

Case Study

ePortfolios - reflecting on the evidence

Libby Clark and Greg Hardham

Faculty of Science, School of Community Health, Charles Sturt University, Australia

The background context

Charles Sturt University (CSU) is a regional university with multiple campuses in regional cities in New South Wales and beyond. Within the School of Community Health, students are now able to undertake a professional 4-year program in speech pathology: the Bachelor of Health Science (Speech Pathology).

Two of the main reasons for introducing this degree were to expand the professional opportunities for students from rural and remote backgrounds, and to offset the shortages of health professionals in non-metropolitan areas.

Although there is a strong rural focus throughout the course, graduates are prepared for practice in metropolitan as well as rural settings. Students learn to assess, diagnose, plan and deliver intervention programs for individuals with speech, voice, language, fluency and swallowing disorders.

The course is taught from the Thurgoona campus, predominantly by internal study, with some distance education subjects.

The current practice

Of the two subjects that were chosen for piloting PebblePad:

1. SPH 103 (Analysing Language, Interaction and Context) has approximately 50 students, and for the past five years has used a paper/CD based portfolio assessment item.
2. SPH 214 (Therapeutic Communication Practice 2] has approximately 36 students. In 2009, this subject changed from 8 point to 16-point full year subject to allow more time for development of basic clinical skills, some of which were to be completed via a portfolio of self-directed clinical practice tasks.

The use of paper-based portfolios in SPH103 was fraught with problems, especially associated with the management of the materials at the end of each year. Students were submitting CDs containing audio as part of their portfolios, but this resulted in loose piles of materials piled up in academic offices, and transportability became a serious issue at marking time. Keeping track of items was also difficult with so many individual 'pieces' of the portfolio, as was return-

ing the portfolios after marking was complete. In fact, sometimes students didn't pick up their portfolios at the end of the semester, indicating that they saw the task as 'just another assessment item', rather than an integral link to their development as a professional.

In the second year subject, students needed to record and analyse speech from their professional practice with clients, and submit the records as transcripts. Yet there was no way of validating the transcripts by markers (thus ensuring that the students had accurately transcribed the conversation, an important skill in itself).



The challenge

Firstly, I was hoping to make the assessment process more manageable. It was essential that the portfolios become more accessible and transportable, and that the same situation wasn't repeated in the second year subject.

However, I also wanted students to be able to capture evidence of their professional skills in different ways. Paper-based portfolios don't lend themselves to use of audio (or video), which is critical for capturing the interactions that are central to a discipline like speech pathology. PebblePad offered more scope for the incorporation of evidence using a variety of media. For example, having audio as evidence for the students' transcriptions of speech would help me align the two, making it easier to validate what they were saying.

“ I was also hoping that students would see the connection between their first year portfolio and the kinds of professional evidence required later on. ”

As students also need to compile an evidence-based portfolio of clinical competence in fourth year, it occurred to me as I started to explore PebblePad that we should be encouraging students to develop a culture of collecting evidence

of their professional growth from the beginning of the course. PebblePad provided an environment in which the culture of collecting (and reflecting on) evidence of professional growth

could be developed. In this sense, it was a gradual emerging of the 'bigger picture' of how PebblePad could be used to support learning and development throughout the degree.

The approach

I began using PebblePad with the first years to teach them the skills associated with gathering evidence of their clinical skills and reflecting on their practice. Then, when external feedback revealed third-year students were still struggling with some basic clinical skills, I decided I needed to build more early-stage practical experience into second year.

As a result, I devised a series of self-directed reflections on clinical practice for SPH 214 students to gather within the PebblePad environment using the blog for weekly reflections on clinical experiences, but encouraging uploading of audio and video recordings that showed the development of other practical skills.

At first, students were sending each of their artefacts to me individually and asking for feedback, and this quickly became unmanageable. With further support, I encouraged the students to use a webfolio to gather their various artefacts. This 'emergent' practice developed as I was still developing in my own mind what I wanted from students. As students began to see how the webfolio gave more structure to their work, they started to develop their own strategies, and in many ways they were our co-partners in



developing the best way of working to meet our needs.

This was particularly true of the first years, who also became mentors for the second year students.

The issues

The first-year students embraced PebblePad, but the second-years were initially much more reluctant. One of the key reasons seemed to be that the second year subject was a year-long subject, and I didn't introduce PebblePad until second semester. The students found this disruptive and difficult to move from paper-based to electronic portfolios mid-year. However, by the end of the year, most admitted they could see the advantages.

