

# Embedding eportfolios in teacher education: Lessons from a multi-year implementation

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ePortfolios are being used in teacher education across Australia as a technology and as a process. They allow pre -and in-service teachers to showcase teaching practice against teaching standards and reflect on their practice throughout and after study. The University of Tasmania is implementing an eportfolio as an integral part of its Master of Teaching and Bachelor of Education programs to help with this process. This paper uses document analysis to describe the support strategies used in the previous two years of implementation of eportfolios at the university and outlines future plans for progressive implementation (including plans to change eportfolio technology and support implications). Some of the strategies used to implement eportfolios include: the use of a community of practice, the use of templates and scaffolds, support from L&T and IT infrastructure, embedding assessments in units; and modelling/building exemplars of effective portfolio practice.

Keywords: eportfolio, higher education, teacher education, e-learning, teaching standards

## Introduction

The use of teaching portfolios has been around for many years. Bunker (2005) suggests that teaching portfolios can be used for demonstrating learning; career enhancement; professional development; as part of academic audits and review. According to Butler (2006) there are three main purposes of eportfolios in education: as a showcase of achievement; as a tool for assessment and/or certification; and as a record of learning over time. Teaching registration boards across Australia have focused attention on developing professional teaching standards to be used for certification, promotion and professional development. It is suggested that teaching portfolios can be an effective way to demonstrate professional standards and are now becoming a common strategy for assessing these standards (Zeichner & Wray, 2001; Smith & Tillema, 2003; Strudler & Wetzel, 2005).

Although there is potential for eportfolios in developing teaching portfolios there are issues that need to be considered before they can become a sustainable part of the curriculum. Wright, Stallworth and Ray (2002) studied the perceptions of students in an implementation of eportfolios in a four-year teacher education course. They identified a number of concerns including increased time commitment, lack of clarity regarding purpose and audience, and problems with the technology. The use of an eportfolio is not the same as creating a paper-based teaching portfolio. There is a need for students to develop eportfolio skills via training (Heath, 2005) and to develop technical knowledge (Abrami & Barrett, 2005). These aspects need comprehensive support and developing these skills takes time.

## Context

In 2007 the *University of Tasmania* decided to make the use of eportfolios one of its strategic goals. In 2008/2009 the *Projects and Evaluation Unit* implemented a trial of eportfolio software with a number of staff and students. One of the cohorts that trialled and evaluated the eportfolio software was the Faculty of Education. In 2010 the University started a wide-ranging “progressive implementation of eportfolios” making eportfolios available across the university “to all UTAS staff and also available for student use within course[s] and units” (Allan, 2010, p. 3).

The initial evaluation of eportfolios by the Faculty Education included units within the course *Bachelor of Teaching*. This course had previously used a portfolio (a printed hardcopy version) which was used for the purpose of a “showcase portfolio” (Stefani, Mason & Pegler, 2007) and an “exit portfolio” (Constantino & De Lorenzo, 2006). The portfolio contained evidence of teaching performance standards, as detailed by the Tasmanian Registration Board (TRB), and was compiled by students to demonstrate mastery of these areas. The students worked on the eportfolio throughout the two-year course and then provided evidence of their

performance against the TRB standards in the final unit (Poot, Oerlemans, Kertesz, Hawkins & Eversole, 2009, pp. 2-3).

After the trial, the Faculty of Education decided to introduce the eportfolio across two of their major programs: the *Master of Teaching* and the *Bachelor of Education* courses. The faculty was interested in developing the eportfolio process throughout its various offerings. Its intention was to get students to create a “developmental” (or working) portfolio throughout the course and to use the evidence and reflection from this portfolio as a final “evidential” (or exit) portfolio in a hope to demonstrate evidence against the TRB standards.

The eportfolio was planned to be used as both a formative and summative part of the *Master of Teaching*. It would have a summative assessment component in the final unit of the course: Preparing for the Profession. “At this time, the portfolio will be presented to a panel of assessors, and this process will result in summative feedback to the student and a final grade for the portfolio” (Fraser, 2009, p. 4). It would also have formative aspects throughout individual units and professional experience during the course.

### **Year 1 (2010): Get something up and running (but make sure it is supported)**

In the first year the goal was to get something up and running and ensure there was enough support for students and staff. We knew, from experience, that if this was going to get off the ground then support would need to be abundant and available wherever needed.

The eportfolio plan for the Faculty of Education was that all students in the *Bachelor of Education* and the *Masters of Teaching* courses starting in 2010 would work on an eportfolio throughout their course. All these students would have access to an eportfolio system (PebblePad), mentors, and technical and educative support for this process. Students would complete an exit portfolio at the end of the course. The eportfolio was to have a number of purposes, including: to show the students’ individual growth throughout the course; as a way for students to document their knowledge of teaching and their ability to teach; and for students to show their best work in relation to the teaching standards.

One of the advantages we had in the implementation was that we were able to get a degree of top-down support for the eportfolio project. There was endorsement from the University Learning and Teaching Committee including a highest level (H1) reporting requirement within the University strategic plan. This provided us with reasonable funding in our first year for Learning and Teaching and IT support and also expenditure for the software. We also had endorsement from the Faculty of Education Associate Dean of Learning and Teaching.

