Moving from paper to PebblePad: Connecting students, practicum supervisors, and instructors

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Chosen theme(s)

Programme curriculum
Professional learning and accreditation

The context

This case study is based on my experience in teaching graduate diploma students in Information Science. The aim of the diploma programme is to educate future information professionals who work in, for example, academic, public, and school libraries, archives, government organisations, and corporate information centres. The programme is accredited by the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) and is offered fully online. Information professionals must have theoretical knowledge of information organisation and retrieval for providing information services and instruction to users. In addition, applied practice is an important component for students to develop professional skills.

As a part of the degree requirement, all students must complete 2 practica during their study, which are allocated as assessments in 2 core units. They complete 60 hours in a work placement in different types of information organisations under the supervision of qualified professionals. During the practicum, students are required to keep practicum diaries, obtain evaluations from the supervisors, and produce practicum reports.

Traditionally, the information profession attracts many female students. ECU's programme enrols roughly 85% female and 15% male students. Some of them have been working in industry for a certain amount of time and are seeking opportunities to advance their careers as information professionals. In addition, some students apply for the programme to build a career. Thus, it is not

common for students to enrol in our programme immediately after completing an undergraduate degree. Many are mature-aged students with some type of work experience.

How it was ...

The basic structure of the practicum component in the curriculum has not changed. However, in the past, all of the relevant documentation, specifically the practicum handbook, practicum diary, and supervisors' assessment, were paper-based. However, this approach has several limitations.

One key disadvantage of the paper-based approach is that instructors were not able to monitor the practicum experience; they only got information about it at the end of the practicum. It was challenging in that situation to be aware of the nature and progress of work students were engaging in and what kind of knowledge and experience they obtained. In addition, a paper-based practicum diary is a very static medium that simply contains a text listing of what students have done. It does not reflect the more dynamic and interesting experiences that students have.

It is important for students to share their ongoing pre-professional experience as a part of their professional development. This also provides a great opportunity for practitioners to develop supervision skills and learn new skills. That is why I decided to implement a new way to capture students' experience and to allow for more effective monitoring and sharing.

The approach

My first implementation of PebblePad was in a final year unit offered in July 2013 in which one of the mandatory practica was scheduled. The first step was to shift all documentation from paper to the electronic environment. The practicum handbook, diary, and appraisal forms were created as pages in PebblePad. The practicum handbook was created using a Workbook template. The handbook is a gateway to all necessary information for the practicum such as basic information about the structure, workload, and workplace safety issues (Appendix 1). In addition to this information, forms and assignment guidelines were included as PDF documents for students to download if they wished. The handbook was to be shared with students' supervisors by using PebblePad's sharing function so that the supervisors could see the content.

During the practicum, students recorded their daily activities using the daily duty sheet, which used the Activity log tool (Appendix 2). Students logged the hours they engaged in their work. Students were encouraged to add images to the entries to give a richer documentation of the experience. These entries were a good foundation for the final practicum report, and each entry was monitored and approved by the practicum supervisor. The unit instructor also regularly checked students' performance to ensure that all was going well. In order for supervisors (not affiliated with ECU) to evaluate students' diary entries, they were given access to ATLAS, added as external members. Then, students and their supervisors are paired using the Sets functionality. This process also enabled the supervisors to evaluate students' practicum performance, as described below.

After the practicum period had finished, supervisors evaluated students' performance using an assessment form (Appendix 3). The form was created using PebblePad's template builder. Students' performance in areas such as communication skills and professionalism were assessed, and supervisors provided an overall evaluation with comments. As unit instructor, I checked the assessments first and returned them to students via PebblePad by releasing feedback.

How it is now ....

Although the curriculum is essentially unchanged, PebblePad has facilitated engagement among students, practicum supervisors, and the instructor, making the practicum experience more dynamic and efficient. It allows students to make a portfolio out of the practicum experience that is more appropriate for the programme's professional development goals. This is consistent with ALIA's recommendations.

The Benefits

One of the main benefits of using PebblePad is that it has enabled a streamlined process for practicum students and supervisors. All content is digitally managed and any changes were immediately reflected without any difficulties. Keeping up-to-date information is very important. All documentation is in one place alongside the actual diaries and evaluation forms.

I believe that implementing PebblePad has helped students to realise more self-directed and independent learning for the profession. The capability of adding multimedia also helped them to express their experience beyond textual forms. Students actively engaged in the process of documenting and assessing their own performance, accompanied by continuous monitoring by the instructor and practicum supervisor. From the perspectives of supervisors and instructors, it is beneficial to be a part of students' learning and assessment process throughout the experience, rather than just at the end. In this virtual space, students, the instructor, and supervisors share in the experience and contribute to students' learning. This will be a good foundation for continuous professional development efforts for the profession.

