Eportfolios: a student perspective

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Abstract

This paper looks at the learner experience of using an eportfolio from the perspective of the part time, non-traditional learner enrolled on the Post Graduate Certificate in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education at the University of Cumbria. The learner, who is also employed at Cumbria as an academic librarian, reflects upon the use of an eportfolio to support a post graduate course. In addition the author has worked to engage with the eportfolio by aligning use to existing work practice. She has logged this experience and discusses the advantages and disadvantages of eportfolio use in educational and professional contexts and considers the implications for learner support in an era when UK universities are widening participation in Higher Education.

Keywords

eportfolio, widening participation, library anxiety

Introduction

This paper looks at the learner experience of using an eportfolio from the perspective of the part time, non-traditional learner enrolled on the Post Graduate Certificate (PgC) in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education (HE). The learner focuses on personal engagement with the eportfolio and relates this to their role of support within the university setting.

Background

2006/2007 students enrolled on the University of Cumbria's Post Graduate Certificate (PgC) in Learning and teaching in Higher Education (HE) are participants in the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) funded pilot designed to look at the potential value of an eportfolio; in this instance to the part time post graduate learner in HE.

The post graduate programme aims to develop the learner's interest, knowledge and understanding in the practice of teaching and the support of learning in HE. It is designed to develop the student as a reflective practitioner with the skills and motivation to continue as an independent lifelong learner with a commitment to scholarship and research (University of Cumbria 2007). Learners are encouraged to critically reflect on their experience as a learner in relation to the programme, to gather and submit evidence of their reflective practice, to gather assignment information and other useful support material and to share ideas, innovation and experience with their peers and lecturers.

Theoretically learners registered on the programme are ideal candidates to use the eportfolio. The application can act as a one stop store for an ongoing reflective log and action plan, personal information, an evolving *curriculum vitae*, a repository supporting literature, assignments and feedback and a secure medium to share ideas and receive constructive comment to aid professional development and record progress.

This study is particularly relevant to the information professional involved in the support of United Kingdom university students. UK Government has a policy of widening participation to HE, (HMSO 2003), (DfES 2003). The plan is to increase not only the numbers of young people entering higher education, but also the proportion from under-represented groups, for example those from lower income families, people with

disabilities and from ethnic minorities. Many of the non traditional learners targeted will also have left full time education prior to the information revolution, will have complex and competing needs and will opt to study part time. Nationally in the UK 42% of first year undergraduates are part time (National Statistics Online 2007) and at the new University of Cumbria around 60% of learners starting in 2007 will be studying in part time mode (Boyle 2007). Merrill (2001) describes how many factors
'..impact on the learning experience of adults, finance, practical issues in relation to access to the library, relationships with partners and families and coping with multiple roles', p.16.
The author of this work appreciates the debilitating and demotivating effects of anxiety in academic situations (Jiao and Onwuegbuzie, 1999[1], 2002, 2003) (Cleveland, 2004). Especially apprehension is likely to be enhanced in a relatively high-tech HE environment (Collins and Veal, 2004) and amongst non-traditional and part time learners, (Jiao and Onwuegbuzie 1999[2]) (Given, 2002) (Glaze, 2002). It is anticipated that this work will inform future practice.

The part time PgC is aimed at professionals working within nursing and midwifery and at newly appointed university academic and support staff. Those registered vary in confidence and experience. It may be erroneous to generalise, but discussion with both lecturers and learners indicates that PgC cohorts usually comprise non-traditional learners who work full time in highly pressured (often new to them) roles. Learners on the programme need to become familiar with a range of supporting ICT and applications, a university network, email, a virtual learning environment (VLE), an online library catalogue and password controlled access to electronic academic literature. Some learners lack confidence with ICT and many may feel they have little time to engage with a new application unless compelled to or unless the application is of immediate demonstrable value.

The author of this paper enrolled on the PgC in January 2007. She is a trained librarian recently employed within Learning and Information Services (library) at the University of Cumbria; her job is to ensure that hard copy and electronic library resources match the needs of university users and to ensure that all users are able to exploit those resources to the full by delivering training and workshops. Although an information professional and familiar with the range of applications designed to support the programme, the author represents the non-traditional, part time post graduate learner in that they left full time education a very long time before the information revolution and has acquired skills through formal and informal continuing professional development (CPD).

