Using PebblePad to support school wide collaborative learning

Jackie Haigh

School of Health Studies, University of Bradford, UK

Theme(s)
Learning: Reflection, Graduate Attributes
Teaching/Professional practice: Programme/Course Development
Organisation: Managing Organisational Processes

The background context

The context for this case study is a School of Health Studies where 5 professional departments (Nursing, Midwifery, Radiography, Physiotherapy and Occupational Therapy) were revalidating their undergraduate programmes at the same time. Each revalidated programme was to include a 20 credit cross-school module, where students would have the opportunity to work in multidisciplinary teams. There was previous experience of this in an inter-professional education module but the assessment of this module had proved problematic. The assessment was a Multiple Choice Questionnaire (MCQ) of students' knowledge of the National Health Service (NHS) and other health professional groups. Marks did not reflect the overall profile of the student and the assessment did not test engagement with learning.

Why PebblePad?

PebblePad provided a platform for bringing together the different aspects of the module into a coherent whole relating to the individual student. This meant that sustained engagement with learning activities was being assessed, not just the ability to write an essay.

The gateway structure facilitates the provision of formative assessment on student work in progress. I created a formative feedback form for the 17 tutors to use to provide high quality and equitable feedback to students. Formative assessment of the portfolios suggests that a substantial proportion of the student body are not engaging in learning activities in a timely manner, but are relying on final cramming to meet a deadline. Formative assessment results have the potential to profile the whole first year and identify those who would benefit from extra time management/ study skills support.

> PebblePad has provided a platform to enable the smooth management of a module of 360 students in 17 tutor groups. The facility to put students into tutor groups made the process of accessing and marking student portfolios quick and easy for novice portfolio markers.

The purpose

The driver for this module was the framework for action on interprofessional education and collaborative practice:

- 'Interprofessional education occurs when students from two or more professions learn about, from and with each other to enable effective collaboration and improve health outcomes.
- Interprofessional education is a necessary step in preparing a "collaborative practice-ready" health workforce that is better prepared to respond to local health needs.' WHO (2010, p7)

This first year module was to start the process of developing the skills to be "collaborative practice-ready". Learning outcomes in knowledge and understanding were:

- Outline the roles of different health and social care professions and how they work together;
- Evaluate the factors that can enhance and inhibit effective team working;
- Evaluate the principles of and barriers to effective communication.

In subject specific skills they were:

- Self-evaluate the attributes required of a collaborative, practice ready, health care practitioner;
- Apply communication and team-working skills in interpersonal relations with professional colleagues, service providers, service users and their carers;
- Reflect on application of communication theory in practice settings with clients/carers and professionals.

In personal transferable skills they were:

- Apply reflective techniques to the development of your own learning;
- Communicate effectively, in verbal and written forms, making sure that the meaning is always clear;
- Demonstrate personal learning skills in an eportfolio including use of IT, academic writing, referencing

The approach

The module descriptor was created over a one-year period by a team of stakeholders including academics, clinicians and service users. The aim of this module was to develop self-aware, collaborative healthcare students who are able to communicate effectively in team situations, valuing the contribution of others, and responding appropriately to diversity. This was to be achieved through face-to-face group work and web based portfolio activities and to be assessed by portfolio. I was appointed as module leader and worked from May to September 2010 with a working group to:

- Produce a scheme of work for the module (schedule of lectures and seminars, allocated time, etc.).
- Produce aims, learning outcomes and indicative content for each taught/facilitated session.
- Identify relevant exercises and tasks to include in taught and directed work.
- Produce a guide (Student & Lecturer) to directed work.
- Produce an assessment strategy.
- Produce assessment guidance (Student and Lecturer).

This module is a core module for all pre-registration undergraduate programmes in the School of Health Studies. In 2011 348 students in total from nursing, midwifery, radiography, physiotherapy, occupational therapy and health care assistant undergraduate programmes undertook two days of module activities facilitated in 17 groups of approximately 20 students per tutor.

