



Working together – the benefits of student-staff partnerships in supporting moves towards personal learning

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Personal learning is a complex terrain for students to navigate, and one that transcends discipline and cohort boundaries. This paper reflects on the introduction of a forum to promote, encourage and support student engagement with PebblePad, an ePortfolio / personal learning system. The forum provides students with an informal network beyond their course/subject cohorts in which they can ask questions and discuss issues as they traverse the technical and conceptual complexities in what is for many a transformational learning approach. It has developed as a partnership between students and staff, emerging from a student suggestion, establishing itself under the leadership of staff with student support, but gradually undergoing a role reversal so that students now take the lead. Now nearing the end of its second year, the forum demonstrates how staff-student partnerships can benefit a range of stakeholders in the university community – from students to academics, and particularly to the mentors themselves.

Keywords: ePortfolio, personal learning, PebblePad, networks, forums, student engagement

Background

Since the inception of the Australian ePortfolio Project less than five years ago, an increasing number of Australian universities have incorporated ePortfolios into their suite of technologies to support more learner-centered (So, Bonk, & Wisher, 2009), authentic (Herrington, Reeves & Oliver, 2009), reflective (Schön, 1983; Kolb, 1984) teaching approaches and the development of lifelong learning skills (Barrett, 2000), such as goal-setting, monitoring of progress and self-evaluation. The work of Queensland University of Technology and the University of New England has paved the way for more recent adoptees, such as Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, University of South Australia and Charles Sturt University.

ePortfolios have alternatively been defined as *product* (Challis, 2005) and *process* (Joyes & Gray, 2009). Indeed they are both, but it is the process that has gained more attention in recent years. This idea of portfolio as process is strongly linked to personal learning approaches, and the concepts of ownership and self-management of learning, both formal and informal. It's based on the premise that 'to learn is not to acquire or to accumulate, but rather, to develop or to grow. The process of learning is a process of *becoming*, a process of developing one's own self' (Downes, 2009, p.29). In terms of ePortfolios, this process typically involves planning, collecting and reflecting, synthesizing, constructing, collaborating and sharing, as well as giving, receiving and responding to feedback. During this process, the ePortfolio becomes 'a place to develop one's professional identity' (Hunter & Stewart, 2010), and provides an opportunity to shift the balance of power between academics and students, giving students more responsibility and control over their learning and professional development (Kimball, 2005 in Butler, 2006).

PebblePad differs from many current ePortfolio systems in that it focuses mostly on the personal learning process, rather than the final product. Indeed, PebbleLearning describes their system as 'more than just an ePortfolio', but a learner-centred personal learning system that 'provides scaffolding to help users create records of learning, achievement and aspiration (with) a reflective structure underpinning all of its core elements' (PebblePad, 2011). While, as an institutional system, it may not offer some of the freedoms of a Personal Learning Environment (PLE) created with social media tools, this is outweighed by the provision of scaffolding, the greater ease of sharing control and levels of privacy for those just starting to explore their professional identity.

One of the great advantages of using a personal learning system like PebblePad is that it is designed for maximum flexibility to suit a wide variety of contexts and learning preferences, and to allow students freedom to manage their learning in a variety of ways; however, this can also lead to conceptual and technical complexity with which some students struggle (Hunter, *et al.*, 2010). This is particularly true for those who still believe that their learning consists of 'acquiring or accumulating knowledge', rather than seeing themselves as creators of 'personal knowledge' (Gamache, 2002). Similarly, those who start exploring the system for personal use, rather than through an embedded course experience which guides students through these changes, may also struggle. These kinds of experiences will likely occur with any new technology that forces students through such a mindshift.

In February 2010, a university-wide online forum was set up to support students who were using PebblePad, both within their courses and for personal use. It was designed to help students tackle the conceptual and technical difficulties associated with the move to personal learning in a staff- and peer-supported environment outside of their usual discipline area. The forum was initiated following a student request, and established with staff guidance and the support of student mentors. By incorporating the mentoring aspect, the forum offered the opportunity for more experienced students to transition from learner to teacher. In discussing Student Peer Assisted Mentoring (SPAM), Whitman and Fife (1998, in Kirkham & Ringlestein, 2008) state that 'to teach is to learn twice' and explain that, through teaching, peer mentors attain an improved understanding of the mentoring subject area through being involved in the teaching process. However, it's not just their professional understanding that improves; there are also significant gains for the mentor in terms of their own personal development as teachers and leaders (Hill & Reddy, 2007).