This work will look at the non-traditional student's experience of using an eportfolio as a tool. In particular in recording a reflective log and action plan, as an area to store personal information relevant for professional development, as a repository for supporting literature, assignments and feedback and as a secure medium to share ideas and receive constructive comment to aid professional development and to record progress.
The paper looks at:
• the motivation of the specific non-traditional learner to engage with the eportfolio
• the value of the learner's engagement with the eportfolio application
• whether other systems would have been as useful, or more useful than the eportfolio application
• a potential area for development
To determine these four aspects the author reflected upon the initial experience of the eportfolio as a tool to support the PgC. More latterly the author kept a log of the experience of logging onto and expanding the use of the eportfolio application for three seven day periods and reflected on those findings.

The reflection

As explained in the Background section I am an academic librarian employed full time at the University of Cumbria. My job is to match library resources to user need and to deliver information literacy training to students and colleagues. The training I delivery ranges from very basic IT skills to workshops on how to access and evaluate academic material in hard copy and electronic format. I enrolled on the PgC to develop my teaching skills and to enhance the support I provide for learners. The eportfolio was piloted with the

cohort, basic training was provided and participation with the application was encouraged but not mandatory. This was my first experience of using an eportfolio and I tried to engage with the application from the start. More recently, and in line with the aims of the Flourish project , I have attempted to integrate the eportfolio into my existing work practices. University of Cumbria staff were offered an opportunity to attend a Flourish project two day e-learning retreat to engage with the eportfolio software (Howard and Chesney 2008) but unfortunately the event clashed with other work commitments and I was unable to attend.

I recorded my experience of using the eportfolio; at the outset in a notebook and more latterly in the form of an eportfolio blog. I used the web-log to reflect upon the value and potential value of the eportfolio in my professional development and current work practices.

- First, I will discuss the motivation that informed my engagement and my early experience of the PgC-related eportfolio use
- Secondly, I will reflect on my effort to integrate the eportfolio into my existing work practices
- Thirdly, I will discuss the value of the eportfolio in relation to existing methods and applications. In particular I will consider ease of use, temporal burden and whether the eportfolio reduces administrative load, immediately or in the long run by allowing me to do what I already do more effectively. Also, I will reflect on whether the eportfolio provides an opportunity to systematise tasks that are currently only done in an unsystematic or *ad hoc* way.
- Finally, I will briefly look at an area where I think the eportfolio will add value to existing practice within my team

Motivation for engagement with the eportfolio

Niemi *et al* (1998) describe how adult learners, 'often feel impelled to take an active part in their own learning' when compared to traditional younger learners. Niemi and colleagues suggest several reasons why this may be the case, including a desire not to waste precious time and a determined focus on career goals. What they do not explicitly mention is the aspiration to please and impress, a wish to do the right thing so that others think well of you. My honest reflection is that my initial motivation for using the eportfolio was just that, to impress my lecturers with my willingness and ability to engage. On reflection, it would be absurd for me to not take advantage of the opportunity the Flourish project offers to learn about a new and potentially significant ICT development.

Secondly, I know that reflecting on my own growth as a learner has, and continues, to develop my ability to support the learners I work with. The learners I support are both traditional undergraduates and non-traditional part timers. Placing myself into the role of the learner reminds me just how much anxiety and pressure there is associated with that position. Learners, of all level of competency and confidence, are often reluctant to admit bewilderment.

Many students come to university already familiar with a range of networking applications such as Facebook. My third motivation relates to a desire to be cognoscente with the kind of technologies my students may use every day. In essence, I do not want to appear completely out of date and incompetent in relation to new technologies well-known to those learners I support who are at ease inhabiting a personal digital space.

Early PgC related experience of the eportfolio

At the start of the PgC the eportfolio did provide a single, and crucially, secure place to write and store my reflective log of teaching sessions and to compile an action plan of steps needed to develop my practice in the direction I wanted it to go. I also used the application to store the articles and links to web resources that informed my work. Much of the PgC assessment was based upon personal reflective practice and I was able to pull together selected reflections, action plans and references and submit my work to a tutor for comment by using the Share facility.

