Using ePortfolios to support the personal and academic development of higher education students

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Introduction

The impetuous growth in the development and use of ePortfolios has led to evidence-based systems becoming an increasingly pervasive method for learners to record and showcase their achievements, progress and learning to others (Cohn and Hibbitts, 2004). Given the continued importance ePortfolios are acquiring within educational institutions, the need for teachers and educators to become more adept in using technology within their own teaching has been highlighted, but not without speculation that academics may resist the development of the new online teaching skills they require (Gerrard, 2005; Wilson and Wright, 2005).

In order for this multimedia development to be a continued success, not only do we need to consider the needs of the educator, but as Spennemann (1997) considers, we must ensure that we understand student expectations, attitudes and abilities towards computer-based learning.

Having recognised the importance for students to record and reflect upon their progress and achievements coupled with the increased time pressure and demands faced by colleges to find available room space for individual pastoral tutorials, it was decided that the new cohort of first-year undergraduates on the BSc (Honours) Tourism Management programme would be used as the pilot group for online tutorials using the PebblePad ePortfolio.
Background

BCFTCS is a specialist institution providing vocational courses providing a range of further and higher education courses, all students enrolled on a course within the College are entitled to an individual pastoral tutorial with their year manager at least once per academic year in which personal and academic development is discussed.

The Tourism Management (TM) students were chosen for numerous reasons to take part in the study, the most notable being that the authors of the study also shared joint responsibility as Year Managers for the cohort, a role that entails administration practices and the undertaking of pastoral duties with individuals within the group.

With two entry points onto the TM Year 1 programme the cohort comprised of 3 male students and 28 female students, the students were split into two groups, for the purposes of administration, with one year manager responsible for each group.

The Pastoral and Academic Elements of Personal Tutoring

For the purpose of this research it is deemed the ethos of the ePortfolio concept deals inherently with student led issues related to pastoral and academic tutoring, something that the BCFTCS prides itself on. In 2002, Owen documented inconsistencies in the way that higher education institutions implement their personal tutoring system.

Literature that deals with pastoral tutoring in the respect of student support appears to offer a range of views as to its appropriateness and presence within higher education. Gledhill (1999) takes a radical view suggesting that students should not expect to receive pastoral support within a higher education institution and that the service should be viewed purely as a fringe benefit.

Bowers (2006) pursues the argument, suggesting that there is clear scope for the pastoral role of personal tutoring to be dispensed with and that instead the activity should focus upon programme and discipline issues, specific to the students learning and their professional career. She adds that
much literature related to the subject would suggest that members of higher education teaching staff do not see their role as one that encompasses non-academic duties.

On similar lines Earwaker (1992) questions the appropriateness of academic staff offering guidance to students, suggesting that a professional model of personal tutoring should be adopted with students being referred onto specialists such as a counsellor or careers advisor. However Trotter (2004) supporting her work by that of Gutteridge (2001) suggests that, with so many first generation students experiencing higher education and with some returning to education after a break from study, many students report some sort of difficulty in entering higher education and thus need a support system to be in place. Owen (2002) therefore proposes that a reliable system should be implemented so that students feel supported throughout their university career.

BCFTCS follow the model proposed by Earwaker whereby the year manager is deemed to be the first point of contact to students throughout their academic career at the College, yet they may also seek or be referred onto professional support if required from the Student Services department which includes a counselling service, accommodation, finance, registry and exams section, nurse, careers centre and industrial placement office. Students can also receive academic support in the form of vocational workshops and study skills appointments from the Learning and Skills Development Centre within the College.

A good deal of literature regarding vocational students has noted the importance of reflecting and learning from their experiences (Tribe, 2002; Morgan, 2004) in order to move forward in their own learning and careers. The use of asynchronous communication for tutorials facilitates the student reflection. A review of the literature that deals with the notion of tutorials in relation to online practices, uses the term ‘tutorial’ to refer to self-directed help packages, which are designed to help students on a wide variety of topics related to their studies (McDonnell, 2000; Gerrard 2005). What can be learnt from this literature however, are the successes and challenges that have been
faced by both students and tutors who have experience of online practices and study in higher education. In a similar vein, the lack of literature focused on online pastoral support is also evident.

The use of an asynchronous discussion can enable anytime anywhere access to the tutor which can facilitate the increasing numbers of students with personal and family commitments which make it difficult to attend at specified times. However, for the purposes of this study and in an attempt to provide equivalent support for students who do not have their own computers, a computer room was booked for students to use if required during their timetabled tutorial hour.

