Can e-Portfolios support professional and collaborative practice?

Robin Trangmar, School of Education and Training, Coleg Llandrillo Cymru

Introduction

This project focuses on the professional practice of teachers working in the post-16 sector and aims to see if an e-portfolio system can improve practice through the collection and sharing of online artefacts.

The participants

The group participating in the project are all teachers working in the lifelong learning sector. Four work in a college of further education (FE), two work as paramedic instructors with an ambulance service trust and one works as a first aid trainer. All were completing a module in professional practice as part of a BA (Hons) in Education and Training. The module was taught as a face-to-face session for two hours a week, spread over 12 weeks, supported through online resources in Moodle, the open source virtual learning environment (VLE).

The Underpinning Model

In further education, and in many other education systems, practitioners work in isolation and often have to make sense of complex situations based on their own understanding of events. In many cases, reflection-in-action (Schön, 1983) occurs but the knowledge is then consigned to the practitioner's tacit knowledgebase and may never be shared with a wider audience. How would it be if practitioners engaged in reflective practice using a tool which created an asset that could be visited by other practitioners, discussed and knowledge developed based on a complex and rich multi-dimensional analysis of the situation. In a culture that encourages continuous professional development, often captured as an attendance certificate, most teachers and trainers are developing wider and deeper understanding of teaching, learning and assessment activities and events on a continuous basis, yet not capturing nor demonstrating that evidence of professional practice. It could be argued that an e-portfolio system is the ideal facility to capture evidence of ongoing and lifelong learning, in a way that is driven by the practitioner rather than the institution.

Suggestions for further development

• Look at studies by other PebblePad users (especially Julie Hughes at Wolverhampton University).
• Think about the technology skills of the learners.
• Make sure the IT support technicians at your place of work can understand the technology – the use of learning technology not embraced by your institution should not leave the learners behind. That's not to say you shouldn't innovate and try out new ideas though!
• Look at your teaching, learning and assessment strategies, and your curriculum frameworks from the new technology's perspective. Don't try and fit the old model into the new technology.
• Get a dummy account and create a demonstration portfolio that you can share with the learners.
• Have an online portfolio recording your own practice that you can share with students when necessary. In other words, don't just teach it - do it.
• Ask yourself this: "what difference will the technology make?" and "why am I using this software?"
• Be clear with students about what assets can be shared, and why they are sharing them. If there is a requirement to review and discuss things online (e.g. a teaching observation) then agree when that can be done. Have some agreement as to how much formative discussion of assets can take place, before the final assessment work is submitted.
• Don't assume that those who have completed a teacher training qualification either know how to, or practice, reflection on their practice.

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Findings

The sample size for the group was very small.
• A majority felt that e-portfolios could support professional and collaborative practice.
• There was no clear agreement if an e-portfolio could capture learning from experience.
• Participants appeared to be doing just enough to get a reasonable grade for the assessment of the module, which was contributing towards their final degree classification.