The above description simplifies my experience. The application is most appealing but at the stage was also

absolutely unfamiliar. I was not confident so I took what help was provided and used the printed guides from the eportfolio developer website. My time was limited but I familiarised myself with two main features (termed Assets, and referred to as Assets for the rest of the paper) provided by the application:

- Thought, which allows the user to record reflections, ideas or notes as a journal or structured entry. I used this asset to quickly and immediately record the teaching sessions I delivered. In particular I focused upon the outcomes I anticipated, the outcomes I achieved and what actions I felt necessary to close the gap between the two
- Action Plan, which allows the user to create an ordered plan to achieve a specific outcome or goal. I used this to plan personal development relating to the preparation for and delivery of teaching sessions

In addition I used the Upload file feature to accrue and store relevant resources such as PDF format articles from electronic academic journals to support assignments, and the Share facility to allow specific tutors or colleagues access to portions of Assets created or supporting material uploaded for comment or feedback, or just to share.

Without the eportfolio reflections or thoughts on teaching sessions and action plans for the PgC would be hand written and word processed in Microsoft Word. I would store word processed files, completed reflective assignments and supporting PDF articles in folders using Microsoft Office or in hard copy in files. Electronic folders would be stored on a work PC, home PC and pendrive to transport material between sites. If I wanted to invite comment or share information I would use used email with attached files. I am accustomed to these systems and found them fairly acceptable but there is always the risk that material stored on portable systems can be lost or corrupted and confusion can occur over which is the most recently updated version when documents are stored in several disparate places.

The eportfolio application does provide a secure central repository for the PgC material with the additional advantage that everything is accessible from wherever I am as long as I have web access. As a tool to support the PgC the eportfolio was novel and interesting. The application provided a structure for reflection and planning and for acquiring feedback on specific parts of work in development.

As I used the eportfolio regularly to record reflections on teaching and compile assignments I realised my expectations were sometimes too high and that I was erroneously anticipating that the application had a similar functionality to Microsoft Word and was disappointed when it did not. For example, I copied a section of references from a document in Word to paste into the eportfolio. Superscript characters, as in 2004[1] and 2004[2] became 20041 and 20042; also some of the formatting within the application came as a surprise; I typed, for example, 13:00-14:00 for the timing of a teaching session and the characters became:
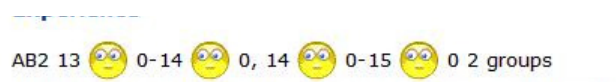

Figure 1: Scary faces formatting.

These little characters opened and closed their mouths as if screaming and I started to think of them affectionately as the Scary Faces, see figure 1.

The software developer suggests that users will not be reluctant to use an eportfolio unless they *have* to, 'if it's interesting, social, easy to use and personal' (Sutherland, 2008). I would counter by saying that this may be the case for the full time traditional student familiar with Facebook or similar utilities but is unlikely to be the case for the time-constrained part timer unfamiliar with or disinclined to use social networking applications. I engaged with the eportfolio for the reasons given under motivation, but it took effort and commitment and had I not had a professional interest in increasing my awareness it is unlikely that I would have made such an effort. However, having made the effort the limited number of eportfolio Assets I used for the PgC were relatively easy to use. Time was saved and the administrative burden was reduced, primarily because I did not need to store or carry around several versions of the same document and I could access all my secure PgC

material from work and home. In addition, the security and organisation of the Structure Thought Asset encouraged me to write candid and meaningful reflections which I feel were significant to marks I received.

Integrating the eportfolio into existing work practices

Having expended effort familiarising myself with the eportfolio and having already established a routine of reflecting upon workshops and teaching sessions within the eportfolio I determined to use the application Assets wherever they could be aligned to existing practices, in line with aims of the Flourish eCPD project at my institution (Howard and Chesney, 2008). To monitor the practice I recording each experience in a log, first in a notebook and then as an eportfolio log. I anticipated that there would be three main barriers to this exercise, lack of time; lack of technical skill; and a lack of understanding, or a fear that I did not know what I did not know.

I completed the Asset termed About me; this feature is for users to enter personal information including current studies and qualifications that can be selectively converted in to a CV. Having familiarised myself with the eportfolio interface during the PgC the exercise was mostly intuitive and took a moderate amount of time. Time spent was an investment as data only needs be updated and amended from now on.