**Tutor Training**

Training for tutors is an essential requirement of any good personal tutoring system. Salmon (2003) has developed guidelines for ‘e-moderators’, her term for tutors leading online discussions, and stresses the need for an awareness of changes in the scope and ways in which academics teach. However, as Salmon notes, we are still in a position in which many online teachers and educators themselves do not have the appropriate skills to provide the online teaching environment for a successful outcome. Although Salmon’s work relates specifically to teaching and learning, much can be learnt from her work in the respect of developing relationships online.

Both lecturers involved in this study have successfully completed e-moderator courses and actively teach on IT related modules and therefore have sound IT experience, although neither had detailed knowledge and expertise of PebblePad specifically. Whilst the technological skills are not considered to be of sole importance in this study, it is important to acknowledge that both tutors have also received ‘informal’ in-house training and support in their role as a year manager and providing pastoral support to students.
The study

The PebblePad ePortfolio package was chosen as an innovative and user-friendly means by which students could take ownership of their own learning and personal development planning (PDP) and also communicate with others, whom they chose to, within their community. The functions could also be tailored to the individual student and allowed the package to be used in a way that also met with the pastoral tutoring requirements of the institution.

Although the PebblePad Personal Learning Environment (PLE) was not designed for the purposes of online tutoring, certain functions such as the 'My Thoughts' tool (similar to a discussion board function) allowed the year manager to have private discussions with individuals with regards to their ongoing academic / personal progress and development. Whilst additional tools (templates) like ‘Experience’, ‘CV’, ‘Ability’ and ‘Action Plan’ amongst others, allowed the students to develop their academic and professional abilities.

In the first seven timetabled tutorial sessions of the year, the year managers met with students individually for face-to-face introductory tutorials to discuss any early academic or personal issues that were raised. The meeting was considered as an opportunity for both parties to meet face-to-face before online tutorials came into effect. With a variety of students enrolled onto the Tourism Management programme, students were also required at this stage to complete a questionnaire compiled with the Honey and Mumford Learning Style Questionnaire and a number of questions developed by the researchers to determine previous understanding and current ability in using computers. The questionnaire was modified, adapted and also given to students studying on a similar programme (BA Tourism Business Management) so that comparisons could be made at a later stage between students who were exposed to the ePortfolio and those who were not. The questionnaires were again completed at the end of the year record any changes in student opinion, learning styles, behaviour and attitude.
After the face-to-face tutorials, two one hour sessions were set aside in a computer room for the year managers to introduce the students to PebblePad, having previously set up demonstration accounts, basic student accounts and usernames and passwords to give to the students. During the two session’s students were shown the various functions of PebblePad that they would be required to use in their tutorials and although students were encouraged to complete a minimum requirement on PebblePad, they were free to use any of the facilities of the program they wanted. Students were also required to log onto their ePortfolios and personalise them with an introduction. Hard copies of the PebblePad ePortfolio User Handbook were also given to each student as a reference guide.

Throughout the rest of the academic year, students and their allocated year manager communicated online via the ePortfolio and students were advised accordingly to complete sections of their ePortfolio.

**Findings**

The findings of the research presented below are drawn from the cumulative findings of the questionnaires, and given the size of the sample group should be taken as indicators of the ‘success’ of using ePortfolios rather than to reach a definitive conclusion of the research.

When considering the total time spent on PebblePad over the two semesters, students’ responses indicated that taking into account even the minimum time spent using the ePortfolio (less than 5 minutes per week) over the year, it still equated to more time being invested in the tutorial than students using the traditional face-to-face sessions.

The results below help to demonstrate the opportunities taken by the students to interact with the PebblePad ePortfolio throughout the academic year. 70% of the students interacted with the PebblePad ePortfolio between 1 and 4 times over two semesters, which was a similar take up to
the majority of students who attend face to face tutorials; whilst 30% of the student group accessed the ePortfolio 5 times or more during the same period. Although it is difficult to determine whether the students were more reflective having used the ePortfolio, our research leads us to believe that the majority of students were, in that they were given prompts by the year managers after every contribution to the ePortfolio allowing the students to reflect upon their thoughts and in many cases provide detailed responses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Accessed PebblePad tutorials</th>
<th>30%</th>
<th>Similar to traditional face-to-face tutorials</th>
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<tr>
<td>Accessed PebblePad tutorials 1 – 2 times</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>Similar to traditional face-to-face tutorials</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accessed PebblePad tutorials 3 – 4 times</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>Like traditional face-to-face tutorials option on offer</td>
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<tr>
<td>Accessed PebblePad tutorials 5 – 6 times</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>More than traditional face-to-face tutorials</td>
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<td>Accessed PebblePad tutorials 10 times</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>More than traditional face-to-face tutorials</td>
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The research indicates that the majority of students only took limited advantage of the online tutorials available to them using the ePortfolio less than four times over the academic year, although this equates to more time in discussion with the year manager than would be required for face-to-face tutorials. The reasons for this are discussed below.

