

Letting in the Trojan mouse: Using an eportfolio system to re-think pedagogy

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E-learning research, as an emergent field in the UK, is highly political in nature (Conole & Oliver, 2007, p.6) occupying a complex landscape which houses policy-makers, researchers and practitioners. Increasingly and more interestingly, the landscape is being shaped by the narratives and experiences of the learners themselves (Creanor *et al.*, 2006, Conole *et al.*, 2006) and the use of Web 2.0 technologies. However, as Laurillard (2007, p.xv) reminds us we still, 'tend to use technology to support traditional modes of teaching' and 'we scarcely have the infrastructure, the training, the habits or the access to the new technology, to be optimising its use just yet' (p.48).

Web 2.0 spaces, literacies and practices offer the possibility for new models of education (Mayes & de Freitas, 2007, p.13) which support iterative and integrative learning but as educators and higher educational establishments are we prepared and ready to re-think our pedagogies and re-do (Beetham & Sharpe 2007, p.3) our practices? This concise paper will reflect upon how the use of new learning landscapes such as eportfolios might offer us the opportunity to reflect upon the implications of letting in the e-learning eportfolio trojan mouse (Sharpe & Oliver, 2007, p.49).

Keywords: Eportfolio, Integrative Learning, Pedagogy

Why eportfolios?

The Centre for Recording Achievement (CRA) define the eportfolio domain as a broad one which is, or which *might be* (2008), 'a repository, a means of presenting oneself and ones skills, qualities and achievements, a guidance tool, a means of sharing and collaborating and a means of encouraging a sense of personal identity'. What is important about this definition is its explicit ambiguity – eportfolio is a contested term and set of practices which have often been dominated by discussions about the tools used rather than the transformations in learning and teaching that such a domain and conceptual shift might support. Sutherland's (2005) conception of eportfolios as personal spaces for learning and for multiple stories of learning can be seen as forerunner to the CRA definition which refuses to reduce the eportfolio domain to a single activity or narrative. Cambridge (2008) develops these positions in his definition of eportfolios as, 'a genre and a set of practices supported by a set of technologies'. A genre of representation/storying of self is made possible through the process of 'collecting evidence in authentic activity, reflecting upon that evidence and interacting with feedback, recontextualising and reassembling this within an interpretative framework and a set of tools' (Cambridge, 2008). Eportfolio then can be seen conceptually as a way of being and of interacting as well as an artefact. The shift to genre allows us to rethink learning landscapes as the potential for reassembly and re-presentation challenges and potentially destabilises traditional notions and methods of learning, teaching and assessment which are often fixed in time and contexts and controlled by the institution rather than the individual. However, without practitioner and researcher reflexivity, the use of an eportfolio system could simply mirror Laurillard's observation and be 'old wine in a new bottle' (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006, p.55). This paper will consider one practitioner/researcher's attempt to dynamically utilise an eportfolio system to support a 'learning ecology' (Brown, 2000, in Garrison & Anderson, 2005, p.1) which is influenced and informed through dialogue with the learners about their experiences.

Context

The conceptual 'data' for this paper is drawn from four years experience as an eportfolio practitioner/researcher in a UK university. Methodologically, the work sits alongside Sutherland and Cambridge's conceptualisation of eportfolios as genre of representation/storying supported by practices and technologies. The technology used is pebblePAD. The practices are based upon iterative reflective writing (Hulme & Hughes, 2006), storytelling (Hughes & Purnell, 2008), the use of multimedia reflective

texts – audio/video, dialogic feedback from tutor and from peers which encourages talkback to feedback (Karim-Akhtar *et al.* 2006, Hughes, 2008), collaborative blogging, the use of frameworks which support rhizomatic (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) rather than linear representation and an emphasis upon integrative learning (Hughes, forthcoming) which encourage the making of connections across modules, programmes of study and non-academic experiences/selves. This project is further concerned with the pedagogy of e-learning which situates itself within a policy and funding context for e-learning which it could be argued has previously privileged the technology over the pedagogy. Laurillard's (2008) plea to, 'give pedagogy back to the teachers' is timely as Beetham and Sharpe (2007, p.3) identify,

this is a particularly urgent question in relation to the new digital technologies, because teachers who are excited about these technologies are often accused of using them regardless of whether or not they are pedagogically effective, and even in ignorance of the long tradition of pedagogic evidence and thought.

The need to attend to 'ways of knowing as well as ways of doing' (Beetham & Sharpe, 2007, p.3) is a vital challenge to us as practitioners and researchers if we aim to shift, or at least destabilise, the dominant paradigm from the hegemony of the book (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006, p.52) and the 'sustaining technology (of Higher Education) – the lecture' (Garrison & Anderson, 2005, p.106) to one which embraces that, 'conventional social relations associated with the roles of author/authority and expert have broken down radically under the move from publishing to participation' (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006, p.52) and collaborative constructive transactions (Garrison & Anderson, 2005, p. 4). The implications for e-learning research within these shifting landscapes are exciting as spaces are opened up for 'the reflexive practitioner to see experiences... as open to contradictory and conflicting interpretations...which can nevertheless disrupt habitual and mechanistic ways of being' (Brown & Jones 2001, p.6).

