

16: Personal learning spaces: horses for FE courses

Name and role

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I left the College under good terms this August. I am now an independent advisor.

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Institution name

Thanet College

Background

Medium size general Further Education (FE) College serving the population of Thanet and the surrounding East Kent towns and villages.

Intended outcome(s)

In the light of the provision by the Institute for Learning (IFL) of a reflective portfolio to every FE tutor, we wanted to see whether it was possible to deliver a 'mapped' qualification through a reflective narrative to the satisfaction of the awarding body, in this case City and Guilds Institute. We wanted to try this because of the emergent return to a shared understanding of the value of reflective thinking and writing as a means of improving professional effectiveness in a sector that is dominated in all it does by qualifications that are mapped to learning outcomes. We wanted to see whether the outcome could be successfully delivered through narrative rather than abstract evidence.

If this is possible, then we see a way in which every FE tutor can use the mechanism of the reflective portfolio (IfL Reflect) to capture directly any training qualification offered either by an awarding body or a training organisation which can also have direct beneficial application to the needs of the employing college.

The challenge

We had to overcome three generally held beliefs:

1. There is one portfolio suitable for the range of learners in FE
2. That it can be built in the Moodle Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) and
3. That the personal can be standardised.

Established practice

The college has and continues to use a fairly orthodox pattern of staff development. It is based mainly on the needs of the college and has predominantly focused on statutory requirements that remove risk of error, such as safeguarding, health and safety, equality and diversity, and discrete teaching provision such as tutorial practice. Staff development has a strong leaning towards addressing problem areas rather than positive improvements. A criticism of this approach to staff development activity is its capacity to be complicit in supporting staff who take a passive role in

their own development, leaving it to the college to tell them what they need to do. Training is seen as an exercise in compliance. However, following the introduction of professional development by the Institute for Learning (IFL) this traditional approach has been challenged and we wanted to test part of that challenge, believing continuing professional development (CPD) to be an important part of the behaviour of a professional teacher.

Staff have traditionally accounted for their development activity, which has been historically recorded by nothing more sensational than attendance at an event and evaluation of the venue and speaker as part of their annual appraisal. In other words, the evaluation answered the question 'how was it for the college?'. In addition to this college-based staff have applied through their manager for other development and training according to the need of the college as assessed by the teacher and their manager. Funding has been centrally controlled and there is a central management approval process for all training requests.

The e/blended-learning/ICT advantage

The introduction of use of an electronic personal portfolio has encouraged the concept of personal professional development; where teachers can conduct their own development independently of their employer. Consequently it has been more popular with staff who are comfortable in managing their own professional development based on reflective thinking. It is being far harder to bring those teachers who prefer to leave the college to make the arrangements and judgements concerning a training profile into the process. A possible criticism of our project is that the 'students' self referred and were already believers in the CPD process with a clear understanding of the nature and behavioural demands made by a reflective portfolio. Reflective portfolios require the owner to manage their own development, or their progression or journey, to validate the quality of the experience to themselves first and then to the college rather than the other way around, and to account for the whole process to the IfL and their manager again at the annual appraisal interview.

Perhaps the most important advantage we have found is that professional development can be seen as a separate and distinct development process relative to the traditional staff development process governed by the college. The two are related of course, but there is no competition between the two and one certainly doesn't replace the other. Consequently the staff who took part in the ITQ (Information Technology national vocational Qualification) process have gained significantly from the liberating experience of following their own learning path, based on their own interests, delivered through a narrative that explains that 'journey' and, crucially, the application of what they have learnt to inform their professional impact. All this achieved in their own words. In addition to this, the students have encountered over 30 types of software and in each case are asked to consider its value to them and their students in terms of pedagogical impact rather than being asked to consider the use of e-learning in some kind of general or abstract form. The use of a portfolio forces the learner, through narrative, to describe 'learning in action'.

Key points for effective practice

It is critical that staff understand the pedagogical concepts that underlie a reflective portfolio before they begin to use it. If there is a misalignment between the properties of the portfolio used and the behaviour of the owner in their use of that portfolio the process will be frustrating and damaging. It often manifests itself in criticism of the way the software works because there is no insight into the purpose of a reflective portfolio and that the criticism should lie with the owner's misunderstanding of purpose. Too many of the teachers still think that technology will provide all the answers in all circumstances and make up for any thinking deficiency in the application of the author's work. Consequently, understanding the purpose of the portfolio in general, the workings

of a reflective portfolio in particular and the expectations it has of the use by the owner is critical from the outset; in short, it is important to teach staff how reflective portfolios work.

We hope that the teachers who actively engage in the use of reflective portfolios will continue to develop a stronger sense of professional identity and they see the value of taking personal responsibility for the management of their own learning.

Mastering this skill teaches them to use portfolios in this way with their own students and we expect all students to be using a personal learning space of some kind within the next 3 to 5 years.

Conclusions and recommendations

This project was designed to see how a traditional FE course that is mapped to learning outcomes can be successfully completed through a reflective portfolio beyond the reach of any other software including the college VLE and in this instance we judge it to have been successful. It has been labour-intensive (we have probably put too much work into the project due to poor design from which we have learned to make improvements) and this kind of learning experience cannot be achieved lightly or easily and requires a good deal of hard work by students as well as the teacher. Nevertheless there is a case now to be made to say that every teacher should continue their reflective development through the capture of personal experience and formal training and qualification-based learning as a means of conditioning themselves to make a better and more effective contribution to students' learning and to their college as laid out in any college staff development programme.

Additional information

The project concerns the completion of an ITQ in participative technologies designed by JISC TechDis. It was validated by City and Guilds Institute. The programme was team taught by tutors from TechDis and Thanet College. We hope to show that it is possible to use a portfolio and the reflective/narrative approach to complete any training qualification. Thereby having consequences for the IfL in publicising this approach, and for awarding bodies who can offer this approach to completing their qualifications as well as the Learning and Skills Improvement Service (LSIS) who can design their FE training to be delivered directly into Reflect.

An example of the student portfolios created can be viewed at <http://www.pebbleweb.co.uk/thanet/viewasset.aspx?oid=24459&type=webfolio>