
IF WE BUILD IT, WILL THEY COME? EMBEDDING EMPLOYABILITY THROUGH EPORTFOLIO ASSESSMENT

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Abstract: The main aim of this paper is to discuss the role of constructive alignment in helping to design ePortfolio assessment strategies which support embedding of employability within subject-based curricula. A critical consideration in this is the availability of different modes of ePortfolios (see for example Danielson & Abruytyn, 1997; Wolf & Dietz, 1998; Barrett, 2002) and their support of both formative and summative assessment objectives. A number of different scenarios for assessment will therefore be considered in this paper. Key issues that affect the quality of ePortfolio assessment and their acceptability to faculty and students will be explored further.

Keywords: employability, professional literacy, Distance learning, Higher Education, formative assessment strategies, innovation

Introduction

The use of ePortfolio assessment is a relatively new phenomenon in UK Higher Education. Although there are many examples of ePortfolio use, these are often found in vocational HE courses or in PDP courses. In courses that do not traditionally have a strong vocational flavour or that are highly subject specific, ePortfolios are rare.

Innovations may be perceived as threats to traditional practices and ePortfolios are not an exception. Adoption by institutions may depend on the success of early adopters. Early adoption has the potential for generating specific information relating to pedagogical, administrative and technical factors, as well as aspects related to student perception and engagement with ePortfolios. By showing how each of these contributes to improvements in learning and course design, evidence of their use will be favourable and more likely to be considered by other courses

The ePortfolio case study presented here, is of a course in the Open University UK. The Open University has only recently made the transition to VLE –based and ePortfolio-based teaching. As a result the case reported here should be of interest in particular to organisations at similar stages of development or with similar student and institutional profiles. What is presented here is a view of the production process involved in designing a new course at the OU, and as a result does not have any student facing evaluation data as yet. However the issues raised as a result of the production process highlight a number of key aspects that further an understanding of the role of ePortfolios in embedding employability and aligning course content with assessment.

“If we build it will they come?” asks a question, which readers may recognise as an adapted line from the 1989 film *Field of Dreams*. In other words, it is not a foregone conclusion that just because we build an ePortfolio into a course, students will want to use it, or find it beneficial in developing their learning in the ways it was designed to do. Therefore, a critical question to ask is whether the things that we put in students’ path will have the desired effects of helping them to learn and achieve both course and programme specific aims as well as their’ other, personal aims and objectives. The following account highlights some of the ways in which the process of course design and constructive alignment can help to answer such questions and thus inform the design choices made.

DSE232 course overview

DSE232 is the first course in the Faculty of Social Sciences developed with the view of capitalising on the new Moodle VLE adopted at the OU. The course counts 15 credits over a period of 12 weeks and will have an expected 350 students in its first presentation. The course will be presented twice per year.

The aims of the course are to deliver a psychology curriculum which is skills-based and uses the psychological content as a platform to teach specific skills in transactional writing. The context for this in relation to assessment is provided by requiring students to write a generic, professional report.

There is a recognition that functional and transactional literacy are important areas in which students should develop, and that contextualisation of this in an applied context are ideal opportunities for engaging students with this. The course covers three main areas of applied psychology, occupational, forensic and clinical psychology, with weekly activities designed to support the material. Students are expected to keep and make use of the ePortfolio throughout most of the course, recording reflection and the work for the assignments

DSE232 makes use of the Open University's MyStuff ePortfolio. This allows course specific customisation and structuring of content. The DSE232 area of students' MyStuff is structured using multiple forms for text entry and uploads of other student-generated content. Automatic 'migration' or zipping of content from the VLE directly into the ePortfolio (e.g. recording of quiz results, forum postings) will eventually be available but for the first presentation the aim is to get students to do this manually). The capability to 'auto-construct' assignments is already available.

The assessment for DSE232 requires two submissions:

1. Formative – Students work through a traditional OU Tutor marked assessment (TMA; approximately 1500 words). This contains multiple questions following a developmental assessment format. Questions require students to engage with scenario-based material (short vignettes of real world problems for parts of this). The aim is to scaffold skills in applying knowledge to a context. Tutors provide feedback, and no summative mark is recorded although the assignment is compulsory. In this context the ePortfolio will be used as a developmental workspace including student artefacts and tutor feedback.
2. Summative, end of course assessment (ECA) – This assessment is submitted at the end of the course and constitutes 3000 words. This is segmented and includes A) A reworked aspect of the formative work. B) Reflection on feedback and evidence from other activities provided in the course. C) A 1500 word report on a longer scenario given to students in week 7. The role of the ePortfolio is to act as a developmental workspace, but also as a scaffold for constructing, presenting and submitting work.

In this sense the deployment of the MyStuff ePortfolio aims serve a variety of purposes that are consistent with Danielson & Abrutyn's (1997) and others (e.g. Barrett, 2002) distinction between different types of functions.

The VLE space used for the course is designed to give students access to the following activities:

- Conferencing and small group activities in forum based spaces,
- Individual activities that are recorded via wiki (sharing of links to resources, articles and other materials students identify),
- Knowledge-based quizzes (covering all 7 chapters of the course text),
- In-house produced AV and multimedia resources,
- Search facilities.