What happens when you let in the Trojan mouse?

Sharpe and Oliver's (2007) conceptualisation of e-learning as a trojan mouse is a simple yet startling articulation of the effect that the domain shift can have upon walled and unsuspecting educational cities and practices. They identify that once the mouse is let into practice teachers will be required to,

rethink not just how they use particular hardware or software, but all of what they do...to incorporate technology successfully requires the purpose of the course to be negotiated and made explicit. This process prompts reflection, negotiation and adaption to what has, traditionally, been a private and tacit area of work. (p.49)

The shift from the private and tacit to the public and explicit cannot be underestimated. The effect of the e-learning trojan mouse is potentially catastrophic as its reflexive urge requires 'a dialogue between theory and practice, as well as between learning and teaching' (Beetham & Sharpe, 2007, p.3). Mayes and de Freitas' (2007, p.13) observe that we are witnessing 'a new model of education, rather than a new model of learning' as "our understanding of e-learning matures, so our appreciation of the importance of theory deepens...we see how learning can be socially situated in a way never previously possible' (Mayes and de Freitas, 2007, p.23). In a fast-paced and constantly changing landscape such as e-learning the time to re-think our pedagogy/ies let alone re-do our practices is often scarce. This is where the trojan mouse and the destabilising activity it causes may be exploited to further our arguments for the development of e-learning in our institutions. Technology, without the pedagogy can be a fetishised and empty learning and teaching experience – stylised but without substance or simply electronic information push. In the UK context the early emphasis upon the technology *per se* has held back pedagogic debate. Recent publications however, (Conole & Oliver, 2007, Beetham & Sharpe, 2007) have offered exciting examples of the development of this nascent discipline and a convincing benchmark for policy-makers and practitioners.

Technology and pedagogy

Baume (1999, 2003 p.4) described the developmental paper portfolio as, 'a compost heap... something refined over time, enriched by addition, reduction and turning over'. This iterative, messy metaphor is a useful one to consider in the movement from paper to electronic portfolios and the pedagogic practices the genre can support. Cambridge's (2008) terms of recontextualisation and reassembly are important ones as eportfolio artefacts can be repurposed and represented to multiple audiences for multiple purposes. Construction metaphors usefully suggest that learning within these environments is always in the process of becoming, always beta and as such are always at hand for future constructions. Rather than reify the summative essay and its attendant literacy practices – the product of learning - the use of an

eportfolio system allows the processes of learning, in any media and any literacy, to be shared, valued and explored ongoing in their composting state. Of course the danger here is that composting may be interpreted as 'trashing' rather than enriching. All learning activities and artefacts may be held in a digital repository for current and future use. This archiving of learning and development and curation for audience is a powerful shift. Perhaps this activity is the bigger challenge to traditional pedagogy as learning is not discretely measured or valued by module or grade but is instead conceived as cumulative and directed by the learner. The selection and reduction activities require cognitive skills identified by La Guardia Community College in their eportfolio programme as, 'collect, select, reflect, connect'. The opportunities for connectivity, with earlier self and with others, within a system such as pebblePAD are controlled by the learner who may choose varying permission levels. This sense of ownership is vital as the educational use of eportfolios does inhabit a potentially tense and at times contradictory space as it straddles the in/formal domains as it is not attached to one learning episode nor is it controlled by one individual teacher.

Cambridge (2008, forthcoming) and the Inter/national Coalition of Eportfolio Research III, <http://ncepr.org/index.html> of which this work is a case study, are considering the implications for eportfolio learning through an Integrative Learning lens. This approach seeks to exploit the potential in eportfolios as genre/practice/technology, to support a narrative-based, cumulative genre of representation which explicitly and reflexively brings together the multiple selves afforded through the use of technology over time and across academic and non-academic contexts. This way of becoming/being/networking and connecting beyond the realms of the academic requires learners to engage in the stages identified by Cambridge. However, it also requires us as teachers and as institutions to engage with our learners beyond the walls of the module/course/institution and technologies of our choice. This is where our trojan mouse could continue to challenge us, to bring down boundaries and open up new landscapes. Adopting eportfolios as genre and practice requires us to engage with our learners in meaningful individual and collaborative activities, it requires us to cultivate dialogic cultures which make connections beyond the immediate and it demands that we interrogate notions of authorship and audience. A synergy between knowing and doing, pedagogy and technology, arrived at through ongoing conversations with our learners and peers, is a starting point for tackling the bridge building between policy, strategy, research and practice identified by Laurillard (2007, p.xvi) which is necessary for us to further explore the technology landscape for the purposes of enhancing learning.

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