ePortfolio for Police volunteering making learners 'future ready'

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

The Context

Work Based Learning and Volunteering has had an important role within the Criminology/Policing part of Plymouth Law School for a number of years. One of the key aims of the School, and the University, is boosting the employability of its students. Consequently, in 2014 the Volunteering in a Policing or Criminal Justice Setting module was made available to Policing and Criminal Justice Programme undergraduates, many of whom are seeking a career in the police service. This module aims to enable students to enhance their personal development through practical work experience in a voluntary placement within a local criminal justice-related agency. The placement provides an opportunity to develop a range of life skills that can enhance a student's employability.

Past experience and previous research (Richards, 2011) has provided insights into some of the characteristics of learners which can impact on the outcomes of a volunteer placement:

- Learners' lack of experience and confidence in using reflective practice and experiential learning in their personal development, including the use of action plans which is now common in many professions.
- A tendency for learners to overestimate their key skills, knowledge, experience and behaviours, and have insufficient evidence to back up their claims.

To address these issues a learning technologist, Emma Purnell, was brought in to develop a new eportfolio template using a PebblePad workbook, to assist learners with the process of recording and detailing their personal development. This Volunteering ePortfolio was integrated within the module assessments to underpin the importance of this process.

In early 2015 Devon and Cornwall Police approached the University to set up a project to recruit new seasonal (summer) members of staff for their Call Centre in Plymouth, directly from the students enrolled on the Policing and Criminal Justice Programme. This would be through a standard competitive assessment process which required applicants to demonstrate skills, knowledge, experience and behaviours measured against a specific role profile. The Volunteering ePortfolio was seen as an ideal way of focusing learners' preparation for this job opportunity. This would not, however, be a straightforward process as previous research with undergraduates at Plymouth University has found that the factors that influence the attitude of learners to adopting unfamiliar learning technology are extremely complex (Richards, 2011).

The Problem

The main challenge was to design an eportfolio template which would provide resources for learners that would have utility both within academic assessments and personal development, and were linked to employability with a particular job role in mind. There was also a unique opportunity to engage employers and students in a collaborative process.

Outcomes sought:

- To encourage learners to engage in reflective practice – 'stopping and thinking' – to help them articulate experiential learning more clearly.
- To boost employability by improving the 'fit' between the requirements of academic assessment and a reflective, developmental eportfolio that includes tailored Personal Development Planning focused on a specific professional role.
- To improve the students' prospects for success by collating relevant evidence from a wide variety of sources, including volunteering, university studies, and current employment, in preparation for the Police recruitment process.

The Approach

In partnership with the learning technologist numerous meetings were held to design and develop a 'Police Volunteering ePortfolio' to achieve the desired outcomes of the project. The learners would complete the eportfolio in a series of steps underpinned by simple 'self-reflection' sheets, ensuring suitable guidance was available as, for many, this was a new experience.

The crucial first phase was to engage the prospective employer for details of the specific 'positive indicators' for the requisite experience, skills, knowledge and behaviours within the call handler's role profile. These included things such as excellent keyboard skills; ability to adapt to change; negotiation and influencing; respect for race and diversity; team work; and so on. These criteria were the drivers for a number of the resources within the workbook. For example, during the

training session on how to use the eportfolio template the learners were asked to take part in a self-reflection exercise and complete a skills audit relevant to the position. In this first attempt they scored themselves on a simple Likert Scale. Later the learners repeated the process, but instead of relying on personal judgements alone they had to score themselves according to the actual evidence they could provide for the prospective employer.

The learners were then asked to study the list of necessary experience, skills, knowledge and behaviours from the call handler's role profile. They developed a SWOT analysis as a personal action plan, using the results from the 'evidence-based' skills audit to identify key areas for personal development and potential opportunities (during volunteering experience) to address any perceived weaknesses. In common with many professions, the police expect prospective employees to use the STAR (Situation, Task, Action and Result) structure to evidence the requisite experience, skills, knowledge and behaviours during the selection process. Therefore, a number of simple STAR forms were included in the workbook, encouraging the learners to reflect on key experiences from their volunteering activities and draw out the required evidence in preparation for this process.

