

Building community: Introducing ePortfolios in university education

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This paper reports on the introduction of a trial of an ePortfolio product at an enterprise level at RMIT University. The work has been undertaken as part of RMIT's strategic e-Learning Advancement Program (REAP), which places emphasis on the utilisation of blogs, wikis and ePortfolios as online learning environments that will strengthen the University's ability to provide flexible assessment practices and support student career development. The trial will run across second semester 2008 till the end of 2009. In following recognised good practice in introducing ePortfolios in the university sector, we report upon the implementation of the trial to date. An important aspect of the trial is developing an associated Community of Practice both within RMIT and through inter-university collaborations. Within RMIT, the Community of Practice extends across both TAFE and Higher Education along with professional support services. The professional breadth of this group has expanded the legitimacy of the trial and led to the creation of CareerTrack, a resource for student career development directly positioned to support ePortfolio use. This trial has the direct aim of developing a whole of University culture that is informed in its use of electronic Portfolios.

Background

Over the last three years, RMIT University (both formally and informally) has been incrementally advancing the use of Web 2.0 technologies at enterprise level to enhance and augment student learning experiences. The use of Web 2.0 technologies is central to RMIT's e-Learning Advancement Program (REAP) (www.rmit.edu.au/reap). REAP aims to improve e-learning opportunities at RMIT University through a three stage plan consisting of:

- Minimum Online Presence (MOP), whereby all RMIT onshore courses are available to students through the Blackboard LMS
- Enhanced Learning Environments that provide online learning environments to support individualised learning, including Lectopia and the use of blogs and wikis
- Active learning, to support the introduction of student-centred, independent learning environments, including ePortfolios.

Wikis, blogs and ePortfolios are powerful tools that together allow connection, collaboration and reflection. Within REAP, ePortfolios have been identified as one of the major drivers of the active learning stage of REAP where the aim will be to:

[s]ystematically introduce e-portfolios to enhance the opportunities for students to evidence formal and informal learning, and position for the transition to graduate employment. The University-wide availability of student e-portfolio capability will provide increased flexibility for the development of assessment practices that are academically robust and independent of time and place (RMIT, 2008, para 2).

This presentation will now explore how RMIT intends to embed ePortfolios into the scholarship of learning and teaching within the University.

ePortfolios in the university sector

There has been a marked increase in the use of ePortfolios in universities over the past several years. ePortfolios provide a space where students can 'record, reflect and present information about themselves and their educational and training experiences for the purposes of learning, assessment, and making transitions, particularly to employment' (Curyer, Leeson, Mason, & Williams, 2007, p. 18). At RMIT,

ePortfolios are being strategically positioned as a vehicle that will enable the 'ongoing compilation of learning achievements and experiences that can be used for authentic, evidenced-based assessment and demonstration of career readiness' (RMIT, 2008, para 1). While traditional paper-based portfolios have been in use for some time, ePortfolios allows for multimodal artefacts, e.g. images, videos, audio files, or programming snippets, along with more traditional rich media files such as Word documents, PowerPoints, spreadsheets etc., to be collected, managed and presented to different audiences as evidence of learning and skills development over time.

Research shows that ePortfolios facilitate student-centred learning, as they are owned and managed by students (Kift, Harper, Creagh, Hauville, & McCowan, 2007; Kimball, 2005). They allow for *reflection* on and in action and *connection* between different life and learning experiences. This is achieved through the *process* of developing a holistic sense of the relationship between learning and life experiences and evidenced through *activation*, that is taking control and responsibility for managing (and evidencing) lifelong learning pathways (Kimball, 2005). ePortfolios provide ways to enhance critical reflection, link praxis and practice, gather evidence of both formal and informal learning and skill development and share this with specific audiences for specific purposes. ePortfolios allow students' 'individual perspectives [to] become the central aspect of learning' (Pusawiro & Pillutla, 2007).

A number of case studies have identified factors that are critical to the successful introduction and implementation of ePortfolios in universities. In one such study Wendy Harper, Col McCowan, Kim Hauville, Kim Moody and Dominique Chorazyczewski (2007, p. 91) found the following organisational factors critical to their successful Student ePortfolio (SeP) implementation at the Queensland University of Technology (QUT).

- A single university wide system.
- The use of universally applicable and relevant Employability Skills as an holistic organising device.
- Scaffolding of the SeP by key staff (training and promotion).
- Close integration of the SeP into curricula.
- Flexible and realistic policy frameworks and design controls for the SeP.
- Targeted internal marketing to generate buy-in from staff and students.

They also state (2007, pp. 91-92) that the successful integration of ePortfolios into the classroom depends upon the following factors:

- Relevance, in that students must see them as relevant and useful within their program.
- Scaffolding, in that they are a 'process as well as a product and therefore requires a focus on skills development as well as technical training' (p. 92).
- Integration, in that they must be connected to the curriculum and supported through both training / skill development sessions and time allowance.
- Timing, in that careful placement of assessment tasks, including reflective practice activities, across a course will help students develop good reflective practices in using their ePortfolios.

