



Towards an eportfolio culture: One institution's journey

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A case study from PebblePad's 2016 'Future Ready' conference on preparing and equipping learners for their journey.

This case study will describe our attempt to move the use of eportfolios beyond those who have already used this pedagogical tool at our institution. We are working at creating an eportfolio culture on our entire campus.

The Context

Given the initial excitement in the early 2000s about the potential of eportfolios for advancing integrative learning and authentic assessment in higher education, one might imagine that eportfolios would be ubiquitous in the academy. The reality is much more meagre. A recent EDUCAUSE survey (Dahlstrom, Walker, & Dziuban, 2013) reports that 57% of higher education campuses have "made some use" of eportfolios, but only at a program or course level. The promise of eportfolios as a broadly used tool for enhancing student learning and advancing authentic assessment is yet to be seen.

In some way this makes sense. The adoption of eportfolios follow Rogers' (2003) 'Diffusion of Innovation' theory which describes the process of adoption of new technologies over time as illustrated by the standard bell curve. The theory asserts that innovation starts with innovators, of course, and that, by definition, they are limited in numbers. The next group to follow a new technology are the early adopters. This is where many of our eportfolio projects get stuck. A few enthusiastic proponents adopt the tool but its use does not go beyond those initial users. The theory posits that there is a breaking point, called the chasm, which must be negotiated to get to the pinnacle – early and late majority adoption of technology. (At the tail end of the technology adoption model is the laggards.) The question becomes, how do we spread the use of eportfolios beyond our innovators and early adopters?

The Problem

Portland State University (PSU) is an urban campus located in the heart of downtown Portland. It is the largest university in the state, with over 28,000 students enrolled in undergraduate and graduate programs. It is Oregon's most diverse state university and also boasts a large transfer population.

In 1994 PSU launched its four year interdisciplinary general education program, University Studies. From the start, portfolios were seen as a way to enhance student learning and assess the program. In 1998 we started using eportfolios in the University Studies year-long Freshman Inquiry courses. Soon, nearly all of our Freshman Inquiry courses were using eportfolios. Despite the technological challenges encountered in these early days of web developed portfolios, faculty and students recognised the value added by using eportfolios. Labissiere and Reynolds (2004) highlight the advantage of an eportfolio over a hard copy portfolio, especially in terms of the impact on student intellectual and personal growth. An eportfolio allows students to consider multiple audiences, forcing a critical lens on what one shares and why. With the ability to hyperlink on a webpage, students are also more easily able to make connections between and across what they have learned, creating opportunities for deeper critical thinking.

Our intention was to carry the eportfolio into all levels of our University Studies courses and beyond. This happened on a limited scale. Some of our Sophomore Inquiry and our Senior Capstone courses began to use eportfolios. Some individual courses in majors also began to use eportfolios. While the majority of Freshman Inquiry students (over 1000 each year) created an eportfolio, few encountered one again in their academic careers. If they did, it was unlikely that the portfolio would be related to their previous portfolios and would probably be hosted on an entirely different web platform. The dream of creating a rich portfolio process that could follow students through their academic career was just that, a dream.

We, in the eportfolio field, often say that it is the pedagogy that matters and while this is still true, the technology matters too. Some of our difficulty in moving an eportfolio initiative across our campus was related to not having a university-wide supported technology platform. The investment a faculty member and a student must make to learn and manage a technology tool might just feel too great.

Without a shared platform across campus, several problems had arisen. For students, it meant that they could not use their eportfolio across programs and courses. In addition, they often had to learn a new platform, which focused them on learning the technology rather than learning through the content and process. Without a shared and supported platform, there was no technical support for learning or troubleshooting problems. This lack of centralized support also contributed to faculty reluctance to invest in the eportfolio process. In the almost twenty years

since our initial foray into eportfolios interest and use has grown, but to move its use beyond the early adopters we needed to address the technology issue.

The Approach

In 2013, the Provost at PSU, Sona Andrews, announced her Provost's Challenge to fund projects aligned with reTHINK PSU.

“reTHINK PSU, a presidential initiative at Portland State University, is a campus-wide effort to deliver an education that serves more students with better outcomes, while containing costs through curricular innovation, community engagement and effective use of technology”

(ReThink PSU, n.d.)

