Scaling up: A whole program approach to eportfolio as process and product

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The Context

In the transition from paper-based portfolios to eportfolios we used an eDelphi research approach to ask industry stakeholders what they believed should be included in a “Transition to Practice” ePortfolio (Hume & Hamilton, 2014). Stakeholders informed us that eportfolios should be developed in three phases, or “scaled up”, increasing content and complexity as the student prepares for entry to practice. This case study describes the resulting whole-program approach to building a Graduate ePortfolio, starting in week two of year one and finishing with a capstone eportfolio project. A second phase of research (English & Hamilton, 2017) developed our awareness that eportfolio is not just a product, but also a complex process.

The Problem

In 2013 the occupational therapy (OT) program at University of the Sunshine Coast (USC) started using PebblePad after it was adopted as the University-wide electronic portfolio (eportfolio) platform (Slade, Murfin, & Readman, 2013). Although initially the OT program had only been seeking a replacement for its existing paper-based portfolio system, it soon became apparent that in addition to being a tool to showcase experience and skills, PebblePad could be used as an adjunct learning management tool and a competency-tracking tool (Slade, Murfin, & Hamilton, 2014).

The aim of this project was to enable the OT program to take a “whole program approach” to using PebblePad to map and tag competencies across the curriculum, track students’ learning journeys, and build a “Transition to Practice” ePortfolio that enabled students to see their learning journey clearly and be confident in their readiness to enter practice.
The Approach

We started by mapping our curriculum against the Australian Minimum Competency Standards for New Graduate Occupational Therapists (ACSOT guidelines) (Occupational Therapy Australia, 2010), which provided a foundation for the competency mapping process and helped us to identify and amend gaps in the curriculum.

The eportfolio development process was broken into two phases; the early education phase (focusing on tracking learning) and the transition to practice phase (focusing on translating learning to practice) (Hume & Hamilton, 2014). See Figure 1 for the ePortfolio Development Framework.

We then built the Competency Tracking Workbook in PebblePad and gave this to students in their final year to demonstrate to them how the minimum competency standards are met across the curriculum and to provide them with an opportunity to evidence competence against the key 31 Elements in the document. These Elements equate to the “key selection criteria” for entry to the profession.

The final assessment piece, the “Transition to Practice” ePortfolio, contained the following components:

1. Professional Statement that integrates personal and professional values and goals in the context of contemporary practice and career goals.
2. A Curriculum Vitae summary on its own tab within the eportfolio, with a downloadable pdf version of a full CV linked.
3. Demonstration of competence in the 31 identified Elements of ACSOT guidelines with a summary statement at the top of each Unit (there are seven Units).
4. A Continuing Professional Development Plan for the final Semester of the degree with links to the reflections 4-10 from class workshops.
5. A Continuing Professional Development Plan for the graduate year.

The Results

With ethics approval (A 16/732) focus groups were conducted at the end of 2016 with students (English & Hamilton, 2017) and with the academic team separately. It is important to note that this group of fourth-year students were the first group to use PebblePad at USC in 2013 and they used Version 3 in Years 1 to 3 and transitioned to Version 5 during their final year of their degree. During the focus groups both staff and students expressed that they found the transition to Version 5 disruptive and their trust of the PebblePad platform was reduced during that period.
Below is a summary of recommendations made by students and staff in the focus groups, which were actioned in 2017 and which continue to inform our curriculum.

Recommendations made by students:

- Provide clear information about the difference between eportfolio as a product and as a process.
  - Product: what is an eportfolio, what goes into an eportfolio.
  - Process: how to build an eportfolio, the role of eportfolio in lifelong learning.
- Provide an example of a complete eportfolio.
- Early and ongoing training in how to use PebblePad, with technical support as needed (especially when assessments are due).
- Integrate PebblePad across the four years of the degree.
- Provide technical support to the teaching staff – many staff lack skills.
- Be our role models: Students want to see staff using PebblePad to map and track their own CPD.

