observational techniques. These combined participants' reflections on their expectations and experiences of the event; research memos kept by the research team throughout the sessions and more structured videoed interviews. The latter focused on participants' views of the retreat from a staff development perspective and their personal reaction to using eportfolio for CPD. In line with the longitudinal research design employed, data collection has continued following the retreat. An anonymous online questionnaire was sent out to the participants 10 weeks after the retreat, asking about their use of the eportfolio. In addition, a series of follow up interviews and a 'catch-up' meeting are planned over the coming weeks to provide further insights into the realities and challenges of utilising an eportfolio for CPD. Finally, while logon statistics are available via the eportfolio, the research team have been careful not to base assumptions or conclusions on the success of the retreat on this information at the current time.

## Analytical Themes

The retreat provided a wealth of qualitative data that suggests key themes for analysis and insights into support for integration. In the present context, four themes are particularly worthy of note. The first theme relates to the benefits of providing a secure window of time and a supportive environment in which staff can engage with the eportfolio software and consider its potential uses and implications.

This aspect of the retreat received universally positive comments from the attendees. Their responses indicate the extent to which being able to 'get away from the normal work environment' and 'everyday pressures' was not only valued, but essential if they were to give the eportfolio 'anywhere near the concentration and attention it deserves'. In addition to being able to avoid 'phone calls and folk with questions', the dedicated focus and support enabled by the two-days away were considered particularly crucial to the experience, as one respondent notes;

With it being a two-day thing it means we can have instant gratification. We come here and we don't know how to do anything and we leave after two days knowing everything we need to know...

While the lecturer above qualified her response in relation to what else there was to learn about the software, her enthusiasm demonstrates the degree to which the structure of the retreat presented a change to participants' usual experience of training. A colleague agreed, drawing comparisons with a workshop she had recently attended on the same eportfolio tool,

I did the three hour training (...) loved it, was really enthused about it, and then it just slipped away...

The implications of this contrasting experience are particularly interesting, not least in terms of their repercussions for the wider support structures underpinning the Flourish project. However, the comparison rests on the assumption that the knowledge and experience gained during the retreat will not just 'slip away'. While this assertion appears justified to an extent, post-workshop evaluation perhaps offers qualifications that must be considered; this is returned to shortly.

A second theme developed alongside the importance of being able to take time to concentrate and focus without interruption. Throughout their interviews, participants indicated the impact of the team basis of the retreat. As well as providing a team-building opportunity and the chance for friendly competition, working in teams added to the store of knowledge on which each team member could draw when back in their normal working context. This was captured by one respondent in particular;

We have been able to build on so much and I know that even if there is stuff I won't have picked up chances are that between the three of us we have probably got enough to survive...

Such points were further developed by the stated aims of the participants concerning their actions following the retreat, each team in some way noting the potential of the eportfolio for keeping in touch across a distributed institution. One colleague signalled the ability to 'keep the information flow just much more alive and active' as a real advantage of the eportfolio tool. Similarly members of a team based in a central service unit grounded the benefits of the tool in the transitions currently underway within the institution,

We've got new members who have joined the unit since the University of Cumbria has come into being and we're very keen to get people who are dispersed into the team and [the eportfolio] will be a lot easier than trying to do it with a phone call (...) people can review and comment and they are going to get four different aspects of team effort

While the quotations above indicate the positive views of the participants regarding the eportfolio and the support provided by the retreat, there was an implicit perception that these benefits came at a price. One respondent made this clear, noting that while having a ‘dedicated chunk of time’ was crucial if she was to concentrate on the software, she felt ‘guilty’ for being out of contact. This sentiment connects to the third analytical theme, the difficulty of separating the *professional* from their *profession*. The data suggests that the basis of H.E. practice in dedicated professionals focused on supporting student learning, presents real challenges when trying to augment the CPD of those same professionals. While Flourish aims to enable staff to better support students’ use of eportfolios by first becoming confident users themselves, staff automatically relate such innovations to their students’ learning, in a sense bypassing the potential benefits for their own practice development. This issue was commented on directly by one participant,

...Like all lecturers we think about how we can use this with our students but we need first to get a grip on it ourselves and utilise it and see how it works

Few of the attendees showed this degree of self-awareness. However, a number presented telling responses that further emphasise an apparent hierarchy within which their professional development falls below a focus on student learning. For example, when asked on day two how she would utilise the eportfolio following the retreat, one participant explained that she would ‘try and think of other ways of using it, so both student related, my own record keeping, loads of stuff, my CPD’. Given the focus of the retreat sessions on continuing professional development, the presentation of CPD some way behind ‘student’ concerns, is indicative of the difficulties faced by the project team.