This concise paper reports on a work in progress, and presents a reflective 'story' of these benefits, drawing upon autoethnographic methodology to do so (Chang, 2008). Autoethnography allows the researcher to be the subject of the research by using their personal experiences as primary data. In this study, the researchers are the leading student mentor (SM) and the staff member who partnered her in establishing the forum (S). The data was collected over 18 months, and includes a reflective analysis of forum observations that had been recorded in the researchers' personal PebblePad blogs. It takes note of our findings and how we understand the interactions and potential benefits of stakeholders in the forum, including academics, student users and the staff who so diligently support its existence. While offering our own perspectives, it interprets our connection to others and the culture of the forum.

The PebblePad forum experience is only in part, my story, that of a student who embraced and shared my learning through a mentoring process. It is also the story of staff members at a university who support the student voice by encouraging and implementing student ideas, students who enter the forum to ask questions and have a sense of achievement when they have completed an ePortfolio task.(SM)

A story of partnership

Since its inception, the forum has emerged as an excellent example of how a partnership between staff and students can evolve through shared need to benefit a wide range of stakeholders. During the first year of its implementation, staff and student support resources were still 'developmental'. PebblePad itself provides a comprehensive help system, and local support included general orientation information, technical 'how to' worksheets, information on the potential for personal and self-directed student learning and general IT service desk. However, despite this, a common theme emerged of students initially struggling to make sense of how the ePortfolio should be used.

With no experience of the ePortfolio process or the PebblePad tool, I accessed the support of a member of the ePortfolio Project team, who using screen share technology spent time demonstrating and explaining its use. As she used PebblePad both professionally and personally, there was a genuine understanding of my confusion, and willingness to assist. The ongoing level of support and encouragement took my knowledge of PebblePad from a task that was overwhelming to one I embraced with great enthusiasm by diving into practice with the PebblePad tools as if I had been given extensive training in their use. My desire to further direct and support my own learning led me to further experiment and find uses that were not restricted to my course work. I wondered what other forms of support may have benefited me as a learner. (SM)

Clearly, in this case help sites weren't enough. There was a need for a 'personal' connection with other more experienced users to overcome those 'hurdles' and uncover the essence of personal learning.

We are such social beings. It doesn't matter how many help pages are created, how many clear worksheets, how many explanatory videos...nothing beats human contact, and the reassurance that comes from being able to ask your own questions, and knowing that someone is there who is able and willing to answer, or at least to find others who can answer. (S)

At the same time, the student was using the university's discussion forums successfully for peer support and interaction, both within courses and subjects, as well as at a wider, university level.

As a distance education learner, forums were providing an important part of both my PLE and social support within the university context. I was impressed by the level of communication, collaboration and support by students on the university's Mature Age Forum, a living university-wide community which embraced all delivery modes, age, courses and levels of study. Was it possible to have a PebblePad forum to support students in their learning of and development with PebblePad? My motive was self-interest. I wanted a place to have my questions about PebblePad supported. I also believed that what I now saw as my successful student experience had the potential for empowering other students in their use of PebblePad. (SM)

With a plan in mind, the student approached the same member of the ePortfolio Project team about the possibility of setting up a PebblePad forum as an online place to ask and receive answers from staff about PebblePad and its use. This idea was embraced by the team and within days the PebblePad forum was open for use.

Gamache (2002, p.281) notes that some students require 'personalised, individualised learning strategies' for support; the forum was providing this for those who participated. While it was still encased within an institutional setting, already the forum was emerging as a useful network for users. The first question appeared within 24 hours., and during the first eight months there were almost 500 posts and 70,000 views.

The forum is really taking off. It's had some significant impacts on students already. Over the past week alone, these comments have been posted: "I also worked on my portfolio and linked files and pages - it was so easy. I just love it!" ; "Do you realise what an amazing journey you are leading me on? I am going places that I never thought possible" ; and "Thanks again for your help, your quick responses have made a great difference to people like me who have no idea!!!!!!" (S)

During this time, some students started to take on a much stronger role in mentoring other students, as they themselves started to learn more technically and conceptually about the tools. In fact, some of the students were evolving from being learners and were taking on the role of teaching other students how to become more confident users of PebblePad.

Due to my newly discovered enthusiasm, I was a prolific forum poster, initially for questions that I required answers to, but later for the questions that I would have liked answered when I had first started using PebblePad. When a question was posted by another student that I could answer I became quite excited and as I would on any student forum, I responded. My answers guided them to the resources that could provide further support. (SM)

There's something great going on in this forum. I'm no longer answering all the questions. (The student mentors) are responding quick and fast, empathising with other students who aren't quite sure of the personal learning journey, championing those who are achieving great success. And there's a qualitatively different feel to the conversation. There's such an interweaving of help, support, and personal story...everything from wine to wombats is popping up as they discuss how they approach personal learning. (S)

Siemen's (2007) states that 'the network is the learning'. While he is referring to open social networks using Web2.0 technologies, the statement is no less applicable to institutional networks. In this situation, students had found a network in which they were familiar and secure, suggested its use to staff, who were responsive to their needs, and students have felt safe enough to gradually take on a leadership role in that network. Today, student mentors are leading the forum, and while staff still monitor posts, they are only required to respond to more 'tricky' questions.