The major initiatives within the scope of the first year evolved around getting the support processes in place and in particular liberating academics from the technical aspects of eportfolios. It also included the provision of advice regarding learning and teaching aspects. We provided the following:

- **A comprehensive training and support package.** This included two sessions for teaching staff (*eportfolios for learning and teaching and how to create your own eportfolio*). The provision of at-elbow support for all units involved in teaching or assessment using the eportfolio tool (there weren’t many in the first year). The development of support resources for tasks. IT Help Desk support for all staff and students using eportfolios.
- **The development of a small number of activities to promote the use of an eportfolio as a progressive task.** Learning & teaching staff supported a small number of units in developing tasks incorporating the eportfolio. One example involved students developing a professional experience blog to document experiences when on placement in school. This was intended to be a hurdle task (i.e. needing to be completed as part of Faculty requirements) but, as it ended up not being a requirement, students did not complete it.
- **The development of an Online Community of Practice (CoP)** using the current Learning Management System. An online site was created and supported by an experienced teacher and technical personnel (it was essential to have both). The community of practice provided a variety of key resources regarding the use of eportfolios, an FAQ section to support both technical and educative aspects of developing eportfolios, and web conferencing for student training and support. All students in the Faculty of Education had access to the CoP. It was not meant to be unit specific but a place where all students could ask questions about the eportfolio process.

## Year 2 (2011): Embed into key units and model effective practice

The major lesson learnt from the first year was that if the eportfolio task was optional and not embedded within a unit then it is highly unlikely that students would participate – no matter what the long term value of the task was. We also realised that it was essential to give students (and lecturers) examples/exemplars of what was expected and also scaffolds and templates to support the process. Helping students to understand the purpose of an eportfolio and what was required to develop one was a key issue of year one.

The major focus for year two was embedding eportfolios into core units and grass roots initiatives. We continued to provide the support and training that we offered in the previous year (although much of the funding disappeared due to the changes in University priorities). We also continued to provide the Community of Practice for all staff and students. The major initiatives included:

- **Embedding eportfolio tasks within key units.** We decided to embed learning, teaching and assessment tasks within key professional experience units in both the *Masters of Teaching* and *Bachelor of Education* courses. We focused our attention on specific units that were consistent in both courses and that had a professional experience focus. Two of the units that we helped develop were the *Foundations of Teaching* and the *Preparing for the Profession* units (the first and last in the degree).
- **The development of a template for the final professional portfolio.** We developed a scaffold/template that was available to students from the beginning of their course and was used in the *Preparing for the Profession* unit. The template provided the students with an understanding of the TRB standards and the types of evidence and information that would be needed to support their case that they had achieved the standard. Students were able to copy the template, modify it with their own experiences and then submit this as part of the requirements of the final unit.
- **Inclusion of examples / exemplars of eportfolio practice.** In 2011 we had our first students complete their eportfolio. We collected a number of examples of student generated eportfolios with permission to use these as a part of the Community of Practice.
- **Documenting case studies of eportfolio tasks.** In 2011 we also collected a number of case studies designed by lecturers using the eportfolio. These case studies can be used in training and at-elbow support to help lecturers understand the kinds of tasks that can be developed within an eportfolio.

## Year 3 (2012): Changing systems - transition

The third year saw the arrival of a significant new challenge: a decision by the University to move to a new eportfolio product. This new product would be integrated within a completely new Learning Management System (LMS) that the University would be progressively implementing in the second semester, 2012 and throughout 2013. The key objectives for this third year became:

- **Consolidating positive attitudes** towards the use of eportfolios within the Faculty.
- **The development of a migration plan** that moved students from one system to the other with the least amount of disruption or extra work for Faculty staff and students. The development of a plan to roll out the new eportfolio tool in semesters 1 and 2, 2013.
- **The introduction of the new eportfolio tool** to Faculty eLearning support staff and key academic staff.

The integrated nature of the new eportfolio tool offered a distinct advantage over the previous software. Staff and students will no longer need to access a separate system and learn to use a product with a different interface and support systems. When fully rolled out by the end of 2013, the new tool will have a familiar interface; a single login shared with the LMS; integrated help and IT support as well as the capacity to draw on assessment and content tools in the new LMS. The integration, however, also meant a re-evaluation of our approach to eportfolios and a rethinking of our eportfolio process. Previously the eportfolio was individually owned and only accessible by the student until work was purposely shared or submitted for assessment. It operated as a personal learning environment which could be continued after completion of the degree. The move to an integrated institutional system raises questions about how we promote the use and value of an eportfolio and also what training is conducted. This rethinking is ongoing and will continue to be a major consideration for our future development and use of eportfolios within the Faculty of Education.

The lessons learnt from the first two years are expected to provide a solid foundation as the project transitions to a broader audience. By the end of 2013 the new eportfolio tool will be available to all students and staff within the Faculty of Education and throughout the University. The combination of a structured workshop series, the

delivery of at-elbow and technical support, scaffolding of eportfolio activities, the provision of templates and learner support materials and the development of Communities of Practice will continue to play an important part in the future success of this project.

## Conclusion

If eportfolios are going to be used to showcase and reflect on teaching practice then appropriate measures need to be in place to support both the teacher educator and the teaching students. All users need to feel comfortable in the environment from a technical and from a learning and teaching perspective.

This study found that a combination of top down support from Learning and Teaching, IT and Faculty leaders and support through grass roots initiatives in eportfolio development is significant in the adoption of an eportfolio. This support will affect how the eportfolio is utilized and whether it is sustained throughout a program of study. The grass roots initiatives in particular need to be nurtured, supported and celebrated in order to develop positive attitudes and perceived value for teacher educators.

The eportfolio implementation in the Faculty of Education at the University of Tasmania is still early in its development. It will need further support to add value within its programs. It will be interesting to see how changes in the eportfolio system (PebblePad to Desire2Learn eportfolio) will affect the uptake and use of eportfolios in 2013. There are some positive indications that the new system will support greater integration between eportfolio use and learning tasks. Maintaining the positive attitude of staff and students within the faculty during migration will be a key consideration for this change to be effective.

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