The differences may have also partly been because the first-years were not being introduced to a 'new' way of doing portfolios (i.e. electronic, as opposed to paper-based). They found PebblePad easy to understand and many of them helped the second-years with the technology!

The other difference was in the kind of activi-

ties involved. The first-year activities were half group and half individual, whereas in second-year they were all individual. The capacity for sharing and commenting as a group before submission within the PebblePad environment enabled strong peer support, giving students more confidence in both the tools and their practical learning activities.

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There were also issues related to activities involving 'reflection on practice' (which were a hurdle requirement) as opposed to the use of an eportfolio per se. Students in second year traditionally find the process of reflecting on their practice difficult; they often provide descriptions of what they did, rather than reflections on what

they have learnt from the activities.

I expect many of these issues to be transitional ones and won't appear in second year in 2010 because students will see PebblePad and the associated activities as routine.

The result

Our initial challenge of transportability and ease of access was definitely met – no more boxes on the floor or uncollected portfolios! The marking process was more streamlined, though a number of changes would be made to enhance the process of adding comments:

- a) some students failed to enable 'comments' to be made on individual webfolio items, which then required comments to be handwritten on evaluation forms (students now submit via the gateway, removing this issue);
- b) most students uploaded Word documents, instead of writing directly onto the PebblePad pages. This required opening multiple files which was time consuming, as was transferring changes into comments (student instructions are now more clear, so hopefully this will no longer be an issue).

The first years fully embraced PebblePad, and gained significantly in confidence, especially following their mentoring of the second years. I feel confident that they will each have strong portfolios by fourth year. The second years, while more reluctant, still agreed that they were pleased they had completed their webfolios and could see the use and purpose of it.

Another result was the enhanced ability to provide feedback during the semester, rather than only following final submission. This enabled feedback for learning, rather than only feedback on learning.

The students were generally very successful in creating basic webfolios, and most were able to upload diverse kinds of evidence for the practical skills they were developing.

The evidence that they collected seemed to be more tangible to them, and made it easier for them to see how what they are doing will become embedded in their professional practice.

“... students will be encouraged to share their work with peers ... so that they are developing habits of peer review to improve the quality of the evidence and reflection.”

In 2010, students will be encouraged to share their work with peers for comment prior to submitting for final marking, so that they are developing habits of peer review to improve the quality of the evidence and reflection. I'm now also much clearer on the purpose of PebblePad for both subjects, and this will be communicated clearly to students at the start of semester.

In terms of personal growth, I've also achieved a lot. Prior to this experience, I didn't have a great deal of experience in PebblePad or in the manipulation of video and audio, but I've found that my skills have advanced quickly, and that makes me so much more comfortable about using PebblePad this year and beyond.



The learning

In future I'll encourage students to develop a webfolio structure from the beginning rather than collect a long list of individual assets which they upload at the 'end' of the session. They will also be better guided to place content on webfolio pages instead of attaching external documents, making commenting easier.

At times, I was swamped with PebblePad assets that had been shared with me for feedback. Next time I'll know better how to manage portfolios – I don't need to see each piece of evidence as it is developed.

As students make extensive use of audio files in their webfolio, it is important that they are aware of the importance of minimising file size – and can do this effectively.

Many of the webfolios were similar in appearance – students devoted their efforts to the evidence without regard for the aesthetics. Next time I'll add an assessment criterion for individuality, or 'flair' in presentation. I'll encourage

Before embarking on this with students, it's vital to have some fundamental professional development in the basic uses of PebblePad, especially on how each of the asset types can best be used. Rather than attempt to use all types of assets from the outset, I think it's more important to begin to develop the process of create/share/reflect.

students to use images (of inanimate objects – no people) to trigger reflection.

Using PebblePad as a personal learning tool and repository will develop over time as students continue to see its relevance.

In brief

- Start small – as you progress, you'll see new advantages and synergies between different areas of student learning. It's OK to build over time.
- Use student mentors to help those more anxious and hesitant to take on the new technology, and pass on positive feelings towards the technology.
- Group activities may help make the initial experience a more positive one for students, building on peer support.
- Don't forget to support students in associated technology skills, such as compressing video files.
- Know your purpose, and communicate it clearly.

Acknowledgements

Case study by Libby Clark and Greg Hardham
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