

making the case

From small acorns do big trees grow: Developing distance learning from 5 units to 20 credit modules and beyond!

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Theme(s)

Teaching/Professional Practice: Programme/Course Development, Managing e-Assessment

The background context

This case study outlines the development of a 20 credit module in the School of Technology called 'Practical Portfolio' that has run previously at a distance as 4 x 5 credit units over 40 weeks. Both versions are delivered and supported using only PebblePad. It is aimed at practitioners within the construction and built environment industry who, due to the challenges of time and workplace restrictions, cannot attend traditional modes of Higher Education (HE). This particular module has been tailored towards practitioners wishing to become members of the Institute for Clerk of Works (ICWCI). The 4 x 5 credit unit approach was designed to provide learners returning to HE with a steady passage back.

The original framework of 5 credit units was developed through a funded project at the university called ePPSME (Developing an eportfolio Based Pedagogy for Small to Medium Enterprises). The tutors involved in this case study were part of the first pilot project in ePPSME delivering a 5 credit unit in 'Developing Communication Skills for the Construction Industry'. The tutors used this same model to create 4 x 5 credit units specifically focused on learners wanting to build their knowledge to put them in a stronger position for application and membership into the ICWCI. However, the timeframe (40 weeks) was too lengthy for the learners who were keen to get their ICWCI memberships applied for as soon as possible. 25% of the cohort didn't complete further than unit 2, although 50% did successfully complete all 4 of the 5 credit units. One solution to try to increase the completion rate was to contextualize the 4 units into a single 20 credit module (still at level 4) and look to bring the timeframe into line with the face-to-face modules delivered over 12 weeks, but to deliver it online.

Why PebblePad?

PebblePad has enabled us to provide a distance learning environment for work-based learners where all course materials and activities are accessed via one hyperlink. Content can be delivered through an eportfolio that provides links through and behind the content directly to learner portfolios, which contain reflective activities, skills analysis, planning, quizzes, space for critical incident sharing and group blog discussion (known as activity workbooks for the rest of the case study). This could not be done in any of our other systems. Had we not used PebblePad, we would have had to use a combination of systems and we wanted learners to only have to get to grips with one technology.

The purpose

After some successful experiences with the 5 credit unit versions completed over 40 weeks it was decided to try to develop this model to support a shorter time frame of study. The aim was to closely work with a professional body (ICWCI) to develop the 20 credit module into a coherent and engaging online delivery format in which the cognitive interaction between learners provides a meaningful pedagogical experience, whilst ensuring that the curriculum best represents their members' requirements in preparation for joining the ICWCI.

The approach

Collaboration with the Professional Body

The new 12 week proposal was presented to the ICWCI Professional Standards Committee in June 2011, and in theory the concept was accepted. The concerns from the ICWCI were that 40 weeks to 12 weeks would lose content and therefore relevance. To address their concerns, the team structured a curriculum design framework highlighting the four key themes outlined in the previous units: Quality; Ethics; Contract Law; and Work Based Learning, the final theme providing the learner with the opportunity to showcase their skills developed during early weeks. This draft outline was made available to representatives in the ICWCI for their comments from the beginning of the design process.

We wanted to ensure collaboration with the professional body wherever possible and explained how the new module design would reduce a “stuffed curriculum”, but would still provide challenging activities and not compromise the quantity or quality of the materials or activities. This did, of course, raise the question of how much involvement employers/professional bodies should contribute towards curriculum design. However, with the bespoke nature of this module, and the professional standards body of the ICWCI requiring involvement so that they would be comfortable accrediting the module, the dialogue continued and members of the ICWCI assisted in providing their own case studies for inclusion to the material. One of the key factors for discussion was the concern that “mentoring interaction”, which is a key requirement of membership to the ICWCI, would be lost through online learning. The ICWCI committee thought that group discussion and question and answer sessions traditionally shared in the classroom would be lost. The solution was to ensure that group blogging activities were incorporated throughout the curriculum, and that the learner interacts with fellow learners from the outset through the “ice-breaker group blog activity” in week 1 and ongoing throughout the module. Another concern was the level of access to a tutor, but again an amicable solution was found and online access to tutors was ensured to be available at least three times a week. Ensuring the platform is formatted in such a way as to allow help and guidance to be easily accessed provided additional reassurance.

