Don’t bolt on; build in! – Scaling up your portfolio perspective to respond strategically to pressures to evidence graduate competency

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The Context

Following a national review of teacher education entitled Action Now: Classroom ready teachers (TEMAG, 2014), and consequent accreditation guidance from the professional standards regulator (AITSL, 2016), Australian initial teacher education degrees now must provide definitive evidence of graduate teacher capability to generate positive impact in school classrooms. Programs must for the first time develop and present for accreditation/reaccreditation evidenced assessments of student teacher classroom performance, comprehensive portfolios of capability evidence (including the development of a professional learning habitus that extends beyond graduation), and a final year graduate summative teaching performance assessment. The Bachelor of Education (Applied Learning) [BEdAL] at the University of Tasmania, a program originally designed around portfolio evidencing of professional standards and the first accredited under the new arrangements, is basing its re-accreditation efforts on PebblePad.

The Problem

The challenge was to establish a graduate teacher evidence framework that:

- Utilised authentic evidence to verify achievement of both student professional competency and program accreditation demands, including a summative teaching performance assessment.
- Portrayed comprehensively graduate teacher capabilities across all professional standards and classroom teaching skills.
- Integrated into the program without additional student workload or assessment stress.
- Facilitated student ownership of learning and development of independent professionalism.
- Integrated seamlessly student practicum experiences and professional knowledge development.
• Provided for concurrent integration across the program relevant to students’ learning stages, whilst generating incremental progressive evidence critical for re-accreditation in 2020.

The Approach

Graduate Achievement Evidence Workbook (GAEW)

The BEdAL Graduate Achievement Evidence Workbook is a template for students to describe, evidence, and reflect upon, achievement of all 37 professional teacher standard focus areas, and is available for immediate use by all students in 2018. The template, and ATLAS resource sharing, facilitates students accessing and immediately being able to focus on outcomes evidence with minimal platform expertise, particularly relevant for 2018 graduates who must reach back into their files to locate artefacts from previous years. Significantly, the graduate achievement evidence concept had been developed previously, minimizing PebblePad workbook construction time. The ability of PebblePad to archive ATLAS workspaces represents a critical re-accreditation resource.

Classroom Teaching Performance Assessment (CTPA)

Considerations for the summative teaching performance assessment were:

• Summative assessment should extend beyond the final professional experience classroom practicum, allow for competency evidence from previous placements and other educational experiences, and facilitate the reflection, revision, and redevelopment of unsuccessful teaching approaches.
• Earlier practicum placements formatively develop student capacity to evidence pedagogy so that active verification of practice is normalized, and the final summative assessment accurately reflects graduate competence.
• There be consistency in criteria evidenced by the student, assessed by the colleague teachers, and verified by the lecturers.
• The summative teacher performance be not a stand-alone assessment but represent the rich culmination of evidenced classroom teaching growth.
• Because final year students on practicum teach up to 80% of load (around 16 contact hours in a high school setting), that includes lesson planning, resource construction, and organizational duties, student teachers be able to focus on classroom learning and teaching rather than struggle with additional assessment requirements. Evidencing practice capabilities must be developed well before the final placement.

The first step was to redefine the 37 graduate teacher standard focus areas into 21 summative teaching performance criteria in five practice domains:
• Apply educational data to inform teaching.
• Plan for positive impact on classroom learning.
• Teach for positive impact on classroom learning.
• Assess for positive impact on classroom learning.
• Reflect on pedagogy to improve teaching.

As shown in Figure 1 below, the criteria were then broken down into introductory, consolidation, and threshold formative stages in the first three practicum placements to ensure student familiarity with teaching performance requirements, and to provide evidence-based incremental verification of graduate potential. In addition to being reduced in number, the criteria for the first two practicums were modified appropriate to the level of student development. Thereafter new colleague teacher assessment forms were also designed based around the teacher performance criteria relevant to each stage.

Figure 1: Incremental development of student teaching performance evidence capabilities.

Having resolved the pedagogical requirement, workbook construction was a relatively simple process. Each standardized criteria worksheet template includes descriptors and authentic evidence guidance, so that students merely have to collect, tag, and collate their evidence, and then justify the capability with evidence and reflect on their professional achievement. Having developed the final teaching performance assessment requirements, "scaling up" to a whole
program approach by working back through earlier practicums was logical and progressive. The rationale behind the process in Figure 1, the criteria and expectations, and the formatting of the workbooks ought to be comprehensible to program managers, auditors, and most importantly the students at any stage.

Finally, the Classroom Teaching Performance Assessment and the Graduate Achievement Evidence workbooks have been combined into a Graduate Portfolio with addition of both a professional introduction and final reflection page. This ensures that 2018 graduates are supported with a comprehensive template that reveals fully their evidence requirement in a year where their critical graduate assessment coincides with the institutional introduction of PebblePad.

