PebblePad

The 'Unfold' project – enhancing the Personal Tutor System with the use of reflective templates

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Chosen theme(s)

Institution agendas

The context

This paper focuses on the initial stages of the 'Unfold' project. The aim of the project is to explore ways of enhancing the University of Edinburgh's institutional Personal Tutor System with a set of self-reflective templates – created, distributed and collected via PebblePad. The PebblePad-based developments (managed by Robert Chmielewski) are presented in the context of a much bigger institutional implementation of the Personal Tutor System (work led by Prof. Ian Pirie).

University of Edinburgh's Personal Tutor System

At the beginning of the 2012/13 academic year, the University of Edinburgh introduced the Personal Tutor System for undergraduate students (extended to postgraduate students a year later). The personal tutor arrangements which were put in place are the frontline of academic guidance and support at the University. Currently, the system encompasses all undergraduate and postgraduate taught students and is underpinned by a schedule of individual and small-group meetings between Personal Tutors and their Tutees. The primary focus is on the provision of academic advice and support, facilitating self-critical reflection on progress and feedback, supporting the development of personal and professional attributes, and developing self-efficacy. The system is supported by a set of online tools developed in-house (PT IT Tools). The tools underpin the system by enabling the creation of personalised and dynamic supplements to the student record of each student. The software facilitates online interactions between Tutees, Personal Tutors and Student Support Teams. This set of online tools has been developed to

support scheduled and ad-hoc meetings, to record notes/discussions regarding academic progress, and to enable the recording of any significant issues that may be affecting a student's studies.

<u>Use of PebblePad at the University of Edinburgh</u>

Prior to the 'Unfold' project, PebblePad has been used in selected Schools across the University to support:

- online assessment (assignment collection and marking with ~1000 submissions in peak months)
- Edinburgh Award (a University-wide programme based on the Higher Education Achievement Report (HEAR))
- course-based reflective diaries (blogs)
- course-based presentations (webfolios)

How it was …

<u>Personal Tutor System – the big picture</u>

The Personal Tutor System is one of the outcomes of the ongoing Enhancing Student Support (ESS) initiative. The ESS focuses on giving students a framework of guidance and support that builds on the best of current practices.

It was established to address the following issues:

- Levels of student satisfaction have not been where they should be across the University
- Student experience not as personalised as it might, could or should be
- Inconsistencies in academic guidance and oversight of whole programme experience
- Student support fragmented across Schools and Central Departments
- Student concerns in general around assessment and feedback

These issues were highlighted by student surveys such as the National Student Survey (NSS), and the University of Edinburgh's own quality assurance processes, such as Teaching Programme Review and the QAA Enhancement-led Institutional Review.

The ESS is also designed to provide more consistent quality of provision, help students systematically monitor their progress and performance, and relate these to their long-term aspirations. It seeks to blend a clear set of University-wide requirements, well-understood by students and staff with scope for Colleges and Schools to tailor provision to programme structures, subject needs and professional accreditation requirements.

Combining PebblePad with the Personal Tutor System

Although the Personal Tutor System institutional roll-out has been generally viewed as successful, there are issues which have to be addressed. One of them is lack of students' engagement with the process of meeting note keeping. Whilst personal tutors are being systematic at keeping notes/records of the meetings, the same cannot be said about a majority of their personal tutees.

The PT IT tools include functionalities designed to accommodate notes from the meetings. These are open-box spaces in which students can record their comments/notes after each meeting. As highlighted above, the mechanism is used mainly by the tutors, while the students' perspective and experience of the meeting remains uncaptured. This alone can make any future students' self-reflection very difficult. Moreover, other tutors who might need to look at a student's meeting history (without being able to consult that student's own notes) will find establishing the full picture of the PT-student interactions difficult.

Therefore, the main task of the 'Unfold' initiative was to find a way of enabling students to become more self-reflective, and to start collecting/recording their thoughts about PT meetings. With that in mind, the project is based on two hypotheses:

- students are more likely to record notes within personalised and structured environments (as opposed to open-box spaces),
- students should be expected to engage with recording/reflective note-taking before the meeting (as opposed to waiting till after the meeting).