Prior to eportfolio use I had no formal system for storing qualification, employment and skills information. I stored CVs as word processed documents in Microsoft Office folders on a series of work and home PCs to be located and updated as required. The experience of having the information centrally in a secure customised format is very positive. The About me and CV features are of worth to students and professionals at all levels. Compiling the About me Asset has already proved of value as I was asked to provide a CV for a course validation and was able to refer to the eportfolio record instantly. However there is still an issue of what the user does when they move institutions (Thomas, 2007). Using the About me Asset is an example of where the eportfolio provided an opportunity to systematise a task that is currently only done in an unsystematic manner. Time was well spent and I had the skill and knowledge to undertake the task with ease.

When I tried to integrate more Assets into my existing work practices I realised that I was not actually sure *how* other features, for example, Blog and Webfolio, could be incorporated. I sought technical support from the Flourish team and spent several sessions receiving one to one support which provided the impetus and much of the clarification I needed. It was during these sessions that it was suggested that rather than a paper-based reflective log I could use the eportfolio blog option; this was useful and had the additional advantage that I was able to link Assets such as uploaded articles relating to, for example, reflective practice to the reflection. An additional benefit was that the blog gave me a motivation to login to the eportfolio each day. It was also recommended that the Webfolio Asset could be used to store completed and developing reports and papers. Again I was happy with this option because it allowed me to store papers and linked supporting literature together in a personalised format.

Prior to using the eportfolio reflections on teaching sessions were scribbled at the end of the lesson plan and filed in hardcopy with the workshop documents. Taking the few minutes to enter the reflections as a Blog or Structured Thought disciplines me to think about and commit to how I will adapt subsequent sessions. As mentioned the inherent security of the system does encourage honesty.

Reports and papers such as this one for a symposium are normally and expediently stored as Microsoft Word and Excel documents in Microsoft Office folders. Portable storage devices or email attachment are used to move documents to non-networked PCs. As a test I copied and pasted the extended abstract and reference list for this paper into a Webfolio. All of the available PDF articles relating to the abstract had been uploaded to the eportfolio earlier and I was able to create links from the article title in the reference to the whole article; consequently, the abstract can be shared with institutional colleagues and they are able to access the supporting material immediately. There are no copyright implications because the application is institution-based and the university electronic resource subscriptions apply to all institutional colleagues. Sharing a document linked to full text references seemed a valuable thing to be able to do but was time consuming to

prepare and I felt I duplicated work. As noted previously, when Word documents were copied and pasted there was loss of formatting.

It is also theoretically possible to 'Edit in Word' uploaded Word documents using the eportfolio; which would be a solution to the issue of duplication and the loss of formatting when transferring material across. The developer suggests that 'some users may limit their use of the system because of inherent suspicion of electronic tools' (Sutherland, 2008). I attempted to develop this paper by uploading the conference paper template and choosing to edit in Word and then uploading the edited document into the eportfolio. The exercise was not a success and although the document is apparently available I am unable to view the changes made and a small amount of work was effectively lost. The experience made me very suspicious of using that particular electronic tool of the eportfolio and I reverted to my system of Microsoft Word and portable storage for that specific portion of my work practice.

Most of the time I expended familiarising myself with the eportfolio was spent pasting papers into the Webfolio Asset, uploading related academic articles and creating links between the two. The chore was made easier when I learned how to zip several article into one file, the eportfolio separates the articles when they are loaded. This series of activities and their result still appeal to me as eventually being a useful thing to be able to do; but I do feel I need more time to reflect on how best I can put the new skills to use. My biggest disappointment was my failure to use the eportfolio to compile this paper effectively. I am still unsure if my failure is due to my lack of expertise or my unreasonable expectations. I spent a lot of time and I did not have the proficiency or understanding to achieve what I set out to do and in this instance the eportfolio will not ease the administrative burden. However, I learned a lot and the exercise was not ultimately a waste of time.

Practice with Blogs and Webfolios inspired me to use the structured Meeting Asset. Official institutional meetings generate minutes as a memory aid but much of my time is spent in informal telephone discussion and attending unofficial or spontaneous meetings. Until now I have recorded these events in a series of notebooks or on whatever paper is to hand. Inevitably meetings engender follow-up tasks. Disparate paper records clutter my desk or diary until acted upon and paper notes can easily go astray. Transcribing from handwritten notes into the portfolio Meeting Asset duplicates work, but experience to date shows it is helpful if I quickly record important points and tasks and meta-tag them for retrieval. The notes in the Meeting Asset can be linked to other events or documents using the eportfolio as a central repository. This is an instance where time spent will pay dividends later and yet another example of where the eportfolio has allowed me to systematise a task that was previously only done in an unsystematic and potentially time wasting manner.

