Structuring the learning; Personalising the experience

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

The Context

The Maritime Business undergraduate programme accepts a small but very diverse cohort of students into stage 1. They vary between school leavers, young people who have completed National Service or have some work experience, and more mature adults embarking on a career change. About half come from the UK and the rest are from across Europe and Asia, learning in a second language and within a different culture. Many of the students have been trained through rote learning and have little experience of self-reflection. Several students in each cohort have learning needs that require modified assessment provision for exams and tests.

PebblePad was used to assess their first module, which ran for four weeks and was designed to immerse the students in their core subject while preparing them for HE study. This was a new module that aims to introduce three core subjects that students study throughout the rest of their programme. It forms part of a new Plymouth University learning framework, which aims to provide 'excellent learning and stimulating student experiences' (Plymouth University, 2013). In particular, it aims to:

- Support all students consistently with curricula and co-curricular opportunities.
- Prioritise inclusive assessments and minimise modified assessment provision needs, so that all students are treated as equally as possible in all aspects of their Programme.
- Meet Code of Practice and Strategy ambitions in a co-ordinated and consistent way, demonstrating effective enrichment.

The Problem

PebblePad was chosen as an inclusive assessment environment offering an enriched learning experience, and because we wanted the student to:

- Quickly become engaged in their studies and to understand the University's expectations of them as a learner.
- Become a reflective learner, who thinks about what they are doing.
- Feel part of a learning community within group work, the class, the course and their profession.
- Be a confident user of learning technology.
- Be a lifelong learner.

The purpose of the portfolio was to compile evidence of competency as a Maritime Business undergraduate learner.

The Approach

We used PebblePad to create a workbook portfolio that would scaffold the learning for the module, but also personalise the experience for student. The module team worked collaboratively with a Learning Technologist to develop the portfolio. Each member of the module team created templates specific to their area of the module and these templates were then brought together by the module leader into a cohesive and comprehensive workbook portfolio. In trying to align and provide a balance of personalisation and structure, the first page of the portfolio was an 'About Me' folio page; a blank page with no formal structure, and space for the student to introduce themselves and their motivations through text or multimedia. The structured pages consisted of spaces for text or uploaded evidence of any kind as responses to the activities provided. Each page included 'assessor only' sections, providing opportunities for formative feedback.

To ensure further alignment with personalising the portfolio experience, there were self-evaluation audits for University Skills and Personal Qualities built into the portfolio. Each element of the audit had the option to be made 'private' by the student, so students could choose to complete the audit and not show the results to their tutors or make some or all of their responses visible if they wished. The final assessment page ensured that all the activities completed in the portfolio had relevance and value at the end of the module, with students required to link back to evidence on other completed pages of the portfolio.

The Results

This first implementation was a pilot and standalone experience within the programme. We wanted to start with a small number of students to help make the changes manageable, as this was a new module, a new group if students, and technology that was new to both staff and students. This was complex, challenging and rewarding both for the staff and the students.

Some excellent reflective work was produced by the students and the 'About me' page in particular was used in creative and interesting ways. Short reflective pieces demonstrated the learning

journey during the students' first weeks. Students could work on their portfolio in their own time and at their own pace. As a result they did not require modified assessment provision and submission was made electronically. Different markers could access their work to provide rapid feedback.

Students gave anonymous feedback on the module. The PebblePad eportfolio assessment was described as 'clear', 'rewarding' and a 'best aspect' by three different students. One student wrote, "The portfolio was very confusing I have lost marks on it as I didn't submit my work the right way." Technical support was given but many students did not complete their portfolio fully and two failed to submit it on time. In general the stronger students responded very well but weaker students needed more guidance and 'hand holding' than was provided.

The pilot was a success and the practice will be repeated and expanded as students will continue with their portfolio in subsequent modules of their programme. Formative or summative PDP or assessment activities will be developed within these follow-on modules. Personal Tutoring will be a key element in supporting the students to continue to develop their portfolios between modules.

Lessons Learned

As time is so short in these immersive modules (4 weeks), being able to introduce students to the portfolio in a hands-on workshop helped them to hit the ground running. They were able to begin developing their portfolio from day 1 regardless of their technical skill. However, some students struggled with completing their portfolio. Next time there will be more workshops scheduled during the four week period to guide the students in the technical, as well as academic, aspects of the work.

It is important to build on the students' experience of reflective learning through PebblePad, so that a progressive body of work can be built up. The next challenge is to provide a meaningful stage 2 assessment, to show progression from their stage 1 work.

In Brief – Showcasing 'Future Readiness' with PebblePad

- The structured templates scaffolded the learning for the module, with several short activities that could be completed at the learner's own pace.
- The portfolio introduced the students to self-reflection on their work, which is a requirement of modern professional development.
- The portfolio incorporated short assignments of academic writing in report and essay style, with feedback, in an enduring format. It won't get lost during the degree programme!

References

Plymouth University (2013) Curriculum Enrichment Project 2013-2015 Retrieved from https://exchange.plymouth.ac.uk/intranet//cep/public/updates/01%20Archive%20documents%20(for%20historical%20reference%20only)/Curriculum%20Enrichment%202013-15%20%20Paper%201%201%20May%20Final.pdf