Personal Learning Space and Digital Reputation - using a Greenwich degree

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Organisational and historical context

Universities and colleges have been experimenting with how personalised learning, supported through a personal learning space, might develop the learner and improve the learning experience. The ability of learners to capture and assimilate aspects of their course and learning into individual context and circumstances means that each student can graduate with what amounts to the record of a unique learning journey. With a personal learning space comes the potential to add to it other experiences and ideas important to the individual that may arise within and beyond the university experience.

In order to test how this might be possible, this case study shows how a Greenwich University degree might be captured and marshalled into e-portfolio form, as a starting point to creating a fuller personal learning space.
To that end, a Greenwich University degree completed in 2007 has been added retrospectively and almost in its entirety to a personal learning space.

The product created was presented at the Greenwich APT Conference in July 2013, the e-portfolio being visually presented on the wall and made available via a URL to delegates with Wifi devices.

The purposes of the exercise are:

- to show that a degree course can be presented inside an e-portfolio (Rebbeck, 2013), demonstrated de facto and discussed at conference;
- to explore some of the pedagogical and methodological issues in creating a degree e-portfolio like this, in terms of time, effort and outcomes;
- to find what limitations may be encountered in the process and to assess the benefits of this approach in creating a personal learning space;
- to consider and evaluate the value to graduates of this approach, from a personal perspective and more widely.

A potential benefit, not tested in this case study, is the ability to give breadth and depth to the degree content in order to be able to offer, through selective publishing of the range of evidence thus provided, a more complete portrayal of a person, who wishes to deploy it in pursuit of employment or, with the intention of taking up self-employment, in seeking potential clients. However, this exercise, as a starting point, opens the possibility of curriculum re-design the better to capture course components and add opportunities to explore and discover contextual learning beyond the course, with the aim of developing a more fully-representative personal learning space.

Technical specifications of the project

The personal learning space used is PebblePad, in a version unavailable when the degree was completed in January 2007.Though the University does use PebblePad, it has not yet hosted a full degree on it. The course is a BSc in Education, with Malcolm Ryan and Simon Walker as principal tutors. Using the timeline structure of the degree, artefacts (notes and files, completed

assignments, gapped exercises completed by the author, records, discussions, marking and assessment, tutor guidance and course notes, synoptic writing and examples of group work) were added around the course units. Digital storage, fortunately readily available in 2003-2006, made this exercise possible. After the scanning of written feedback forms, the process of creating the e-portfolio from scratch took approximately ten hours' work.

Discussion of pedagogy

JISC has provided an excellent library of resources and research concerning the development of e-portfolios. One of its publications (JISC, 2012) looked at how colleges and universities that had made the transition into using e-portfolios had gone about doing this. Experiences reported suggest the need for thoughtful implementation based on pilots and early adopters, but not before there is agreement on clear and precise aspects of pedagogy to match the properties of portfolios and student behaviours in creating a personal learning space.

A further JISC study (Joyes, 2012) resulted in the publication of an e-portfolio toolkit. Joyes' work demonstrated the method and range of applications in both FE and HE in the UK, Australia and New Zealand. His study made the same points relating to pedagogic preparation and the need to develop the method through 'champions' and early adopters. The underlying issue is the personal nature of each portfolio production and the need to incorporate narrative that gives coherence. The value of persevering with this is that links, threads and themes can be identified through reflection, joining up aspects of study that span the whole study period.

Both studies argue that simply seeing e-portfolios as another extension of 'what we do now but with the addition of computers', is wrong and that what is required is a conceptual change in both student learning approaches and tutor design of the curriculum.

In this case study, a crude and retrospective upload of content to the e-portfolio provided a straightforward capture of the degree, but demonstrated the classic 'repository' result, none of it making sense as a whole. Consequently, the top level pages in the portfolio required new narratives, drawn from a consideration of the content.

The availability of end-of-semester synoptic writing, completed at the time, provided a valuable connection with the experience of the degree rather than just its process. To make sense of them, such collections of content do need their narratives to be indexed and doing this, as became obvious early in this study, underlines the value of reflection upon whole experiences, rather than the mere recounting of component learning.

This study has also highlighted a change in thinking since 2006 about the place and function of the VLE, as software created for the many has given way to software geared to the individual.

A mechanism for students to present themselves beyond their qualification

The Greenwich Graduate Skills were not available in 2007 but could easily have been accommodated in an e-portfolio through the use of common tags for each student. Tags allow the content to be re-sorted into collections, so that any aspect or artefact can be used to evidence different ability levels. Personal tags chosen by an undergraduate (such as 'intellectual curiosity', 'new ideas', 'emerging technology' etc.) can also be applied, thereby enabling the re-sorting and

assembling of evidence relating to a theme. It would be worthwhile to explore whether a degree could be wholly re-designed on the basis of tagging of attributes (to gather evidence of learning), which then would become the main vehicle for presenting the degree; a student's own academic development, currently tested only minimally in the presentation portfolio, would by this means take precedence over the traditional 'timeline' structure dictated by administration of learning.

A personal learning space allows its owner to present her/his academic experience and final qualification to multiple prospective employers (or clients in the case of self-employment) via the Internet. With the addition of other aspects of personal life experiences, values and beliefs and its re-presentation of the story, the e-portfolio becomes a much more complete portrayal, only a part of which is the actual qualification.

The re-purposing of content

Tagging can be further developed. It is possible to reassemble content into collection behind tags describing other soft-skills ('critical thinker', 'creativity', 'research skills' etc.). The owner need only write new summaries, whilst the re-marshalled content sits behind it as evidence to be explored if the reader so wishes. Tagging enables collection of such learning features as agreed tutor/student targets (e.g. to develop research or presentation skills, to demonstrate sustained enquiry, to research a particular idea), extended synoptic writing, which could count as a final project, or other assignment as an integral part of study. This method would be equally applicable to and effective in Masters courses. Being able to re-purpose content transforms the completion of a degree from a summative moment into a continuous formative professional development (Rebbeck, 2012).

