

making the case

PebblePad profiles for enhanced employability and reflexivity in the arts

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Theme(s)

Learning: Reflection, Graduate Attributes, Employability

The background context

This case study is based in the Photography Department in the Field of Art and Design, School of Art, Design and Media.

The University of West London (UWL) prides itself on an agenda of widening participation and many of our students come from non traditional backgrounds to academia. Progressing through the programme, students go through a series of modules covering a range of technical and intellectual skills. Sitting for assessments in these discrete modules, students often miss out on comprehending the bigger picture of their overall progression and development and when reaching the third year cannot clearly articulate the abilities and competencies gained in their education.

For my level 6 (third and final year of the BA course) 'Professional Portfolio' module, a new module designed and taught for the first time in 2010-2011, I created a PebblePad profile called the 'Photography Employability Profiler'. The 'Professional Portfolio' module was designed to support students in preparing for employment in the photo-imaging industry. The photo-imaging industry, like most creative industries, is highly competitive and success in gaining employment is achieved through personal initiative, strong technical and creative abilities, self-confidence, good presentation skills, and an excellent photographic portfolio. Students' ability to talk about their skills and competencies in a confident and informed manner is a major factor affecting their level of success in gaining photo-imaging industry related employment.

Why PebblePad?

I have always been an early adopter and am excited about the pedagogic possibilities presented by new technologies.

As soon as PebblePad was introduced at the university, I saw its potential as a tool for personal reflection, leading on to empowerment through understanding and ability to articulate one's own skills and competencies. I have introduced PebblePad as a tool for reflection in all three years of the Photography BA and Foundation degrees we teach and have in particular concentrated on developing learning tools to guide reflection on learning and personal development. I have utilised the PebblePad Profile Builder and designed a profile to guide students' personal reflection upon their abilities and skills. The further stages built into the profile, which require the student to either evidence a competency or devise an action plan for further development in response to a specific profile question, makes the profile a comprehensive and effective tool for this purpose.

Making the profile available to the students through the gateway and setting it to be 'copied and published' back into the gateway by the students makes students' work through the semester available to the tutor from the start.

Being able to support progress, give formative feedback at any stage of the semester, guide students' work, and correct and clear misunderstandings through the gateway makes PebblePad particularly suited for setting up an on-going supportive learning environment.

The purpose

One of the central issues affecting student success in gaining employment upon graduation, according to Jenny Moon (2004), is their lack of self-awareness and their inability to recognise and account for their acquired skills and abilities. She claims

that students have been found to be unable to account for their learning and gained abilities, which affected their chances of promoting themselves effectively to potential employers.

On the BA Photography and Digital Imaging, taught at UWL, students study a modular programme, which makes this ability to account for personal overall development even more tricky. The discreet study elements and assessment regime often becomes fragmented with students not being able to see their development holistically.

My aim was to create a tool that will help engender a sense of achievement and development, create a sense of ownership of learning and knowledge, empower students, and enhance their employability. This was to be achieved by guiding them through a process of reflection upon their level of skill and ability at the end of their three-year Photography BA course as they become graduates.

The approach

My starting point was to look for sources that define students' skills and abilities at the end of a degree programme.

I looked at three main sources to help me design the profile questions. These were: the Programme Learning Outcomes; Skillset skills required for entry into the photo-imaging industry; and the UWL Graduate Attributes document.

The Programme Learning Outcomes, re-written for a major re-design of the BA Photography and Digital Imaging programme in 2010, offered the most valuable set of statements on which many of the questions were based. The learning outcome statements, which were used by our team to design the programme, were made available to students in module documentation but students for the most part do not know how to make sense of the learning outcome statements in their programme documents.

BA students in their third year, approaching the end of their degree studies should be very close to achieving the Programme Learning Outcomes. In addition, Programme Learning Outcomes as opposed to Module Learning Outcomes account for overall learning hence they offer a tool for reflecting on student learning holistically.

The skillset papers regarding the Photo-Imaging industry specify skills and competencies desired by the photo-imaging industry and have guided the re-design of the programme.

The Graduate Attributes document is a set of statements that guides the university in designing programmes and assessing 'graduateness'.

The questions in the profile have been worded in relation to competencies. Aiming to ensure that all students have a clear understanding of the question, most questions have two tiers, with the second tier being about the actual practical things a student having the competency would be able to do.

Example 1

For the subject-specific, practical skill category learning outcome stating that students should be able to 'Photograph professionally in complex and unpredictable contexts requiring selection and application from a wide range of innovative or standard photographic techniques' upon graduation, the following competency question was written and included in the profiler:

1. Can you select from a wide range of standard or innovative photographic techniques?

And the following practical things the student would be able to do were:

- *Would you know what photographic equipment, cameras and other imaging tools would be appropriate for specific image production requirements and in relation to space and lighting conditions?*

The self-grading in response to the competency questions were on a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 being 'No I can't' and 5 being 'Can do well'.