Robert Chmeilewski about work which led to 'Unfold':

"Professionally, I have always been interested in the subject of reflective learning; especially in encouraging more mature and metacognitive analysis of students' educational journey. For years, I have also been promoting PebblePad across the University to support all types of activities linked to students' self-monitoring and recording. The arrival of the Personal Tutor system presented a chance of combining the two areas of my interest to produce something fresh and powerful.

I was invited by Prof. Ian Pirie to one of the meetings of the Senior Personal Tutors group, where I was presenting PebblePad as a tool which could be used by personal tutors and their tutees. During the meeting I realised that, despite the flexibility of PebblePad, more work would have to be done to customise its templates (before we were able to offer it to personal tutors). It seemed that a new, bespoke set of specific activities was required. Activities, which could contribute to the Personal Tutor System whilst at the same time would simplify the process of recording notes.

In order to investigate the new ways of combining PebblePad tools with the idea of reflective development for personal tutees, I was offered a secondment with the University's Institute of Academic Development (from January 2013). After a few months of some preliminary research, I began to promote the idea of introducing online reflective templates for personal tutees under the name of 'Unfold'."

The approach

Building the workbooks

As part of the preparatory work, a dozen of the personal tutors from across the institution were interviewed to seek their views on the 'Unfold' approach. All of the tutors expressed their support of the idea of adding some structure to their meetings with their tutees. As a final result of those consultations, a group of personal tutors from three Schools agreed to take part in a pilot run of 'Unfold':

- School of Biology (3 personal tutors - 14 students)
- School of Education (2 personal tutors - 30 students)
- School of Biomedical Sciences (6 personal tutors – 61 students)

Interestingly, one of the Schools (Biomedical Sciences) had already had experience of designing reflective templates (using a different set of online tools). Taking part in the 'Unfold' pilot was an opportunity for updating their templates and thus allowing a fresh start. That particular set of reflective templates has been named 'Unfold+'.

A series of further meetings and consultations within the three Schools resulted in the creation of three custom PebblePad workbooks (one per School). Each workbook has been designed to suit the following prerequisites:

1. Students' self-reflection is structured and directed using locally pre-prepared templates (relevant to subject areas).
2. Students are asked to complete relevant sections of the Unfold workbook ahead of the meeting.
3. The student's input in 'Unfold' serves as the foundation for the face-to-face meeting's conversation and insight.
4. After the meeting, the student is encouraged to return to the template to update it.
5. System permissions can be granted, so that the link to the Unfold workbook is posted in the 'Notes' section of the central Personal Tutor IT system. (In this context, PebblePad is used alongside (but not integrated with) the Personal Tutor IT Tools. It is worth adding that any wider roll-out of the Unfold templates beyond the pilot stage would most likely involve developing a mechanism of linking the 'Notes' section in PT IT tools with the Unfold templates in PebblePad/ATLAS).

6. Personal Tutor group meetings can be planned based upon issues and trends which are arising from structured preparation or reflective comments.

The launch of 'Unfold' (which took place in September 2013) was promoted through a poster at an internal teaching conference (www.tiny.cc/unfoldposter), and through an article on the IAD4LEARN blog: www.tiny.cc/unfoldblog.

Reflective questions

Since its introduction, the 'Unfold' workbooks have proved to be very flexible template containers. Students found them easy to access (with very few technical problems). One of the essential features was the ability to expand workbooks continually - new sections could be added to templates whilst students were using their copies of the workbook. The 'Unfold' workbooks were also customised visually using a custom banner and colour scheme – see example www.tiny.cc/unfoldbio3.