The learning outcomes produced for this course cover skills relating to knowledge development, conceptual and applied skills, as well as more generic key skills identified in the Open University skills framework. This includes self management, learning to learn as well as skills that have direct applicability to employment contexts (e.g. IT, communication) and corresponds broadly to those skill areas that are featured in the QA skills framework for Psychology (QAA, 2002b, p. 8). Constructive alignment has been a key aspect in designing the assessment strategy with the view of assessing these outcomes and in developing the ePortfolio deployment.

Rationale for selection of ePortfolio tool as an assessment tool

In the context of UK Government and European initiatives of life long learning (e.g. Leitch, 2006; Bologna, 2005) and other drivers of portfolio adoption (Hartnell-Young, 2006) ePortfolios have an increasingly important role to play in Higher Education. Exactly what this means for assessment at the Open University is not clear at this stage. However it is reasonable to assume that in future, programmes and courses will make increasing use of ePortfolios, and that increasingly students across

HE will expect ePortfolio work to form part of their assessment. Past experiences at the Open University have highlighted particular aspects of the technical parameters that are required to ensure that ePortfolio assessments at the Open University are successful (Gray, 2006).

There are a number of potential impacts that ePortfolio implementation can have on educational institutions, not just in relation to assessment (Topp & Clark, 2006; Blocher & Sujo de Montes, 2006). Consequently, there were several strategic aims for learning and new course developments in Social Sciences and the Open University that fed into the consideration and adoption of the ePortfolio route to assessment in DSE232.

A key feature of ePortfolio-based assessment that attracted highly favourable support from the faculty was the possibility that adoption of ePortfolio based assessments in a course could lead to more flexible arrangements and conceptualisations of assessment at the Open University. One of these is that the ePortfolio assessment could lead the way in relation to facilitating collaborative online learning, involving both students and tutors as partners in a two way assessment dialogue.

Prior work by the author with paper-based portfolios in the context of VLE-intensive course delivery (Patent, 2003), also highlights the role of Portfolio-based assessment in focussing student effort, mediating student engagement, motivation and retention, supporting the development of breadth and depth in student output, and permitting the assessment of diverse learning outcomes. The work of a number of authors and good practice in ePortfolio assessment suggest that such gains could be consistently achieved (see for example Doig, Illsley, McLuckie & Parsons, 2006; Ehrman, 2006; Greenberg, 2006). Recent work on formative assessment (Knight, 2002) suggests that assessment in which the sole purpose is to collect summative information may be insufficient in promoting the type of learning students need to develop in the 21st century. In particular the idea of using assessments in a reflexive and developmentally revisionary fashion is gaining some ground, as this is considered a way for developing the thinking and learning skills required. Such approaches can however be jeopardised by low take up if they have not been linked with a compulsory assessment structure (Handley, 2007). This is the main reason for making formative assessment compulsory and ePortfolio assessment provides support for assessing in this way. Since the a record of formative work is contained in an ePortfolio repository it is available and can then be drawn into the summative part of the assessment strategy. In DSE232, the decision to use formative assessment was made prior to the decision to adopt the MyStuff ePortfolio, but on discovering that different aspects of the MyStuff system would support a formative strategy whilst overcoming some of the hurdles in formative assessment, the decision to opt for portfolio assessment recommended itself.

Additional pedagogies that shaped the development of an ePortfolio assessment strategy in DSE232 stem from recent work in writing research in HE (Ahmed & McMahon, 2006) and recognition that traditional subject-based courses could be engineered so that they become more inclusive of a broader skills framework, than that found in more traditional subjects. In particular work on the purpose and nature of the professional report submitted at the end of the course was strongly influenced by this agenda. Related to this is the concept of embedded employability. Increasingly, professional bodies (e.g. for example in health, social care and HR) rely on ePortfolio systems to engage members with continuing professional development (CPD). Building activities into a course so that the course anticipates students' future engagement with ePortfolio-based CPD was viewed as a way to ensure that students gained relevant subject knowledge, but also gained the skills and experience that should enable them to negotiate future CPD requirements effectively. A course covering Applied Psychology thus provides a natural home for ePortfolio assessment and fosters practice of technological tools that students will encounter in the shape of CPD at a future stage in their careers. From a learning design perspective, the ePortfolio approach also presents a way in which learning outcomes could be mapped onto an 'assessment space' to allow transparent and direct assessment of all learning outcomes. As a result it was expected that learning outcomes and assessment strategy could be very tightly coupled as well as being constructively aligned with the activities and types of learning expected of students on the course.

Problems and issues

Paoletti 's (2006) report on failure of a ePortfolio introduction provides a clear reminder that it is important to assess the possible reasons why an ePortfolio might fail, so that necessary risk management can be applied. This could also improve the 'stickiness' of the ePortfolio system (Jafari, 2004) and thus improve new course teams' perceptions and likelihood of adopting ePortfolio-based assessment. As a result, the DSE232 course team has been highly critical of the adoption of ePortfolio rather than simply succumbing to the seduction of the new (Rouche, Milliron & Rouche, 2003). This process has led to a number of issues being identified that required careful consideration for deployment at a course level. Since DSE232 acts as a live case for a host of course innovations, it is anticipated that our experience around managing the risks and obstacles in the DSE232 ePortfolio deployment will feed into technical development, training and assessment structures. In this way the course acts as a pathfinder for the development of portfolio based pedagogies in other areas of the faculty and the university.