A group of faculty proposed a project called “Making Learning Visible: An ePortfolio Initiative to Transform Learning and Assessment at PSU.” The proposal was primarily aimed at obtaining funds to acquire and support an eportfolio platform. However, in addition, it aimed to develop an eportfolio culture on campus through the process of acquiring the platform. The project leadership team consisted of a small group of faculty and staff who were already eportfolio users and enthusiasts. The team decided that we would organise our work around three general steps: Platform Procurement, Early Implementation, and Expansion.

The Results

Procurement

The procurement process started in fall 2013 and culminated in the purchasing of the eportfolio platform, PebblePad, which PSU began to pilot in fall 2015. We certainly could have facilitated a quicker process but by taking the time to engage our community in the selection of the platform, we gained excitement and momentum in using eportfolios on our campus. We decided to involve all possible stakeholders. There were individuals in the institution who had already expressed interest in eportfolios and they were, of course, invited to the conversation. We also identified and invited others who we thought might have an interest. Early in the process the leadership team held small meetings inviting these stakeholders to think about the possibility of eportfolios. This could be called intrusive inclusion. We then held several large meetings with the intention of asking these stakeholders and potential stakeholders for their help in selecting a university-wide eportfolio platform. Both the small and large meetings served as an opportunity to educate our community about eportfolios and the potential they have to improve learning and assessment on our campus. We gave those involved an opportunity to imagine possibilities of using an eportfolio in their context, something that many had never considered.

From these early discussions the project leadership team decided that we needed three work groups to help develop the criteria we would use in our Request for Proposal (RFP) to eportfolio vendors. These work groups were Pedagogy, Assessment, and Technology. Stakeholders selected the work groups they wanted to participate in and each group was facilitated by a leader. These meetings were held once every two weeks. There was good participation and faculty and staff were eager to learn about, and share ideas about, what should be included in the RFP. It was a learning experience for all of the participants. For example, it was impossible to talk about the requirements for pedagogy without talking about pedagogy in general – sharing ideas about assignments, addressing diverse student needs, and talking about concepts such as student-centred learning and self-directed learning – as well as the role an eportfolio could play in a student’s learning experience at PSU. Unlike some meetings, participants left these meetings feeling energized, inspired, and knowing that their ideas could make a difference.

The ultimate RFP was unwieldy and asked for more than any software could deliver. However, the discussions allowed stakeholders to consider with some depth what was possible and what was most important. In the end, participants felt their voices were heard and their constituent’s needs were being addressed. The RFP was released and we had six vendors express interest. We invited four vendors to come and present to the campus community. We made sure that these big Public Forums were advertised widely. The events were well-attended and were video-taped so that those who could not come were still able to participate. We solicited opinions about the platforms via an online survey but participants were also encouraged to give feedback in whatever way they wanted. These events, again, were learning opportunities for our community. Those who had not been involved previously, but were curious, learned more about eportfolios and their potential for learning and assessment in their context.

Ultimately, the project leadership team recommended that we use PebblePad. PSU is one of the first North American schools to work with PebblePad. We were attracted to the idea that the platform is actually more than an eportfolio tool; it is a personal learning environment. It is a place where students can plan and document their experiences and thoughts as well as document their achievements. While not designed to be a Learning Management System (LMS), it has the capability of delivering content and managing submissions and online conversations. In addition, being one of their first customers in the American market meant that we could have a collaborative relationship in the future development of the product. More information about the procurement process through the Provost’s Challenge project can be found at: <https://www.pdx.edu/oai/provosts-challenge-projects-169>.

Implementation

At the tail end of the procurement process, the project leadership team began to plan for the next stages. While procurement of a platform was the aim of the Provost Challenge project, just purchasing a product would not be enough to support our movement beyond initial adopters.

Leadership for the project had to shift. There is now shared responsibility for the eportfolio process in centralized offices on campus. The Office of Academic Innovation (OAI), our faculty development centre, is now responsible for helping on-board and support faculty who want to use PebblePad. The Office of Information Technology (OIT) is now responsible for supporting the technical backend of the product but also supporting students who are using the platform. A faculty-in-residence for ePortfolios and Integrative Learning in the initial pilot year was established. In addition, a Stewards group was formed with those from the project leadership team who wanted to continue and was expanded to include newly identified eportfolio enthusiasts with the role of stewarding the project forward.