Recommendations made by staff:

- Take a strategic and developmental approach to using PebblePad across the program:
  - Frequent and consistent exposure to product and process.
  - Staff need to be confident in the tool, the process and the outcomes.
  - Use PebblePad to create a summary of competency achievements at the end of each course (in class).
  - Use consistent language when talking about PebblePad.
  - Where possible link with assessment to promote student buy-in.
- Systemic technology support for educators and students.
- Peer support between users (educators & students; students & students; educators & educators).
- Contextualise the use of PebblePad during the degree by linking its use with the “Career Development Phase”:
  - Keeping everything in one place is a great use of PebblePad and helps in the job preparation process.
  - Align OT job advertisement language with the language used in the competency document.
  - Remind students that an eportfolio is primarily a repository for the USER and not necessarily a “portal” for job applications (in OT right now).
  - Explain clearly to all students that PebblePad is available after graduation, remind in 3rd year and show 4th years how to set up a personal account as part of coursework.
  - Need to understand that one use of PebblePad (tracking) feeds the other use of PebblePad (eportfolio).
- Celebrate commitment to success of the project through nomination for teaching awards.
Lessons Learnt

This project has led to several key changes in the way we use PebblePad across our program.

During week two of year one, the early education phase (Hume & Hamilton, 2014), students are given a presentation about the program’s aims and the “whole program approach” to eportfolio as a product and a process. They are shown how to create their first Asset in PebblePad (a Personal Statement about their reasons for choosing occupational therapy) and are required to submit this for assessment via ATLAS in week four (not automatic submission by design). Students are introduced to their first PebblePad workbook during the week two tutorial and all in-class activities for that course are delivered via that medium. Custom videos are created to support students in their PebblePad learning journey.

Students and staff told us that regular exposure to PebblePad is essential in maintaining skills. We have integrated PebblePad workbooks across all year levels, designed assessment tasks that contribute to building the eportfolio gradually, and regularly encourage students to upload other assets to PebblePad to ensure they have the necessary ingredients to build a comprehensive Graduate ePortfolio in fourth year. The assessment tasks and workbooks are designed to nurture and guide students to start by “learning privately” (shared with few) early in their degree and build their confidence to “learn out-loud” (shared more widely and open to scrutiny) as they complete the “Transition to Practice” component of their eportfolio (Hume & Hamilton, 2014).

We also found that students and staff needed to have ready access to support to troubleshoot technical issues. This maintains confidence in the process and the product. Having an ePortfolio “Champion” (key staff member) visit classes across the whole program to discuss the progression of eportfolio development is useful for students and the academic team. This occurs at the end of first and second year, and midway through third and fourth year. Through this process we are able to continually revisit the goals of developing an eportfolio and update students and staff on new features of PebblePad.

After completing our research with the 2016 graduates we were interested to know if mapping, tracking and evidencing competencies using PebblePad had been helpful in the job-seeking process. The responses received (see below) are now used in our eportfolio product and process presentations to first and fourth year students as they highlight how these students found the process very worthwhile.

Responding to the 31 key elements in the eportfolio assignment provided me with a valuable opportunity to reflect on the past four years of learning. It gave me confidence in my knowledge and skills and helped me to realise that I am ready to transition into practice. I reviewed this part of my eportfolio to prepare for job interviews as I presumed that interviewers would ask me questions that related to these competencies, and they did! For example, I was asked...
how I adopted client-centred practice and how I promoted client’s occupational performance. Having already thought of evidence to support my responses was so helpful.

(USC Graduate, 2016 cohort).

Filling out the competencies actually did wonders for my resume and job interview. I was able to really deconstruct every core OT element I had learnt throughout my studies and reflect on how I had demonstrated this clinically. Initially I felt it was just so much to fill out... but it built my confidence in answering questions for my job interview, gave me the ability to think for on the spot answers to questions, and made me feel confident that I could answer any question as I could relate back to these competencies. I also used some throughout my CV and had compliments on it from recruiters. I would recommend 4th years doing these competencies, but starting them in 3rd year. It will give them more time, and also the reassurance that they have come a long way in their learning since 1st year!

(USC Graduate, 2016 cohort).

To provide students with examples of eportfolio in the “Career Development Phase” (Hume & Hamilton, 2014) we are now planning to deliver workshops for academic staff who wish to build their own eportfolio in PebblePad. The portfolio will include a professional statement, a CV, a continuing professional development plan and record (meeting the requirements of the Occupational Therapy Board and AHPRA), annual performance plan and review, and other elements related to working in the Higher Education sector including teaching and research philosophy, grants, publications and presentations.

**Take home messages about ‘Scaling up’**

- Design and develop a strategic and developmental approach to integrating PebblePad across your program to address the “education phase” and the “transition to practice” phase.
- Contextualise the use of PebblePad during the degree program by linking its application in the degree as the “transition to practice” phase with the “career development” phase.
- Provide education and training for academic staff to become PebblePad role models in the “career development” phase.
Figure 1: ePortfolio development diagram
References


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