Lessons learnt

A key to get students engaged with PebblePad is to convey the message that the system is relevant for their professional careers. When I first implemented PebblePad in 2013, the relevance of the system was not always explicit, which seems to have led to complaints that the system was overly complicated. There was confusion over procedures for creating diary entries and reports, particularly in the difference between Pebble+ and ATLAS. In addition, the terminology (e.g., "assets") and the flash-based interface (as opposed to Windows programmes) meant that it took some effort to get used to the system. Going forward, I now explain that an eportfolio system is recommended by the relevant professional association (ALIA) for ongoing professional development. I anticipate that giving a clear message to students about why this tool is important

for their profession will help with motivation in taking the time needed to get used to the tool. I will monitor whether this explicit connection with professional practice changes students' perception during the current semester in 2014.

Active involvement of supervisors in PebblePad is an important part of students' practicum assessment. Approximately 60% of supervisors completed their assessment with no difficulties last semester. However, the remainder of the supervisors had problems or did not participate in using PebblePad, as they did not seem to have followed the instructions provided. Interestingly, when I provided guidance via phone, some of these supervisors quickly learned how to use the system. For example, some did not realise that they needed to use the "save" button after entering their assessment or didn't understand that the assessment needed to be "attached" to the diary as a whole rather than each entry. These steps were mentioned in the instructions provided, although I have now updated the layout to make the procedure clearer.

Although these steps are a very small thing from my perspective, some supervisors expressed that there was a significant technological barrier to using PebblePad. Even though video tutorials and PDF guides were distributed, they really had trouble understanding how to find materials and add content in the system. It seemed that in some cases, the notion of using a "new" system itself was a barrier more than the actual programme. Since active participation from supervisors is an essential aspect of using the tool for practicum placements, I expect that more frequent communication between instructors and supervisors will resolve this issue in the future.

In brief

- streamlined practicum monitoring, documentation, and assessment for the practicum
- facilitated self-directed learning
- involved students, supervisors, and the instructor in the learning process, especially for the purpose of students' professional development

Appendix 1: Practicum handbook

Practicum Handbook

Practicum handbook for students and supervisors

- Introduction
- General Information for Host and Students
- Practicum Placement Arrangements
- Note to Supervisors: Student Workload
- Note to Supervisors: Student Responsibility
- Note to Supervisors: Student Evaluation and Assessment
- Note to supervisors: Practicum Appraisal Form
- Documentation Checklist
- Practicum Assessment (IST4104)
- Practicum Assessment (IST4107)

The purpose of this handbook is to provide: 1) basic details on the nature of the Edith Cowan University (ECU) School of Computer and Security Science (SCSS) practicum experience, 2) general expectations of the host information service and professional supervisor, and 3) general responsibilities of the University and practicum students.

Note to Students:

carefully read all sections of the handbook before meeting your professional supervisor;

examine all accompanying related forms available in Blackboard for the unit;

raise any questions you have with the unit coordinator or lecturer/tutor prior to meeting your professional supervisor;