The assessment is very much an ongoing process and the module incorporates two summative submissions: an online presentation (20% of the marks); and a critical analysis portfolio (80% of the marks). However, the team have also incorporated weekly activities, which act as a reflective ‘check point’ of constructive alignment and provide patches that can be used in their final critical analysis portfolio.

How the module requirements and collaborative outcomes from discussions with the professional body described above were designed using PebblePad.

The module was broken down into 5 sections: Welcome Week (week 1); Quality (weeks 2-4); Professional Ethics (weeks 5-7); Contracts (weeks 8-10); and Assessment (weeks 11-12). Each of these sections of content was designed into individual webfolios. This was so that the parent webfolio could have each of these sub-webfolios inserted at the week in which they became relevant, thus enabling us to time release the content. The content webfolios contained a range of multimedia resources relevant to that week’s topic. In the 5 credit version of the modules, the webfolios were copied by

the learner. However, this proved problematic if something in the content changed such as new policy or legislation, or if a YouTube link broke. The learners were then left with the old version or broken link. For the 20 credit version we shared the webfolios, enabling the content to remain editable where and when needed. In addition, it helped tremendously in the early days to see who had accessed the materials and when.

There were 2-3 short weekly activities incorporated into each week’s content. At the point in the content in which an activity was placed and relevant, there was a hyperlink to a gateway where student activity workbooks were accessible. The activity workbooks were eportfolios that were created for the students at the start of the module, and that the students copied and published to the gateway (as part of induction). It was to this gateway that the hyperlink in the materials pointed. The workbook was a multiple page eportfolio that had each of the tasks pre-populated into it. For example, there were blog pages where students may ‘post new’ to respond to the activity by text, with the opportunity to upload additional files or multimedia. Others may be blog pages that have been made into activities that involve ‘filling in the gaps’ where the ‘edit entry’ option is used. In addition, form pages were embedded for structured activities to be completed and PebblePad quizzes were used for multiple choice type assessment. The workbook contained built in help and guidance with each different activity type.

There were a number of group activities throughout the weeks which were completed in a group blog available from the first week. A separate ice breaker blog was used at the start of the module to try to bring together virtually a geographically disparate group of learners.

A tutor quick links webfolio page was created so that the tutor could see at a glance which activities were in which week, and there was a link to where the activities were located, e.g., a link to the activity workbook gateway if it was a workbook activity or directly into the group blog if a group discussion was scheduled that week.

The result

At the time of writing we are in week 4 of the 12 week version and we have 100% retention of learners that started with us on the programme. The results of the programme when studied in the 4 x 5 credit unit framework was that we lost 25% of the cohort by the second of the 4 units and in total 50% completed overall. So the results for the 20 credit version so far seem positive.

The impact

Programme/Course Development

A similar adaptation of the 5 credit framework using eportfolios into a 20 credit online modular structure that is seen in this case study has also been used in a Distance Law course where all modules have been designed and developed in a similar way that is currently running.

Managing e-Assessment

This case study illustrates a method by which a module can be assessed both formatively and summatively without having to use an additional e-assessment system. Even though this module has not finished yet, the multiple 5 credit version of the module was successfully assessed without using an additional system.

Lessons learnt

We time released the content by theme which worked well. Content was released every 4 weeks and each new section was added to the main portfolio, so that the learners only ever accessed the same shared webfolio which grew over time. In line with this, we released multiple activity workbooks so that an activity workbook was released at the same time as the related content. However, next time we would have only one activity workbook copied and published at the start. This would avoid learners having multiple workbooks at the end.

In brief – making the case for PebblePad

- Programme/Course Development
PebblePad can provide a Distance Learning platform and Personal Learning Space simultaneously. This means there is only one technology platform for learners at a distance and in the workplace to have to learn. PebblePad is an effective content delivery and e-assessment system all in one place that has the added advantage that students have the ability to step outside of the structured use of the system and use the other tools in the PebblePad suite, such as action planning and skills auditing etc., to assist and support them in the completion of the formal learning requirements of the module.
- Managing e-Assessment
PebblePad enables the early identification of students at risk. Through using an eportfolio to complete short, weekly tasks the tutor is able to quickly identify students at risk if they are not completing the weekly milestones. In addition, the gateway structure and built in functionality give a robust e-assessment platform where the summative (as well as formative) element of the assessment can be carried out with all the necessary quality assurance features.