Impacts for stakeholders

Since the beginning of the forum in late February 2010, there have been almost 1000 postings and 200 000 distinct reads on the forum. For students, the sheer volume of postings and reads suggests that they are gaining something more from the PebblePad forum mentoring than the traditional support options provided.

I'm still amazed by the thanks that some students are expressing on the forum. This one came in yesterday: "Thank you (to staff and student mentors) from me, one who hardly knows how to turn a computer on, NOW HAS A SPECIAL PAGE in her portfolio! Thank you for your kind, scaffolded instructions." And this one: "I forgot to just say how appreciative I am and everyone else is of the responsiveness of those monitoring the Pebblepad forum...It really should be acknowledged." And again this: "Thanks again for your help. I'm just completely blown away that you are giving me technical advice on the weekend!!!" (S)

The reflections in both the staff and student blogs noted that the forum was being used by students who were not using PebblePad as part of their course, possibly because it was grouped with other university forums focused on personal and academic support, and so students would just 'drop-in' to see if the discussions were of interest.

I am often surprised by students who just find their way to the forum and ask what is PebblePad and what is it all about? On 7 February 2011, "OK I knew this pebble pad thing existed but have not a clue where to begin." If PebblePad is not being used as part of their course they may not know about it. By finding the forum, reading and asking questions they are able to add a new tool to their PLE. Many of these students return to the forum as they start to explore more tools in PebblePad. (SM)

In instances where academics are using PebblePad for the first time, often students feel more empowered to learn together with the academic as they have previously gained support outside the course from the forum.

In chatting to academics, I'm finding that they are really happy that they have a backup for student support when they themselves are quite new to using this system. It's a relief to be able to provide a link to the forum, and know that this is being monitored regularly by both staff and students. It's taking the pressure off them as they learn together. (S)

However, despite the aforementioned benefits, arguably the greatest benefit has been for the student mentors themselves. Another common theme was emerging: the forum had provided them with a vehicle to develop self-confidence as well as expand and share their skills within the institution and beyond. Indeed, two of the mentors have presented their work with ePortfolios at local, national and international conferences.

Sometimes I am struck by the frustration that a student portrays in a forum post. I originally only answered questions that I knew the answers for but ... (now) even if I do not know the answer I can

reply and truly empathise with how they feel and let them know that an answer is being sought. I cannot always find the answers and there are those that need university IT support, this is where the PebblePad support team give of their expertise. They monitor the forum and still provide answers, including different solutions to an answer given by me, this is accompanied by a positive comment or thank you for my efforts. I read, I practice, I learn and feel that my role is appreciated by staff. I value highly their knowledge and support for my learning as well as their ready availability to provide help via phone or email. (SM)

My personal reflections in my PebblePad blog showed me the positive impact from being able to help a peer with a task that I had once had difficulty with. After answering posts for a few months, she said “I finally pulled together a rather fancy webfolio. I can't believe I managed to learn yet another technological tool... Just want to say thanks for all your support and e-portfolio emails, they really helped.” I started out with very little confidence and low self-esteem, but now feel empowered as a learner. I have started a Masters in Education with a view to research and co-written a conference paper for ASCILITE. During the time participating in the forum I have improved my understanding and knowledge about the PebblePad tool and taken active responsibility for my own learning by seeking articles and practitioners of e-portfolios and personal learning to become better informed about the practical and educational implications of e-portfolios as personal learning spaces. (SM)

This is only the beginning...

Student engagement involves ‘active and collaborative learning, participation in challenging academic activities, formative communication with academic staff, involvement in enriching educational experiences, and feeling legitimated and supported by university learning communities’ (Coates, 2007, p.122). This paper provides an example of how a staff-student partnership can enable this kind of student engagement to occur. While in this case online forums were used, the technology is not the important feature. The partnership has resulted in the development of an emerging community, where both students and staff can explore personal learning, and share experiences and technical know-how in relation to an institutional system. Weller (2009) describes this drawing together of students with a common interest as part of a university’s function. At this stage alone, the forum has drawn together not only students but staff in a creative and committed partnership through using technology in a way that is both vital and relevant in today’s digital society. However, this is just the beginning. The university is embarking on a new initiative to provide more structured support to student mentors, and to ensure the sustainability of the mentoring that has emerged organically through the forum. We look forward to watching future developments.

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