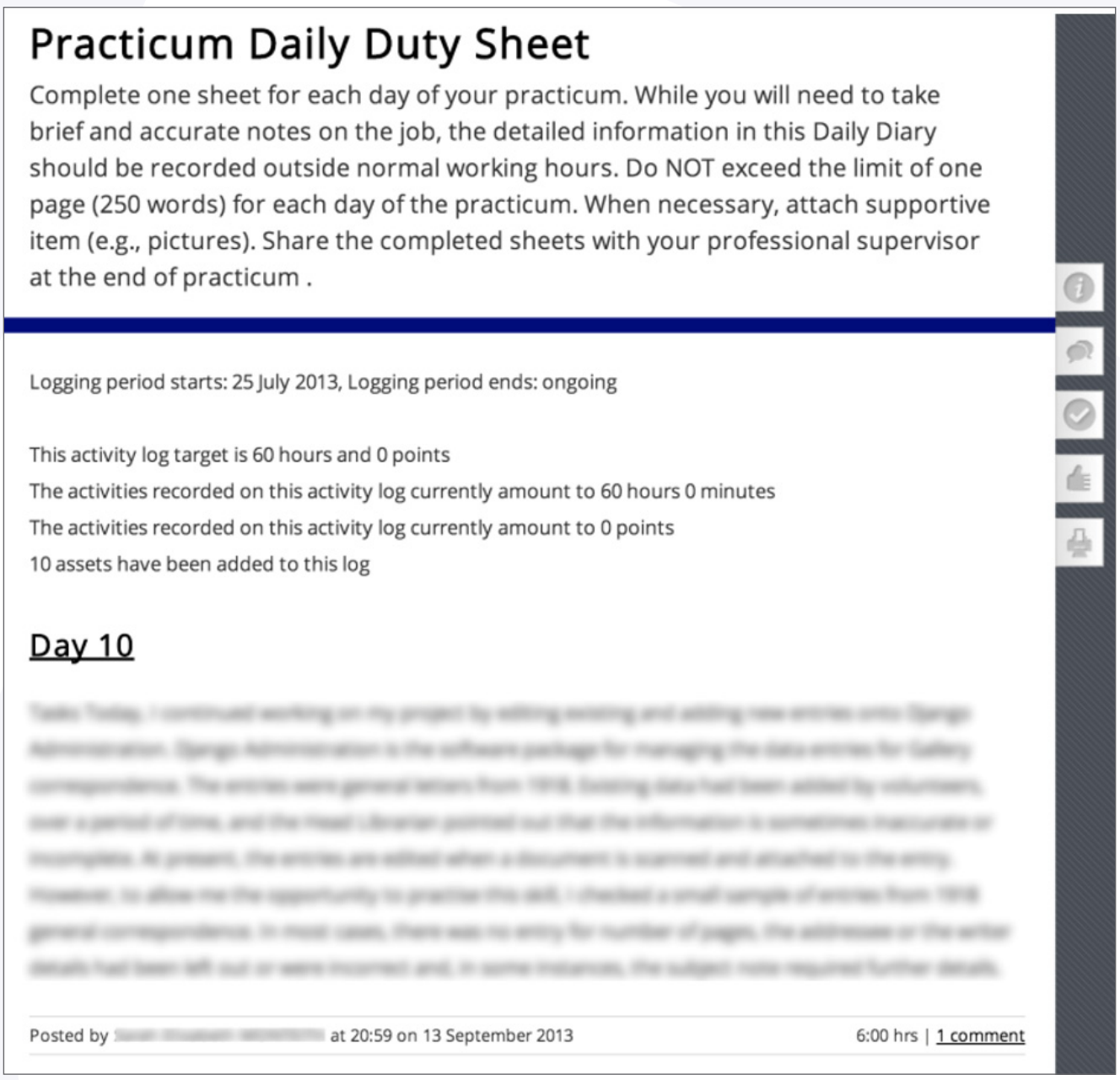
be prepared to provide answers to questions the host supervisor may have at the initial practicum interview; and

provide the professional supervisor with electronic copies of all relevant forms (or paper copies if necessary)

Note to Supervisors:

please read this handbook prior to or soon after the initial meeting with the student, before finalising the practicum arrangements.

Appendix 2: Sample daily duty sheet entry



Practicum Daily Duty Sheet

Complete one sheet for each day of your practicum. While you will need to take brief and accurate notes on the job, the detailed information in this Daily Diary should be recorded outside normal working hours. Do NOT exceed the limit of one page (250 words) for each day of the practicum. When necessary, attach supportive item (e.g., pictures). Share the completed sheets with your professional supervisor at the end of practicum .

Logging period starts: 25 July 2013, Logging period ends: ongoing

This activity log target is 60 hours and 0 points
The activities recorded on this activity log currently amount to 60 hours 0 minutes
The activities recorded on this activity log currently amount to 0 points
10 assets have been added to this log

Day 10

Tasks Today, I continued working on my project by editing existing and adding new entries onto Django Administration. Django Administration is the software package for managing the data entries for Gallery correspondence. The entries were general letters from 1918. Existing data had been added by volunteers, over a period of time, and the Head Librarian pointed out that the information is sometimes inaccurate or incomplete. At present, the entries are edited when a document is scanned and attached to the entry. However, to allow me the opportunity to practise this skill, I checked a small sample of entries from 1918 general correspondence. In most cases, there was no entry for number of pages, the addressee or the writer details had been left out or were incorrect and, in some instances, the subject note required further details.

Posted by [redacted] at 20:59 on 13 September 2013 6:00 hrs | 1 comment

Appendix 3: Supervisor evaluation form

Student Name

Unit Code

Practicum Location

Communication Skills

1. Uses language appropriate to clients

Unsatisfactory | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | Highly Competent

2. Demonstrates clear, expressive verbal communication.

Unsatisfactory | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | Highly Competent

3. Demonstrates clear, expressive written communication.

Unsatisfactory | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | Highly Competent

4. Approaches clients in an appropriate manner.

Unsatisfactory | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | Highly Competent