



## Embracing personal learning and ePortfolios @ CSU: A university-wide approach

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This poster introduces the rationale for CSU's approach to nurturing personal learning / ePortfolios across the university community. It presents examples from the diverse range of courses and subjects now integrating ePortfolios within the curriculum, and discusses some of the expected and unexpected outcomes which have led to a further refinement of this approach.

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### It started with a virus...

'As with any e-learning initiative, moving from small-scale pilots and funded projects to wider implementation involves careful management.' (JISC, 2008, p.22).

ePortfolios are a complex and amorphous concept. They suggest different things to different people, sometimes referring to the *process* of 'planning, synthesizing, sharing, discussing, reflecting, giving, receiving and responding to feedback' (Joyes & Gray, 2009), and at others referring to the resulting *product* of that process – a selective, structured collection of information showing one's accomplishments and growth over time (Challis, 2005). At CSU, we have deliberately chosen to combine the concepts of 'personal learning' and 'ePortfolios' to differentiate between the process and product. At the heart of *both* terms is a focus on self-management and *ownership* of one's learning, both formal and informal. It's a flexible space in which to learn, commit, make mistakes, reflect, share, converse, construct and collaborate...a place to develop one's professional identity.

CSU adopted PebblePad as our university-wide personal learning / ePortfolio platform in February 2009, and immediately set out to establish a university-wide culture around personal learning that promoted self-management and ownership. The first stage involved a partially-devolved implementation model based on viral professional development, or VPD (Dalby, 2008). Such a model draws from the popular definition of 'viral', whereby a technology, tool or teaching strategy is quickly spread from one person to another. While such an approach might appear, at first glance, to fly against JISC's above-stated notions of 'careful management', this was a deliberate strategy that suited key factors important to our particular context:

- our limited centralized support resources and strong, distributed learning and teaching support enabled through school-based educational designers;
- the current climate at CSU, where both academics and students were dealing with multiple new (and often mandatory) initiatives, with an uneven willingness and capacity to take on new technologies; and
- our desire for ownership of personal learning / ePortfolios to be driven by and lie firmly in the hands of the users, and for it not to become 'just another institutional tool'.

To ensure initial success, we used an extensive needs analysis (Hunter, 2007) to identify a small group of academics who were already using portfolios (paper- or web-based) in a positive and meaningful way with their students, who were enthusiastic about using new technologies to support this work and were willing to share their knowledge, experience and resources with their peers. These academics became the focus of our attention, instead of using our limited resources to drag in those who were not ready to engage with personal learning. In this way, we deliberately encouraged and *expected* multiple levels of engagement depending on the academics' own comfort zones.

Our early adopters were supported in their own context by school-based educational designers and the ePortfolio Project team, as well as support resources which communicated a consistent and clear set of key messages and 'seeded' short pieces of relevant content that had an instant effect. These resources included:

- **a project site** - for sharing resources, updates, case studies and user profiles with academics;
- **a student support site** – for sharing background information and help sheets (<http://www.csu.edu.au/division/landt/eportfolio/index.htm>)
- **a blog** (<http://pebblepadtips.wordpress.com/>), internal microblog (Yammer) and YouTube – for sharing tips and successes;
- **staff and student discussion forums** – for peer support and conversation around personal learning; and
- **showcases and public forums** – for sharing good practice and lessons learned.

At the same time, we recognised that students needed to see personal learning as something that also occurred *outside* of formalised course work. Thus, our Career Development Officers also embedded personal learning / ePortfolio concepts and tools into their various conversations with students.

## Life-wide, university-wide ... the results so far

During the first 18 months of implementation, we have grown to over 6000 users, with 10,000 thoughts and 41,000 files being uploaded and 4000 webfolios created. While formal learning and teaching represents a large percentage of this use, developments in other areas have boosted overall uptake across the university community.

A diverse range of course disciplines have now integrated PebblePad into the curriculum following the success of our early adopters. A key leader has been the BEd (Early Childhood and Primary) course, in which students use PebblePad throughout their degree to reflect on prior, course and work-based experiences, create rich evidence-based webfolios in curriculum areas and use profiles to track their development against professional standards. Academics have noted significant increases in deep learning, as well as improved confidence, independence and responsibility towards learning. It has also encouraged academics to provide more formative feedback (Munday, 2010). Following in their footsteps is our degree in Policing and several other Education degrees, including the BTeach (Primary), with gradual moves toward the same in Nursing, Community Health and Agriculture.

Smaller initiatives are occurring in a wide range of individual subjects with similar positive results. For example, in the Faculty of Science, physiotherapy students are using the blog tool to reflect on videos of themselves in simulated client consultations in preparation for their clinical placement. In another subject, PebblePad allows the academic to provide rich, dialogic feedback as students build skills in developing and justifying climate change arguments based on scientific evidence. Speech pathology students are using webfolios to more effectively and efficiently demonstrate their practical skills through audio and video files (Clark & Hardham, 2010), while nursing students are using blogs to reflect on various aspects of their transition from school/work to university. Individual successes are encouraging wider sharing with peers, with showcases now being initiated and conducted within individual Schools.

This gradual move towards personal learning / ePortfolios within courses has been greatly supported by other areas of the university community who are also buying into the culture of personal learning. For example:

- **Careers:** Our Career Development Officers are actively promoting personal learning and its linkages to 'career thinking'. They run skills-based workshops (e.g. planning) and include support resources on their Career Hub.
- **Academic development:** Personal learning is being introduced to new academics through the Foundations of University Learning and Teaching (FULT), academics undertaking our Graduate Certificate in University Learning & Teaching (GCULT) use PebblePad to support the development of a teaching project, and teaching fellows in Flexible Learning Institute (FLI) use webfolios to apply for and report on their fellowship projects.
- **Performance management:** A growing number of staff use PebblePad webfolios for their performance management, and are finding this valuable in terms of moving towards more meaningful self-management of their performance. Others have used them to successfully apply for internal teaching fellowships and awards.
- **Websites:** Some divisions are using PebblePad to create dynamic content for official CSU website pages.

Although not all initiatives have gone as smoothly as they may have if a more 'controlled' approach had been taken, the advantages in enhanced ownership and more widespread innovation have far outweighed any 'mistakes', which are also providing useful feedback for future iterations.

## Students taking the lead

One of the most unexpected outcomes of our approach has been the incredible enthusiasm in which some students have taken ownership of PebblePad, helping drive its usage among their uninitiated peers and academics. This has involved taking on the role of volunteer mentors both in their subjects and in the PebblePad student forum, which itself was initiated as a result of a student suggestion. Students report that the mentoring process has helped them to both increase their knowledge of PebblePad and pass on thoughts about how they have taken charge of their own personal learning. This sharing gives them the opportunity to regularly review and reflect on their own personal learning process. The sharing of this personal experience and knowledge, but more importantly, enthusiasm towards personal learning helps other students to become involved, relieve frustrations and start sharing their own work, so that success breeds success.

## Where to now?

The unexpected success of these emerging, voluntary mentors has led to a number of courses deliberately encouraging mentoring between students, as well as the launch of an official student mentoring program in personal learning / ePortfolios in 2011. Our implementation continues to be partially devolved, but is now focused on collaboratively guiding the change process with key stakeholders across the university community, including Student Services, Human Resources, Library Services, Learning Skills and student bodies. This also involves ensuring that personal learning / ePortfolios play a key role in major university initiatives, and practice-based research is encouraged to enable a stronger understanding of how personal learning and ePortfolios can be best utilized to enhance student learning outcomes.

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