Student related issues: Lack of Experience of students in negotiating the VLE and My Stuff could be problematic if insufficient time was given to develop students understanding of the tasks they are required to carry out. On a short, 12 week course (approximately 150 hours study time) this could throw up a range of problems. In other words, an ePortfolio space might be buildable within the time frame allowed for producing the new courses, but this could potentially be a risky strategy if students are not engaging with it as intended. As a result early activities in the course need to ensure that students are familiar with the tasks required for managing ePortfolio work and understand its role in assessment.

Tutor workload: The role of tutors in being able to view material that students are working on needs to be carefully evaluated since this is one of the areas where course costs could potentially expand. The ePortfolio system at the OU will eventually allow full integration with the electronic assignment submission and distribution system, which will make tutor marking in the MyStuff ePortfolio space feasible, rather than marking in a separate e-submission space (eTMA system). Additional issues relate to the training that tutors require in order to support student use of ePortfolio, and to be able to engage successfully via the ePortfolio system.

Assessment support: MyStuff supports assessment in a number of ways: automatic construction of portfolio based assignments allows students to compile their final assessment submission at the click of a few buttons and checkboxes. This is done via a course specific workspace defined in the ePortfolio and allows the assessment process to create relatively standardised compilations of students' work. How much to allow students to select and choose all material for submission is a risk from both academic standards, and technical perspectives. This has been addressed for the first presentation by creating ready made web forms for students, rather than requiring them to construct these themselves and should thus help them manage both of their assignments. The notion of the workspace being analogous to a workbook has been used in describing our aims to developers.

Feedback on the ePortfolio: At the Open University, End of Course Assessments (ECAs) typically do not get detailed feedback as this cannot be supported easily through the existing online system. However, the ePortfolio affords the possibility that assessment feedback can be provided to students for ECAs using a tick box approach which is mapped onto the learning outcomes and which is found in the ePortfolio space. One possibility which has not been fully explored in DSE232 is to invite students to provide their own evaluations prior to receiving feedback, as this would strengthen the level of self evaluation and understanding of assessment (Rust, Price and O'Donovan, 2003). Student self evaluation could also conceivably play a role in the marking of the summative work (Boud, 1989).

Management information – Managing students over a period of time requires course level access to information on activity and engagement patterns. Although the strategy is designed to increase retention, early warning on potential problems is a desirable feature of management of any course not just those with ePortfolios. Although MI on the VLE is available, it is currently difficult to obtain for MyStuff ePortfolio, but this is an area in which DSE232 has a role as a shaper of the type of information that will be available in the future. Ideally we would like management data on levels of access in contrast with simple and perfunctory counts of the number of clicks. In particular since the

ePortfolio is structured around activities we hope to be able in future to see the development of a representation of where students are, relative to the tasks that they have been set.

Social constructionist vs. traditional pedagogies – Development of assessments that maximise VLE and Web2.0 approaches can be in conflict with more traditional assessment and course production models. For DSE232 this has required substantial effort in challenging assumptions, innovating of practices and collaboration and consultation with academic, quality assurance and technical stakeholders.

Developmental Issues: Since MyStuff is an ePortfolio tool that is undergoing continued development and thus subject to the time scales imposed by developers, developing a course that uses a new ePortfolio system can be tricky. To minimise risks in facing students with under-developed functionality, in depth, three way consultation with the development team leader, other learning design professionals and academics has taken place which effectively tied the course team to adopt the functionality that is available in October 2007, with the view to the first delivery of the course in May 2008. The long production schedule for a course, has the advantage of allowing extensive usability testing and thus supports the management of the risks inherent in using new technologies.

Conclusion

Developing courses that place employability in the context of more traditional subject matters can be difficult to bring to fruition if appropriate forms of assessment and means of supporting students are not available. Once these become available course designers are in a stronger position to build a course which delivers on employability. Although DSE232 has not faced students so far, the rigours of OU production ensure that risks to the potentiality of students not engaging are reduced. Questions about the relationship between learning outcomes, individual student learning activities and forms of assessment are key to this. In particular the My Stuff ePortfolio system has the potential to make the link between outcomes, activities and assessment highly explicit in ways that are not possible in the same way with other forms of assessment support: Students will recognise the learning outcomes because they are engaged directly with activities that are signposted as fulfilling the requirements for constructing a learning outcome. Furthermore they should be able to identify how these activities relate to their assessment but also how these activities relate to the bigger picture of their lives. Under those circumstance students will be able to direct effort to those areas in which they perceive a strong sense of relevance. As a result they will engaged and provide direct evidence of their accomplishments in the key outcomes specified in the course. If we build it they will come and use it successfully - But only if we make it clear to them why they should.

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