

making the case

ePortfolio based learning for accountants... Does it add up?

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Theme(s)

Learning: Reflection, Graduate Attributes (Digital Literacy)

Teaching/Professional practice: Managing e-Assessment

Organisation: Retention

The background context

This case study centres on a level 4, core accountancy module based in the Finance and Business department in the Wolverhampton Business School and currently taught on campus only. The module aims to give students the basic accounting skills and knowledge that will underpin a successful progression through, and completion of, their three year degree programme. It is, therefore, a vitally important module for staff and students. This is also the first module the students study after starting University, so there are many other concerns to consider: transition, retention, academic skills development, and pastoral support.

First year, first semester, first module students may not have the confidence in a lecture room scenario to ask questions to clarify their thinking and due to this, struggling students can remain invisible until obtaining a low pass rate at the summative exam. To exacerbate the issue, the volume of learners undertaking this module makes individual, face-to-face interactions between tutor and student, problematic.

This specific module has a large cohort, based over 4 tutor groups with 2 tutors running, delivering and assessing the module. The module has a 50% case study exam based summative assessment, which is a requirement from the professional body.

Why PebblePad?

The benefit of using PebblePad in the context of this core, level 4 module was the ability to keep all the learning together in one place and included personal, academic and subject specific learning. The design allows for incremental feed-forward to happen with dialogic potential so that students were able to develop their skills and knowledge on-going with the support and guidance of subject specialist tutors.

The purpose

The introduction of the PebblePad webfolio coincided with the Learning Works curriculum design, implemented in 2010, which moved from 8 x 15 credit modules per annum to 6 x 20 credits. This gave the tutors the opportunity to re-evaluate the existing module structure and design and introduce methods and approaches which would more effectively address the issues highlighted above. Additionally, within this framework, it was no longer possible to run a separate learning skills module. The necessary skills learnt in that module previously needed to be incorporated within an accounting module, and as this module is one of the first accounting modules taken, it seemed logical to embed the skills work within this. Hence the two assessments measure very different things – the webfolio focusing on the learning skills and the end of module exam on the basic double entry book-keeping.

The new module design aimed to build in a process of encouraging and supporting student subject, personal and academic skills progression, monitored weekly by the tutors, helping to identify any potential issues and struggling students

at any stage during the module. The most challenging change to the existing design was the introduction of reflective practice, a skill not normally developed or required in a 'hard' subject.

The rationale for developing a three-stranded skills progressive approach was to prepare students for the end of module exam by breaking down the module into weekly tasks: addressing the book-keeping and academic skills required which built up student skills in chunks, allowing the tutor to address any issues in class, with either a whole group or single student. The addition of reflective practice weaved throughout the weeks enabled the tutors to start to have more of an understanding of their students and enabled an empathetic relationship to grow.

The approach

The University's Blended Learning Unit worked closely with the tutors, discussing and pooling expertise on pedagogical benefits, technical opportunities and practical considerations. Importantly, the model that was eventually developed evolved from what the tutors wanted to achieve and wasn't initially based on a particular tool.

However, as discussions advanced, it became patently clear that PebblePad would support everything that the tutors needed to succeed with the new design and also add the extra value that students are also engaged with PebblePad on their first module at the University. This ultimately gives them the opportunity to build their eportfolio assets from an early stage in their academic career and may encourage them to continue building their asset store throughout their time at the University, allowing the creation of richer job applications and CVs, based on their personal and subject knowledge growth and all supported by evidence.

The tutors initially required a design that developed a weekly case study approach, which could help students to increase their academic skills and importantly the reflective practice element had to weave throughout all the academic and skills learning.

The first iteration of the design involved a comprehensive webfolio designed by the tutors, involving subject information and weekly tasks. The tasks revolved around the three core requirements of the design: case study, study skills and reflection. Each strand related directly to a blog which was embedded in the webfolio. At the beginning of the module, the students were asked to take a copy of the webfolio and publish their own copy to an assessment gateway.

Wherever possible the study skills activities were linked to work needed on other modules, e.g. planning an approach and outline for an assignment was timed to prompt work on the Business Management report that BAAF students were required to submit in Week 8 of the course. The challenge was to make the webfolio relevant – a criticism often directed at the previous stand-alone module.

Given the volume of students to tutors, the major stakeholders were the staff who were willing to take a risk with their curriculum, wanting and embracing a different way to support student development and assessment. Also integral to the success of the new design implementation was their willingness to give feedback and consistent support electronically. Naturally, the other stakeholders were the students and other tutors within the Finance and Business department who had the opportunity to continue weaving a PebblePad methodology throughout other modules. An important stakeholder was the software

provider as if the platform was not stable at this point in time, the students would lose confidence in using the platform and be wary of engaging with it throughout the rest of their time at the University. It was the intention to introduce the platform at a crucial time in their learning and it was important to get all the elements right.