Currently, the workbooks are being updated with new sections to provide scaffolding for the 2nd semester Personal Tutor meeting reflections.
Although each of the three 'Unfold' workbooks features unique questions, their overall structure can be divided into the following themes:

a) Day-to-day issues/general reflection, for example:
  - How are you settling in so far?
  - In general, how are things going?
  - Currently, is your experience on the programme keeping with your expectations?
  - Are you clear on what you need to do in the next few days?
  - Reflecting on your goals for this year, do you feel you are progressing well?
  - How do you feel about the courses which you are taking this year?
  - Is there anything you wish to discuss face-to-face but do not want to put it in the workbook?

b) Self-assessment of assignments, engaging with feedback and post-feedback reflection, for example:
  - Feedback Points – what I've done well;
  - Feedback Points – what I need to improve;
  - How I will use the feedback to improve...;
  - Draw up a quick action plan based on the feedback you received;
  - Which three words would you use to summarise your experience of preparing for and writing the essay?

c) thinking about the future, including strong references to graduate attributes, for example:
  - Please select your two attributes which could particularly benefit from being strengthen;
  - What is your realistic plan for improving on those two attributes during the current semester?

Example of the 'Unfold' workbook: www.tiny.cc/unfoldbio3

Communication to students

The students were introduced to the 'Unfold' idea by their personal tutors via email. The email included a link to the 'Unfold' instructions. The instructions themselves were published as an open PebblePad webfolio. When designing the instructions, it was important to ensure that students did not see taking part in 'Unfold' as too time-consuming and overwhelming. Here is a sample message which was sent to tutees:

"The UNFOLD workbook is designed to help you record your reflections around the meetings with your Personal Tutor.

YOU will be able to:

learn more about yourself, who you are and where you are heading,
identify gaps, make sense out of university reality and establish long term goals,
revisit older sections of your workbook and learn from past experiences.
YOUR PERSONAL TUTOR will be able to:
know you better and provide more adequate advice during your meetings,
provide you with more relevant references in the future,
help you with making the most of the feedback you are receiving from other tutors."

Example of the 'Unfold' instructions: www.tiny.cc/unfoldeducation

Personal tutors and 'Unfold' workbooks

There are two ways in which a tutor can access their tutees workbooks. They can do it on an individual basis before the meeting by opening each of them in ATLAS. However, they can also run reports on students cohorts using the ATLAS reporting features. To illustrate this approach, below is a wordle created using the Biology students' anonymised group responses to the following question: 'Which three words would you use to summarise your experience of preparing for and writing the essay?'

Figure 1: Biology students' wordle

Assuming that some scale-type questions are asked before all personal tutoring meetings, running group reports on such questions on a year-to-year basis might expose tutors to rich and interesting sets of data/graphs.

The benefits

Although the evaluation of the 'Unfold' pilot is scheduled for the UK summer of 2014 (surveys and focus groups are being planned for tutees and their tutors), the informal conversations with personal tutors who are taking part in the pilot have so far been encouraging. The Personal Tutor meetings are seen as better structured with the vast majority of tutees engaging with the workbooks provided. More measurable outcomes/views are not available at this stage of the project. Despite that, the process of consulting tutors on the structure and the questions for the 'Unfold' workbooks, presented a good opportunity to explore their approaches to personal tutoring tasks. In other words, it has been useful to encourage them to reflect on things on which they want their tutees to reflect!

As for the University-wide Personal Tutor System, a year after its introduction a survey was carried out to assess the experiences of the Personal Tutor System amongst students. The headline results show that 79% of students stated they had attended at least 2 meetings (with their personal tutor during the previous academic year), with 49% attending 2 meetings. Three quarters of students found the Personal Tutor meetings helpful, with 36% finding them very helpful.

As indicated earlier, the survey also highlighted the students' reluctance to record their meeting notes – one of the issues for which we hope to have found a cure in 'Unfold'.

In brief – personalising the curriculum

- extremely flexible reflection-recording tool allowing for seamless customisation of templates
- expandable workbooks which can be updated "in the background"
- potential to link individual workbooks or whole ATLAS sections with the University's own Personal Tutor system
- interesting workbook reporting capabilities within ATLAS