PebblePad has supported this development in the following ways:

- Ease of workbook construction based on prepared content sections that facilitate direct attribution of evidence and student justifications.
- Copying of workbook pages facilitated quick modification of criteria or standard evidence templates for each course, and scaling up to a whole course approach that establishes a consistent framework to reveal clearly student capability development over time.
- Whilst the certification/accreditation and practicum templates are highly structured, students retain substantial flexibility in creating and linking assets through individual course tasks. The standards focused professional capability analysis in one of the first BEdAL courses represents just such an opportunity, and its alignment with a foundational outcome means that students are able to link this particular task to their individual graduate evidence requirements. In this sense, the templates allow students to “scale up” their own vision from just meeting a particular early course assessment requirement to commencing construction of their future teacher identity. This is further supported by the development of a teacher proficiency workbook template for individual full teacher certification after one year of practice.
- ATLAS allows templates not only to be easily shared, submitted, and graded, but the archive function also represents an ongoing repository of developing and graduate student competencies backed by authentic evidence that can be interrogated by accreditation authorities at any future time.

The Results

At the time of the submission of this case study, the workbooks are in place, associated rubrics and assessment tasks have been modified, and students will have just started on their PebblePad journey. Importantly, we have addressed not only what our final year cohort needs to do to address the new regulatory expectations, but also scaffolded the whole course to allow all to concurrently embark on their professional evidence journey at their relevant learning stage. At the next significant program re-accreditation point in two years time, the 2018 entry cohort will
still only be partway through their evidence workbooks, but we will have achieved exit portfolios for at least two other cohorts, demonstrating fulfilment of program accreditation commitments.

By PebbleBash 2018, we expect to have exemplars of practicum workbooks for all practicum placements, and certification/accreditation aligned exit portfolios from our graduate cohort. A lot of work remains, such as introducing students to PebblePad, and the workbooks, modified practicum expectations and criteria, and new program evidence requirements. However, we remain fairly confident that we will have progressed towards the desired outcomes for the following reasons:

• We have adopted a strategic objective of the desired outcome for a complete program progression and utilized the capabilities of PebblePad to incrementally advance towards that goal for the 2018 entry cohort, whilst supporting existing cohorts to utilize their current evidence base and enter the process at their respective stage.
• Pedagogy has preceded technology, and we have clarified the portfolio expectation that is not defined in accreditation documentation so that our portfolio concurrently benefits both students and the program. Our accreditation evidence parallels student professional growth, based around a common motivation towards quality outcomes.
• We have provided sufficient scaffolding to ensure that students will not be confronted by the technology and additional expectations. This will leave them free to explore and utilize the custom PebblePad templates and capabilities. They have places to fit their reflections, experiences, action plans etc. The graduate evidence and practicum placement workbooks provide pillars of relevance for evidence and artefacts, and these in turn justify the workbooks.

Lessons Learnt

The introduction of this portfolio approach follows some years of research and consideration of changes to the Australian teacher education environment. PebblePad has delivered the mechanism to further refine, resolve, and enhance our latent solutions developed in response to new demands on our professional program. The main barrier has been trying to convince managers of the need for a proper portfolio platform. Hereafter, the challenge will be to overcome internal pedagogical and technological inertia, and encourage academic colleagues to recognise the portfolio as more than a complicated display book. Here once again, the consistency and logic of the presented solution should ease the way. Key lessons drawn so far:

1. This process has reinforced a previously advocated principle of pedagogy before technology (Kertesz, 2016). If we want to derive maximum benefit from a versatile platform like PebblePad, we need to know clearly in our own minds why we are using it. An accreditation demand for students to have portfolios is not enough. Even if PebblePad suggests possibilities, we must still work through our justifications.
2. Identifying the correct objective for portfolio integration is critical. For example, the aim of establish a graduate teacher performance assessment to meet an accreditation requirement is an objective that will generate an outcome within a limited space. An alternative of develop a comprehensive evidence-based evaluation of graduate teacher capabilities that supports individual certification and professional growth, and program accreditation over time steers one to wider considerations. After all, any program change will have knock-on effects that we ignore at our peril.

3. The 2014 review identified teacher preparation programs as failing students, and subsequent regulator accreditation documentation is focused on program quality. Both call for program changes, not just uncoordinated additions – a portfolio here, and a final teaching assessment added there. ePortfolios have been called a disruptive technology that challenges us to teach in new ways (Slade & Readman, 2013). We should therefore not approach PebblePad as another online tool, but as an opportunity to reinvent our educational space to respond positively to a new regulatory environment that will undoubtedly continue changing.

Take home messages about ‘Scaling up’

- Scale up your portfolio objectives to solve not just your immediate problem, but also those of the program, the school, and beyond. Think strategically – What is the real big picture need here?
- Scale up your students’ thinking. Help them to visualize and take ownership of the endpoint of their own portfolio journey and professional future.
- Scale up your pedagogical risk-taking in order to appreciate and demonstrate the potential of this “disruptive technology.”
- Scale up your personal PebblePad engagement; explore, experiment, and lead by doing.
References


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