The result

The team worked towards a cohesive design of a learning environment which crossed boundaries between subject, personal and skills development.

The design achieved the increased initial submission of work. The module design ensured that all student webfolios were submitted within the first 2 weeks of the module. This early submission of the student's own webfolio made their weekly work, and understanding of the subject, transparent. This was intended to allow any required interventions to be made quickly and before the situation was non-recoverable. The student work was available for tutor comment from early on and throughout the module. This approach meant that students who may have struggled invisibly throughout the module previously and then either failed the exam or left the course could be identified as at risk early enough to assist them.

However, due to the lack of strict interim submission deadlines in the first year of operation, there was a hard core of students who left too much work [particularly the case study accounting tasks, which took students a long time to type up, and were not uploaded regularly] to the last minute – in many cases the day of the deadline itself - and who therefore failed to complete all tasks set. This resulted in a high failure rate in the first year of operation [around 50%], although the pass-rate for the exam was nearer 80%.

The project started 2 years ago and has just finished its second iteration. A definite design evolved over the 2 years with the second year taking on board all the reflections from the first iteration and applying them to the second. For instance, to align with the exam component, the use of weekly PebblePad quizzes ensured an element of testing with feedback was done regularly and kept in the same place to help students to see synoptic links between their learning and the weekly quiz results, and enabling them to quickly go back to specific items for revision purposes. The weekly quizzes were much better than the case study tasks – they did not take as long to do and there were specific weekly deadlines for each quiz to be submitted to the gateway, so the students engaged with the webfolio on a weekly basis. They were therefore much more likely to work on other tasks on a regular basis, rather than leave it all to the last minute. The benefits were seen in the pass rate of around 80% for the webfolio in the second year of operation – much better than the first year.

Having run 2 iterations, the third iteration is now in design and will, undoubtedly, also undergo this reflective feed forward process.

The impact

Teaching/Professional practise: Managing eAssessment

The first year of operation saw an initial failure rate of around 50% on the webfolio due to students leaving too much work, particularly the case study, to the last minute. The weekly quizzes in year two, with their inbuilt deadlines, introduced a sense of urgency to the webfolio work and were also easier

for students to complete promptly; the pass rate was around 80% for the webfolio in the second year. However the exam pass rate has been consistently high at around 80% both years – largely due to the subject mastery built up first by the case study exercises and then the weekly quizzes. The quizzes were good preparation for the multiple choice section of the final end of module exam, as instant feedback on performance was provided automatically. The lessons learnt by the tutors in the way that the assessment was designed and feedback given has had impact year by year on the developing design within this module. It is also used by the Blended Learning team as an exemplar of best practice within the institution and the principles of this design can be seen in a number of modules in the University.

Organisation: Retention

Although the impact of any process on retention is always difficult to measure, the pre-emptive nature of the intervention, the weekly contact, building of relationships, and knowledge gap analysis have all had a positive impact on the running of the module, and have enabled students in trouble to be identified – possibly even before they knew they were!

Learning: Reflection, Graduate attributes (Digital Literacy)

The tutors found that introducing the students to PebblePad actually increased the students' confidence in using the subject specific software, and this was a major influence in increasing the digital literacy skills within the cohort. The impact of embedding reflective practice in this design may not be evident until later in this course. However, encouraging early understanding and exploration of reflection in budding academics is as important as any immediate or measured impact.

Lessons learnt

- The importance of setting ground rules and having clear expectations of the students, yourself and the curriculum.
- Barriers can sometimes be the logistics of coordinating such large groups into lab style sessions to ensure everyone is comfortable with the technology. Across the developmental cycles of this practice it was found that detailed and bespoke help materials can go a long way in supporting students in developing their webfolios. You need to ensure students are clear about what reflection is and time spent on differentiating reflection from review can be very beneficial.
- There is also a danger in assuming that all students are IT literate from the beginning – more mature students and overseas students were not as conversant with the technology and needed more support. It was pleasing to note the development of skills over the first semester – these same students were more confident in tackling Sage than they perhaps would have been without the PebblePad experience [evidence from discussion with one student in particular].

In brief – making the case for PebblePad

- Enhance learning potential by scaffolding reflection and supporting digital literacy.
- Develop assessment design to manage and support dialogic e-assessment for large cohorts.
- Improve retention through early identification of students at risk via weekly tasks.