These factors have been used to guide and prioritise a trial of PebblePad, an ePortfolio system, at RMIT, thus we have:

- decided upon a single ePortfolio platform to run a 1000 student licence trial from second semester 2008 through 2009
- designed key organising frameworks around; graduate capabilities (Higher Ed), competency standards (TAFE) while targeting key policy areas of Work Integrated Learning (WIL) and Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in TAFE
- used an existing group of key staff who have been involved in a previous ePortfolio initiative as the starting point for building interest in and as a starting point for the uptake of this trial
- worked with interested staff to integrate PebblePad into their curricula in 2008 and / or for 2009 in meaningful and timely ways, including the use of customised skills / capabilities / assessment frameworks created with Pebblepad's Profile builder
- developed a specific ePortfolio website with learning and teaching resources for both staff and students
- given PebblePad presentations to different schools and Learning and Teaching committees across the university to increase awareness and uptake of the trial
- streamlined a staff application process for personal PebblePad accounts or program / course nominations for 2009.

To date, there are approximately 60 active staff accounts and 320 active student accounts, with the full complement of licences allocated for 2009. Early indications are positive and we have received positive feedback from both staff and students involved in the trial. Many of the current staff accounts are for personal use, to act as a 'sand pit' area for skills development before they integrate PebblePad into their courses / programs in 2009. Current uses of PebblePad include evidencing professional practice in Medical Sciences and creating professional portfolios in Teacher Education. Work is currently being undertaken to trial PebblePad in Engineering to use for professional accreditation along with standardising a TAFE RPL process.

Building a community of practice

One of the underlying principles of the trial is to develop a Community of Practice (CoP) around ePortfolios. This has resulted in the development of an internal staff wiki to act as a professional development resource and a shared space for collaboration and dissemination of ideas, research, pedagogy etc. There are ePortfolio Professional Development days in place and RMIT is hosting an inaugural Australian PebblePad Users Group meeting with other interested universities attending through video conferencing. These professional development initiatives are considered important for building a community of local and national expertise to help foster collaboration and knowledge sharing. We are currently working closely with the University of South Australia (UniSA) to build inter-university professional expertise around PebblePad, its functionality, best practice models and potential enterprise level implementation processes.

RMIT is a dual sector university, i.e. it contains both TAFE and Higher Education sectors. It is often difficult to find a product that has equal relevance to both sectors as well as advance the strategic goals of the university. At this stage, PebblePad seems capable of achieving this. This is an important factor that can bring all teaching staff across the university together, as they can see equal applicability of the program to their respective areas and their relevant industry needs. This helps to foster a community of professional practice across the entire university, where both sectors are equal.

The trial has also brought together staff members from both teaching and professional support services, including Career Development and Employment, the Learning and Teaching Unit and the Study and Learning Centre. This has resulted in a focus on teaching, learning and career development being embedded into the trial and the production of a set of targeted staff and student resources that link graduate capabilities to ePortfolios and teaching and learning support resources aimed at helping staff and students understand the learning, assessment and presentation processes underpinning ePortfolios.

This supported approach to both staff and student teaching and learning needs helps to embed the necessary pedagogical and cultural shifts required to successfully integrate ePortfolios into teaching and learning practices. While at this stage, the trial is for 1000 licences, it will start to develop a CoP that can be scaled across the university. Early adopters are important as a means of building a culture and increasing awareness of ePortfolios use, and these people will be used as champions within their respective areas and across the university.

Career track

In keeping with the pedagogical perspectives of the importance of graduate capabilities and the use of ePortfolios to evidence learning and skill development for employability, the Career Development and Employment group have developed an interactive website, *Career Track*, that will be positioned centrally in the University's ePortfolio structure. *Career Track* guides students through evidencing graduate attributes as well as career planning for both personal and professional development. Through the use of interactive activities and guided reflective practices, the site will allow students to identify their skills, and skill-gaps, and suggest ways that their reflections and skills can be incorporated back into their ePortfolios. This focus therefore fulfils one of the aims underpinning REAP, that is to position ePortfolios as a means to 'enhance the opportunities for students to evidence formal and informal learning, and position for the transition to graduate employment' (RMIT, 2008, para 2). Importantly the site makes use of the increasing array of external online career support tools and resources, to assist student career development through a convenient and University-contextualised online environment.

Reflections and future directions

The trial to date has been successful, but a full evaluation will not be undertaken till the end of 2009. However, early indications are positive and we have received positive feedback from both staff and

students currently involved in the trial. The fact that all licences are allocated for 2009 is also positive. One of the important features of the trial is the applicability of PebblePad to a dual sector university.

The ongoing development of the CoP at RMIT will focus on developing collaboration, connectivity, community, culture, capability, content and curriculum across the university, for both staff and students. It is also an important vehicle for developing interdisciplinary and inter-university collaborations. It is believed that by building core organisational capability and culture, there is a greater opportunity for successfully integrating ePortfolios into mainstream learning and teaching practices. Our experiences to date have shown the importance of building an organisational culture that provides active learning opportunities for both staff and students through reflection, assessment and professional development. These themes will be explored in a full evaluation of the trial.

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