In addition to presenting challenges for educational developers, the clear prioritisation of the participants’ professional roles over and above their personal development, links to the fourth and final analytical theme. The concept of *momentum* was apparent within the interviews conducted during the retreat and in the post-workshop online questionnaire. Taken together, these sources indicate that the need to maintain momentum of eportfolio use is absolutely critical if continued integration of the software is to occur. Furthermore, the retreat participants were aware of this, raising the issue unprompted during the interviews. One experienced lecturer described her intention to start using the eportfolio immediately upon her return to work, as she would need

...To get in and have a go, because this is the essential next bit. If I was to leave it a week and not do anything it would just drift away from me. But I am determined that that won’t happen...

The participants were all too aware that once back in their normal working contexts, their personal development would again take a back seat to the time demands, responsibilities and student focus from which the retreat provides a temporary escape. As such, they realised the need to keep up the momentum provided by the retreat in the form of hands on use of the eportfolio tool. If the latter faltered, the ‘danger’ would be that one would ‘just to slip back into old habits’ of ‘forget what to do’.

Despite this pre-emptive planning, the evidence suggests that the participants were right to express these concerns. While at an early stage, preliminary analysis of the existing post-retreat data makes it clear that a range of barriers have hindered use of the eportfolio following the event’s conclusion. These barriers are almost entirely linked to the time-pressures staff face, the very element the eportfolio is intended to help staff manage more effectively. Furthermore, the perceptions of staff regarding their roles again seem to be a factor negating integration. One participant puts the latter succinctly, noting that time is the main factor in her lack of use, as the eportfolio is ‘a personal tool and there is little time for the personal’. Although initially disappointing, such findings are valuable to Flourish in their ability to inform the next iteration of the support put in place. Lessons from the retreat and experiences since its completion have highlighted a range of issues that the research team need to address as the project moves forward.

## Ongoing Development

Ongoing analysis of the impact of the retreat as a form of support for integration provides a number of insights. In terms of positives, it appears that the overall model was well received; staff emphasised the value of having protected time away from the pressures of their everyday routines, benefited from the team approach and grasped the benefits of the eportfolio for their working practices. Furthermore, analysis suggests that the retreat was successful in terms of providing the participants' knowledge of the software and how to navigate its various applications.

Where the retreat proved less successful was in supporting the required momentum and continued integration of the eportfolio following the retreat's conclusion. It is clear that additional measures need to be put in place to help staff assimilate the eportfolio into their existing work practices and CPD activities on a continuous and long-term basis. One approach may be to focus the retreat on more specific agreed outcomes. For instance, the original intention of the retreat was to allow participants to determine how they would use an eportfolio once back at work. It was hoped that, in unison with the other forms of support initiated under Flourish, this would help to develop the 'grassroots' integration of the eportfolio tool and dissemination of its potential benefits. However, building towards the completion of a finished artefact or marker of completion may provide a stronger structure and direction to the retreat. A possible solution relates to one of the key strands of Flourish outlined in the introduction, the demonstration of professional standards. Linking the facilities within the eportfolio to the increasing necessity of providing evidence in support of the attainment of agreed professional standards would perhaps help staff to recognise and defend the significance of the eportfolio for their practice, justifying time for its use within their time-pressured contexts.

Linked to this refocusing of the retreat, it may as a result be necessary to re-think the participants who are encouraged to take part. It is perhaps the reality that a greater impact would be seen if staff with management and leadership roles were invited to participate. By allowing such individuals to engage with the eportfolio tool and understand its potential benefits in terms of time and task management and effective working, others within the institution may, over time, have a greater chance of reaping the rewards. Such managers will ultimately decide if their staff should be provided the time to utilise the eportfolios and their support is required if Flourish is to successfully integrate eportfolios into existing working patterns for the benefit of both staff and students. There is perhaps therefore more value in targeting them from the outset, as opposed to enthusiastic staff who are less able to justify the time needed to practice new ways of working.

The research team feel that the solution potentially lies somewhere between these two poles. Future iterations of the retreat will further develop the model trialled so far. The specific focus of defined outcomes will be incorporated and the benefits of the team approach will be developed by ensuring that participating teams include members with line-management responsibility. Throughout, an emphasis on continuous research and evaluation will maintain a critical perspective and continue to inform the core aims of Flourish.

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