With this authority in place, a roll-out plan was developed with the Stewards group. We agreed that it would be best to start with a diversity of programs that wanted to be in a pilot group and would commit to participating in a several day PebblePad Academy at the beginning of Fall term and ongoing community of practice meetings. We included groups in the pilot projects that represented a variety of uses of the platform with the idea that we can create use-cases that others on campus could learn from. Some are from academic programs, both offered face-to-face and online; some are extra-curricular programs. One pilot involves faculty using PebblePad to create their own Promotion and Tenure eportfolios. In addition, OAI has organized professional development activities involving eportfolios and PebblePad. Two of the most recent campus-wide events included international speakers on eportfolios. The platform is available to any PSU faculty, staff or student and, while not widely advertised yet, word of mouth has brought new users to OAI to learn about the new platform and how it can be used.

Expansion

The Stewards group is currently refining our original visioning for the eportfolio project as well as our five year plan. We have identified constituents we would like to engage in eportfolios, including our partnerships with high schools and community colleges to alumni. One important area that seems to have potential for creating an eportfolio culture is the use of PebblePad for Promotion and Tenure and other appraisal processes. As faculty and staff become familiar with the software, they will likely see the utility of using PebblePad with their students. While we had wondered if we were going to need to do a lot of outreach and education to get buy-in, it is clear that we, instead, will have to manage the demand for getting involved.

Lessons Learned

Procurement

The biggest lesson we learned is that the involvement of many people, current and potential stakeholders, worked. We had the advantage of being one of the Provost Challenge projects and people were curious based on that alone. They may have initially engaged based on curiosity alone but they stayed because we invited them to actively participate in a process that could,

or would, have an impact on their practice at the university. Through our intrusive inclusion of multiple, and perhaps unlikely, stakeholders, ownership of the eportfolio on our campus broadened. This process created new eportfolio champions on our campus – programs and people that were eager to engage in an eportfolio process and use the platform. We were also reminded of the need for, and reward gained by, creating the time and space to discuss issues of learning in the academy. The small and large group meetings, the work groups, and the public forums all provided opportunities to connect and learn across departments and disciplines.

Implementation

Beyond the initial procurement process, the university has invested in the new platform by centralizing services to faculty and students through OAI and OIT. The impact of this has been extremely positive. Faculty and student questions are addressed quickly. Staff in these offices are eager and able to create resources. Prior to this, program faculty and students who wanted to use eportfolios were on their own. This centralized support in well-established services on campus will make the integration of the new platform sustainable. In addition, we have learned the importance of maintaining and nurturing the learning community that developed in our PebblePad Academy. Those of us who are actively using the tool contact each other to celebrate our successes and help each other out with problems. In addition, OAI has hosted initial adopters' reunions. One such reunion was focused on a discussion of possible research agendas that could be developed from these projects. Lastly, we have learned that faculty and students are interested in learning more about how to use PebblePad. As more people learn about the platform, the numbers of calls and emails have increased.

Expansion

We have learned that we need a clear process for on-boarding new projects using eportfolios and PebblePad. Learning new software and changing pedagogical practice is challenging. Acquiring a platform is not the end of this journey. While we chose the platform because it offered more than just an eportfolio, it has not been easy learning about and using all of its functionality, even for our professional staff in OAI and OIT. Also, in bringing in a system that is student-centred, we are needing to redefine how we provide support services to our students. OAI is focused on providing support for faculty while OIT is tasked with providing support for students. However, OIT's focus has been on supporting students with the use of the technology and not on supporting them with the learning process. The boundaries of the platform demand that we consider student learning and support outside of the traditional classroom context. Finally, we are learning that to sustain and continue to grow interest and use, we must continue to promote and support new users. Without this we will have a few more initial adopters but we will not get to a "majority" user status.

Conclusion

Selecting a centralized and supported eportfolio platform has paved the road for PSU to fully realize the promise of eportfolios in advancing learning and creating authentic assessment. Faculty and students now have the basics for creating a rich and connected learning experience. Our journey with eportfolios started with a focus on student learning and the development of processes that were aided, but sometimes hindered, by the lack of an easy to use, single platform. With the introduction of PebblePad we are addressing this issue. The future, however, is dependent on how we use this new base to continue to innovate and support our campus community in continuing to put student learning first. The platform remains a tool for learning; the work behind the tool is still most important.

References

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