For the follow on stage, 'Finish and Evidence', students were guided to reflect on an instance where they demonstrated this competency in an assignment or a work experience situation. In many instances proper evidencing required the incorporation of the students' photographic work and they were instructed to include images as evidence where appropriate and to use the text box to explain what it was that the image presented demonstrated.

Example 2

For the Knowledge and Understanding category learning outcome, 'With minimum guidance can transform abstract concepts towards a given purpose and design innovative solutions to photographic presentation and communication', two questions were designed and included in the profile.

1. Can you transform abstract concepts towards a given purpose?

- *How confident are you in developing a photographic approach to illustrate abstract concepts such as, for example, joy, pain, possession etc.*

2. Can you design innovative solutions to photographic presentation and communication?

The second question did not have a second part, because it was felt that the first part was clear enough for students to be able to evaluate their competency in this category.

The profile was part of a comprehensive webfolio of preparation for employment in the photographic industry and was a required assessment element for the module.

The profile was published to the course gateway at the start of the semester and the students were given a whole semester to complete it, alongside the other assignments compiled in the webfolio. Progress on the profile was regularly monitored by the tutor, and students who were lagging behind were coaxed with encouraging messages. The gateway was set so that all students were allowed to publish, view and comment to encourage the sharing of good practice.

The result

Students were required to undertake the profile as an assessment element and all students engaged in the process. The difficulty anticipated was that not all students would work at an appropriate level of reflection and some would not go

beyond a superficial level. This is one of the potential difficulties with reflective activity that Moon (2004) identifies in her paper.

The problems encountered in the students' work with the profile included some students who did not read the questions properly or did but did not think through their answers (work at a deep level of reflection). Very few students set up 'action plans', which might be because the 'action plan' asset is more complex and elaborate than the 'ability' asset. Most students viewed this as a paper exercise that they needed to get through. All problems were dealt with through tutor monitoring of student work and formative feedback given through the gateway throughout the semester.

At the end of the module students indicated that the profile had been useful to them and that being asked to reflect upon their current level of skill in varied aspects of their academic and professional progress was useful. This benefit was more apparent with those students who actively engaged with the process and engaged in deep and meaningful reflection.

I am now running a study, using a similarly designed profile with level 4 (first year of the degree course) students, which will involve focus groups at the end of the academic year.

The impact

According to Moon (2004, p. 7), "(r)eflection [upon learning] is important in employability ... as a means for students to gain, maintain awareness of, express and explore their abilities in general and particularly in recruitment processes". The students' engagement with the 'Photography Employability Profiler' directs and encourages reflection which is expected to enable them to be conscious of their degree of readiness for industry. Through a process which potentially enhances their ability to articulate this readiness, it is anticipated that students should gain increased confidence in approaching and dealing with potential employers within the photo-imaging industry. This effect is of particular importance with students from non-traditional backgrounds who often lack the self-confidence needed to engage with industry.

The use of programme learning outcomes in this way is now being extended to all three levels of the degree programme and students are being asked to use the profiles as part of their employability skills programme throughout their education. In asking students to engage with the profile in their first year of study, students are effectively invited to become active agents in their own professional and personal development, to evaluate their own progress against the level learning outcomes, and devise action plans to improve skills and competencies they perceive as lacking.

My work with first year students is part of a programme of preparedness for employability, which is introduced at the start of the second semester of the first year and accompanies the students' journey through their three year degree, enhancing the students' abilities to account for their own learning and to take ownership of it.

Lessons learnt

- The PebblePad Profile Builder is an ideal tool for guided reflection upon learning; it allows the tutor to design a customised questionnaire relating to any aspect of the students' learning which students then use to reflect through scoring and evidence. Having the action plan as an option within this structure guides students to take

charge of their learning and development and become independent, life long learners.

- Reflection upon learning is not easy for many students especially if they have not been guided to engage in reflective activity before hand.
- To save the tutor a lot of feedback time, more class discussion in which different evidence entries are analysed to demonstrate the difference between deep and surface reflection need to be introduced to ensure students understand what is expected of them. The activity needs to be presented clearly as a meaningful and powerful learning tool which is of significant benefit in preparation for employability.
- Encouraging or demanding that students devise action plans in response to areas of weakness, to facilitate taking ownership of learning, is also worthwhile.

In brief – making the case for PebblePad

- The PebblePad Profile Builder is a tool for guided reflection, customisable to any learning situation.
- In using the profile to guide students to reflect upon their skills and competencies at the end of their studies, their graduate attributes were an integral part of the profile.
- The link between reflection upon learning and employability has been vastly demonstrated. The profile has been designed to enhance student employability through reflection.

References:

Moon, J. (2004). *Reflection and Employability*. York: Learning and Teaching Support Network.