Using different Assets of the eportfolio encouraged me to start to keep my record of staff development within the application too. For example, I attended a day event on Action learning; I was able to upload all the preparatory material into the eportfolio, record the experience as an Experience Asset (I could also have used the Structured Thought Asset), assemble an Action Plan for integrating the system into existing practice and upload articles and resources for further reading. Although the training was away from my home institution I had web access and was able to start to compile the record and reflection immediately. I was able to link the different components of the training with meta-tags and links. As suggested by the educational developers, records of professional development used in collaboration with the Action plan Asset will be of value as part of the annual staff appraisal process, (Howard and Chesney, 2008). The literature, (Thomas, 2007) (Lonrenzo and Ittelson ,2005) alerted me to the fact that the Webfolio Asset can be used to compile information from other Assets such as About me, CV, and Experience as a personal presentation tool to 'showcase talents'.

It is wonderful to have a central store for training and conference attendance reports. Like other CPD information, material would previously have been stored in hardcopy format in files or in electronic format in Microsoft Office folders. The eportfolio system has the advantage that several tags can be added to any item to allow for cross referencing. Using the eportfolio system to collate CPD related material was not significantly more time consuming that using the less organised systems I am used to but I became aware that I was hampered by a lack of skills and knowledge. I was keen to import an audio visual file that I had created at a Digital media training day but it was not in the right format. Similarly, I had an MP3file of an interview

that related to a paper that I wanted to import but was unable to do so. Online support is available but some of the written instructions assume a level of expertise or familiarity with jargon, for example, to import another e portfolio we are informed that it need to be in 'IMS ePortfolio format'. I do not know what that means and I suspect that very few of my students will know either.

Discussion

In considering the value of the eportfolio as a tool to support study (mine and the students I support) and my existing work practice I have considered ease of use, time and whether use reduced administrative burden in relation to existing systems already in use. I am focusing on these characteristics from my perspective as a non-traditional learner who left full time education prior to the information revolution. This perspective is vital to my practice. Future traditional 18 year old undergraduates will probably come to university having already used eportfolios for personal development planning (PDP) to support their lifelong learning (Gray and Davis 2006) but around 60% of the students I support this year will be non-traditional. In an era of widening participation in the UK this level is likely to rise; I am going to have to be prepared to support eportfolio users who are disadvantaged from the outset.

Learners starting university in the UK are already expected to use a range of password controlled electronic resources and applications. Users are often bewildered and frequently confuse, for example, network and VLE access. The eportfolio does provide a unique and valuable resource for learners on an academic course such as the PgC. However, unless users have prior experience of similar applications the system is not intuitive and all users, not just non-traditional learners, do need explicit instruction on the use, purpose and value of the resource. Ideally training should include applicable worked examples of how each Asset might be of value to them in their practice and development. Continuing technical support, for advice on issues such as file format, needs to be available.

My concerns about integrating the eportfolio into my existing work practices were that I would lack time and technical skills. To start with the log of my effort to expand eportfolio use was handwritten and paper-based. I cited being too busy to have time to logon several times. Interestingly, when I started to record the experience as an eportfolio Blog I had a reason to logon and time ceased to feature as such an issue. I just logged on and recorded my experience; each time I logged on I experimented a little bit more. Learning to use the application has been time consuming but feels like an investment. I am aware that I am essentially a participant observer and that the act of recording my experience has profoundly altered that experience. The learners I support will not have that advantage. A lack of technical skill has hampered me but that can be resolved by advice and training; making that training available to all learners is an institutional level issue. I will certainly continue to use an eportfolio for organising personal professional development information and as means of keeping track of informal meetings.

Further development

Under current practice, my team colleagues who attend training or conferences share their experience by word of mouth; informally or during a meeting or they email a report to relevant colleagues. All methods are flawed as the University of Cumbria operates across a number of geographically separate campuses and all staff receive an enormous volume of email daily; it is easy to overlook non-essential communications. Eportfolio Assets such as Thought and Experience provide a structured format for recording events and would allow the user to share the experience with specific co workers and act as a central repository for records.

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