The Greenwich Graduate skills may also be easily added, by tagging artefacts against one or more skills, and these can help towards a fuller portrayal of a person than the simple provision of degree components would provide. With such enrichment, an e-portfolio would be better termed a Personal Learning Space, the e-portfolio itself becoming just a component part of this. Re-purposing personal learning space is relatively straightforward and demonstrated in the e-portfolio: in effect, pages are created against each of the Graduate skills and evidence is added, drawn from the artefacts. Each page then requires a piece of synoptic text that introduces the evidence (Rebbeck, 2013).

Implementation

307 artefacts created or used in the original course were uploaded into a previously empty e-portfolio. The structure emerged during construction and was based upon units completed, semester by semester, in the original degree, following the degree course timeline. For completeness of the study, every artefact still available from the degree was added. However, only around a quarter of that content is available through links, the remainder simply forming a body of work that sits in the portfolio, demonstrating that the content of a degree can be stored in one place, if required, and that the portfolio can be seen as an alternative to a VLE as a repository of the trail and administration of learning. It was by this means possible to find and use any aspect of coursework to illustrate or verify conclusions or reflections that emerged in the writing of the summaries.

Being able to write 'in the moment' allows the capture of nuance and detail not possible when writing after the event; formative contemporaneous collection, weaving course requirements with experiences, ideas, values and wider personal exploration creates something of far greater quality and depth than a mere summative account. The author's course required him to draw on current practice and experiences, but a personal learning space would have supported a compilation of self-validated learning. Much of the written work was summative in nature and aimed at completion of units, rather than developing a continuous narrative of learning. An illustration of this is the theme of 'developing independent thinking and understanding' that did not figure as an overt part of the course, yet in fact was the main benefit of a learning process that developed seamlessly; this study shows that such a significant element may be easily demonstrated in a personal learning space.

This case study demonstrates only proof of concept, the degree content having been added in little more than a day's work.
Using an e-portfolio in this manner shows what a common VLE can achieve, once personal space becomes available. Completing an e-portfolio retrospectively cannot be considered ideal. No curriculum design was available in 2006 to accommodate this approach and so much of the richness of contemporaneous discussion, contemporary note-taking, diary-keeping and enquiry is missing because there was no mechanism to capture it in detail at the time. E-portfolio content needs to be developed over time and gathered 'in the moment'; retrospective approaches are inevitably too summative and perfunctory.

Replicating the structure of the degree in an e-portfolio is relatively easy. Because of the personal nature of e-portfolio creation, it is a good student skill to learn how to capture experiences during the course and to follow the directions taken by personal interests and enquiries (indeed, it is quite likely that, if a fellow student had also undertaken this particular exercise, the e-portfolio would have looked very different in content and presentation). Rather than simply uploading standard forms and papers, the owner achieves a detailed, reflective representation of experience and achievement by real interaction with, and at all stages of, the course. The reflection, making of connections, drawing of conclusions, identifying of themes and summarising of content help convert an e-portfolio into a personal learning space and it is in this student-centred behaviour that the real value to learning presents itself.

None of the social and learning communications between learners in the degree has been included here as they are lost. Likewise, no longer is there evidence of the group learning and collaboration that was a strong and important feature of the course. None of the units and their assessment was designed with an e-portfolio or personal learning space response in mind. Consequently, many of the properties in PebblePad have not been brought to bear on formulating the story of this learning passage.

Evaluation

The value of this approach

Reflection as a study technique undoubtedly leads to a re-evaluation of learning and this approach could transform the narrow summative presentation of a student into a well-rounded and detailed formative picture of the person and the learning achieved.

It produces a strong foundation for the addition of further evidence and, as a result, new overarching summative writing, discussing how other influences, experiences and ideas might well follow for those who want to maintain the discipline. The degree becomes a starting point from which new themes and strands of learning and enquiry can emerge. This process can include any experiences and allows for the fusion of study and professional and personal life.

It is very clear that the approach adopted for this study would allow graduates to re-purpose learning and student life into a learning space that is self-controlled, available for re-selection, re-marshalling, re-formatting, re-purposing and re-telling as understanding is developed and improved, thus telling a story of professional and personal development rather than offering jus a summative statement of ability.   It is a completely different way of presenting a university experience and its real value is in encouraging the owner to make connections and links and to invest time and effort in developing a narrative. The time involved in uploading content is minimal; the real effort is in reflecting, connecting and adjusting conclusions in the narrative.

Unlike the course, personal learning is never finished and can support a career-long journey using synoptic writing as evidence in further summaries and adding layers of new experiences and learning. What was essential evidence in demonstrating degree competence will diminish over time into an incidental body of evidence, but one that gives weight to new arguments and ideas.

Helping students develop and sustain a positive digital reputation is best served by encouraging them to keep a formal e-portfolio and to use it as a personal learning space. Only pages and content published to the web will contribute to the reputation. The rest acts as evidence: private thoughts or supporting evidence of specific tasks completed that the owner chooses not to share or collections of thoughts and ideas that are published for separate purposes.

An unexpected consequence of attempting to re-purpose content to the Greenwich Graduate Attributes was the author's identification of large gaps in the content of his study relative to these headings, which meant that no evidence relating to cross-cultural issues and sustainability could be found. However, scores of examples of attempts at scholarship were available. University undergraduate experience has developed hugely in recent years in preparing graduates for the modern world and this study shows how a personal learning space might add further value, by finding gaps in development that can be addressed and presenting a very complete picture of student attributes.

References

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