A key feature of the project was a collaborative and co-operative approach, particularly with the learners who would be using the eportfolio. Following bespoke eportfolio training, an early working model of the eportfolio was developed for review by two of the learners who agreed to 'test drive' the resources to ensure they were easy to use and appropriate to their needs. The feedback received was very positive and encouraging with comments such as 'really useful' and 'easy to use'. These learners were encouraged to be advocates for their learner colleagues by promoting the usefulness and importance of the eportfolio to personal development. It was hoped this would help improve the overall engagement with the resources which would be crucial to success (Davis, 1989). They were also asked to volunteer to become 'eportfolio buddies' to assist fellow students with the unfamiliar technology. Representatives from the prospective employer (police recruiters) were given view access to the eportfolio template to ensure that it was 'fit for purpose' in terms of recruit preparation. The creation of the eportfolio template was very much an iterative process as resources were developed, uploaded, discussed, and 'tweaked' throughout the collaboration. This also ensured that the template was a 'live' resource and could be adapted to learners' needs as they evolved.

The Results

One of the consequences of the structure of the academic year meant there was a substantial gap of time between the training and the subsequent use of the eportfolio. Therefore, to begin with, there was a lack of engagement. This is not surprising as previous research has indicated that the drivers for learners' engagement with digital technology are complex (Hosein, Ramanau, & Jones, 2010).

However, over time the levels of engagement improved, particularly when it became clear that the call taker's job opportunity was imminent. The number and quality of personal reflections in the eportfolios indicated that the learners were actively engaged in experiential learning through the activities within their volunteering experience. Many created specific personal development plans using the skills audits, SWOT analyses, and STAR forms to address areas identified for improvement. Also, a number of eportfolios contained evidence highly appropriate for the call taker's (or any other job) recruitment process.

The Police recruitment process was completed in the early summer (UK) of 2015 with a number of the learners being successful. Very positive feedback was received from the recruiters, including comments about the quality of the applicants' preparation for selection. The success of the project has meant Devon and Cornwall Police have committed to making this employment opportunity a permanent feature for future students.

Some of the learners have developed so much enthusiasm for the eportfolio that they have volunteered to be eportfolio buddies for future students to complement and boost the University's IT teaching resources. The success of the project and the identified utility of the unique learning 'space' has meant the evolution of new eportfolios for all Stage 1 students from both Criminology and Policing Programmes (over 250).

Lessons Learned

The key lessons learnt are:

- The importance of learner engagement from the beginning, in particular inviting volunteers to collaborate in the development and design of resources to ensure that they are specific to their needs and easy to use (Harley, et al., 2003).
- The need to avoid assumptions that learners will engage with a new digital platform just because 'it's there'. Having some true advocates to build and sustain engagement of the whole cohort is essential (Sharpe, Beetham, & de Freitas, 2010).
- The importance of true partnership between academic staff and learning technologists to develop a collaboration based on trust, enthusiasm and a passion for innovation. Regular meetings and contact were essential.
- The 'labour intensive' nature of the continual development and review process of the eportfolio to ensure its alignment with users' needs.

Barriers:

- The demands of both staff members' 'day jobs' meant great time pressure to ensure the anticipated outcomes of the eportfolio were met.
- The general lack of knowledge of the usefulness of eportfolios amongst academic staff and students alike.

- The inertia of learners to engage with a digital platform they are unfamiliar with unless they really feel they need to.

What we would do differently:

- Ensure that following any eportfolio training the students are encouraged to complete activities immediately and regularly to sustain the early engagement.
- Ensure there is an 'about me' folio page at the start of the eportfolio for students to personalise the space from the start.

In Brief – Showcasing 'Future Readiness' with PebblePad

- Real engagement with personal development planning to make the most of learners' time at university and to enhance their transition to the 'world of work'.
- Improving lifelong learning and transferable skills by linking technology to reflective practice.
- Making the most of work experience through volunteering by recording and developing evidence of skills, knowledge, experience and behaviours ready for future career applications.
- Self-learning using the integrative aspect of eportfolio, allowing learners to connect their learning to the process of identity development and link this to future employers needs.

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