With 92% of the students having attended the introductory sessions on PebblePad, 58% of the students found PebblePad easy to use whilst 21% of the students found difficulty in using the ePortfolio. On this point it is necessary to point out that the year managers trialling PebblePad with the students only had limited knowledge and experience of using the PebblePad ePortfolio themselves. It may be that if the tutors had more experience of the software they may have been better enabled to help the students to acquire skills more easily and therefore increased their usage of the facilities.

Despite this, 75% of the student group reported to having had a good experience of using PebblePad whilst only 4% reported having a bad experience. Linked to this 69% of the students...
deemed the ePortfolio a sound method in which to conduct online pastoral tutorials and encourage professional development whilst 13% disagreed.

As this research was undertaken as a pilot project for the College to consider the perceived ‘benefits’ of hosting tutorials online, the year managers were aware of potential issues that might arise with the students who are new to the Higher Education system and so year managers made themselves available in person. 71% of the students took the opportunity throughout the academic year see their tutor in person, whilst 29% did not need feel the need to see their tutor after the initial face-to-face meeting early in semester one.

In respect of the specific functions of PebblePad, 67% of the students said the PebblePad ePortfolio was useful to them whilst 83% described the discussions with their tutor online as useful. When asked to consider the advantages of using PebblePad over traditional face-to-face tutorials, students viewed online interaction as being more convenient.

Conversely, the main negative issue to be raised by students was the difficulty in self-motivation to complete the online tutorial, a response from 54% of the population. Some students highlighted the advantages of the traditional tutorial over the online tutorial, suggesting they would be more likely to attend a face to face tutorial than they would be to contribute online to a discussion, they felt more involved in discussion when they met with their tutor face to face and generally found they ‘got more’ out of face to face tutorials.

When asked about reasons for the lack of motivation some students pointed out the effort involved in accessing a different IT system with different ID and password. Many said that if this were more integrated with their email or Blackboard, the college Virtual Learning Environment, they would participate more - raising issues of interoperability. This requires further research.
In considering what students liked most about the PebblePad ePortfolio 96% of students liked the fact the their tutor was always available for contact whilst 71% enjoyed the continuous discussion with their tutor. In terms of time 54% felt that the ability to contribute at their own pace and in their own time was positive, whilst 63% felt it was easy to make up for missed discussions in their own time.

As a final point to the study, students were given the choice of what method of tutorial they would choose in future and the results were telling. 17% said they would like to continue with online tutorials only, whilst 21% said they would opt for face-to-face with 63% of students opting for a combination of both modes. No relationship was found between the age and satisfaction of students within the group.

In an attempt to find out if these responses given were indicative of actual behaviour, at the beginning of the second year, students were asked to make a choice between online and face-to-face tutorials: 54% of students chose online and 46% opted for face-to-face tutorials. Again, no significant correlation was evident between the choice of tutorial mode and any other student characteristic or IT experience.

**Conclusion**

This research suggests that online facilities have a useful place in tutorial support for HE students but there are issues that need further consideration.

In light of this study it would appear that there still remains a need for some students to have the opportunity to have face-to-face support at significant times during their programme and thus that online provision should not entirely replace this option for contact.
Considering that staff with little experience of using PebblePad delivered the training received by the students, more staff training would be recommended. In consequence, had this happened in this study, perhaps overall satisfaction would have been greater still. Thorough staff training should be provided for online tutors.

The level of online provision could also be increased to provide additional support resources online using the software which can address common questions and concerns relevant to these students and therefore provide the students with further autonomy and opportunities for development. One concern, however, with respect to this improvement would be the development time required to produce these resources.

An analysis of tutor experiences would also be insightful and could be an extra strand in which this research could develop, considering the ups and downs of implementing such an online personal and academic development tool. Furthermore, identification from the tutors’ perspective of additional facilities / tools to the package that would be of benefit to online tutorials such as study skills and careers strands would also be invaluable and further strengthen the support that is required by QAA and institutional guidelines.
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