From the beginning I have seen this module as developmental. Developmental for the staff involved in learning to work together as a team, learning how PebblePad works, and learning how to assess eportfolios. For the student this module was even more challenging. They had to work in a mixed professional team and learn how to use eportfolio tools to reflect on their activities and communicate with their group. I anticipated that this learning would cause anxiety because many students begin university with a very transmissive notion of what learning is, i.e. it is what the teacher tells them to learn, not active engagement in activities which change the person of the learner. I tried to alleviate this anxiety through careful planning and clear instructions as well as an open forum for module questions, but changing a philosophical stance is not so easy.

The result

I am now at mid point through the module. Reflecting on what has been achieved so far I think I have achieved some success but there is considerable room for improvement next year. In this paper I want to focus on the issue of formative marking which PebblePad makes manageable but which raises issues for the module leader.

We have just completed the formative marking process (31st January) and final submission is 14th May. From a staff management point of view a feedback form linked to the gateway worked well. Tutors were impressed with the ease of the process, which allowed high quality, individual yet standardised feedback to be given in a sustainable time frame. However from a student engagement perspective the findings have been disappointing.

Students were introduced to the system during induction week and encouraged to experiment with it until the activity week in week 6 of the programme. In week 6 all students attended two days of group activities, which included an eportfolio workshop. In the workshop they were shown how to download the module eportfolio template and publish it to the module gateway, and how to perform the limited portfolio tasks they would need to create their module assessment. A further workshop was arranged in December 2011 for those students still having difficulty mastering basic eportfolio skills such as linking assets in a portfolio page. Students were asked to include specific items in their portfolios by the end of December so that they could get substantial feedback from their tutors in January.

Despite these quite explicit instructions a provisional analysis of the formative grades shows that two thirds of the cohort had not done enough to be considered on track to pass the module.

The impact

Learning

The formative feedback report has highlighted the extent of non-engagement in module activity. Many students leave course work until the last minute, and lack of compliance with the formative deadline might be due to other priorities, given the summative submission date is not until May. However, this formative feedback may also be alerting us to unmet learner needs in relation to time management, reflection, use of literature, IT skills and ability to follow instructions.

Teaching

This module was logistically challenging, bringing together students from different courses. These groups had to work face-to-face in group activities, and then maintain learning through group discussion and directed learning tasks, recorded in an eportfolio. Logistically PebblePad was an effective tool for managing this process. This module was an easy way for tutors to sample using this active learning approach with minimum personal risk, since the overall responsibility for success rests with me, the module leader. If eportfolio practice is to widen out from a base of pioneer users it will need to be embedded in curricula and to be led by experts who have the confidence to take risks. This confidence must come from support within the wider organisation.

<u>Organisation</u>

From an organisational perspective my results so far look alarming because they demonstrate high levels of lack of engagement. However these are formative results that provide information about the student group. Acting upon this information, through personal tutor follow up to find the cause of non-engagement should improve the overall pass rate and identify those students who require additional support from student services.

Lessons learnt

- The main barrier in successfully running this module was that I was the only PebblePad expert. My staff team of 17 tutors ranged from some experience to no experience of using PebblePad with student groups. Team meetings were busy just planning the activities and, though I did spend some time introducing staff to portfolio activities, with the next group of staff I will link this more closely to the portfolio activities expected of students. In this way tutors will be better prepared to provide student support and so develop their own understanding of the system. Gradually through this module staff expertise will build up – this is a learning activity for tutors; a much more effective learning experience than context free IT training.
- This was the first occurrence of the module. As such I had no exemplars to show to the students. Next time I will make full use of student volunteers to demonstrate a complete portfolio. This will help students achieve a clearer conception of what is expected.
- I will keep detailed records of formative results to compare with final outcomes. I will expect to see some improvement in formative results next year as a result of improvements in module delivery, but I will also monitor formative results against first year student profiles to test my theory that evidence of non-compliance at this formative stage is an indication of overall performance in year one.

In brief – making the case for PebblePad

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References:

WHO (2010). *Framework for action on interprofessional education and collaborative practice.* Switzerland: World Health Organisation