2008

Creating Constructive Criteria: Evaluating The Perceived Usefulness of ePortfolios to Support Different User Needs

Roisin Donnelly
Technological University Dublin, roisin.donnelly@dit.ie

Jen Harvey
Dublin Institute of Technology, Jen.harvey@dit.ie

K.C. O'Rourke
Dublin Institute of Technology, kevin.orourke@dit.ie

Recommended Citation

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R. Donnelly, J. Harvey, K. O'Rourke
Lifelong Learning,
Dublin Institute of Technology

The use of Portfolios and ePortfolios in HE signifies a potential move towards a self-directed, student centred approach to learning and assessment through processes such as personal development planning, reflection and negotiation of evidence of learning. New and emergent technologies can now provide a diverse range of opportunities to represent, store and present different kinds of knowledge within a dynamic multimedia environment. Whilst many institutions place value upon the concepts underpinning the use of ePortfolios, there has, in the past, been reluctance to engage with ePortfolio systems for both technical and economic reasons. A key challenge for institutions is the selection of one ePortfolio system that can both operate within existing IT infrastructures and at the same time be able to support a plethora of different user needs. This paper reports upon one institution's progress towards making this choice.

Currently, the Institute is engaged in reviewing several ePortfolio software options for integration within a proprietary Portal system and alongside the institutional VLE. The paper will draw from a pilot study involving the use of Pebblepad ePortfolio software to support the first year of a Masters programme for the professional development of academic staff in Ireland – an MSc in Applied eLearning. As well as providing a repository of resources for use as part of their research project, it is intended that each ePortfolio will reflect participant progress throughout the Programme: a collection of work, selected, reflected upon and shared between individuals. Ultimately, the ePortfolio acting as a vehicle for the demonstration of continued improvement of professional practice through a combination of critical inquiry, professional development, and reflective practice.

At the outset of the programme, from the participants' perspective, the ePortfolio specification needed to be clear and simple, support needed to include regular peer conversation, reviews and feedback and they have expressed a preference for exemplars of good practice in ePortfolio development. One aspiration of the programme tutors was to encourage participants to make use ePortfolios within their own practice and through building upon evaluation feedback from the pilot study to then encourage more widespread adoption of ePortfolios across the institution.

The study will combine evaluative feedback from the participants and tutors on the MSc programme about their experiences to date, providing interesting issues for further reflection and development. In particular drawing upon feedback elicited through a focus group session where tutors and participants met to discuss and develop a set of evaluation criteria related to what they view as important factors determining potential ePortfolio usage and usefulness. Any resulting dichotomies will be explored in depth. The session

will be of interest to individuals contemplating the use of ePortfolios with different user groups.

Evaluation of ePortfolio criteria from the focus group session: staff and students
- ease of use/ training required prior to use (is this provided)
- longevity /portability of system ie for long term usage (lifelong learners)
- cost (value for money)
- storage (remote or local)
- interoperability (with institutions/external systems)
- security/ privacy (control of access/ownership?)
- functionality (what is actually needed/useful)
- synchronous multi-user access?

1. Ease of use and training required prior to use
I have first hand experience of using PebblePad and am building an eportfolio with it. I received very little if any training to use this software package and have found it very ease to learn. There is a menu of 8 different entry types such as webfolio, blog and action plan and each can be tested by making trial versions quite easily. It is easy to try out the software and see what happens so, for example, a webfolio can be created, a small bit of content can be added to one page and the result can be seen quickly. It is then obvious to the user that the webfolio is basically an easy to configure website. Likewise for the blog or other features. The curious new user can quickly see how these can be used and will look. In summary, it is an easy software package to use if you're willing to experiment and try it out. For those who are reluctant to try it out and want to read the instructions first there are a number of 'how to' websites available that give step by step instructions to use the package.

Mahara appears to be equally intuitive. In fact, it has a more familiar look and feel to me, more in line with other Web 2.0 packages such as wikis. I thought the profile editor looked very like a wiki editor. The locations for files and blogs are obvious. It does not seem to have the web site building feature that PebblePad has but appears to be much stronger on social networking and bringing online groups into the eportfolio.

2. Longevity /portability of system for lifelong learners
This is not an open source or freeware package and is therefore only valid as long as the license is paid. This obviously poses problems for students who have been given access to PebblePad by their institute because when they leave that institute they will have to make some change to their registration to continue to use the software. I feel that this is a very negative feature of the package in a Web 2.0 environment where there are many freeware options to choose from. A once off registration may be acceptable but a recurring fee to maintain an eportfolio would not be acceptable in my opinion. It is not clear from the PebblePad website which payment structure is required. The City University London state that access to PebblePad is lost when you leave the institute but claim that you can export your PebblePad eportfolio to a CD and then '*upload your assets to other e-portfolio systems using the IMS ePortfolio format*'. I don't know how easy or hard this is.

I believe that an open source approach is better and that this does not even have to be an eportfolio package. A blog may be a very suitable method of maintaining an eportfolio and likewise for a website. Both of these can be set up using Web 2.0 facilities (wikis etc.) or by using straightforward web site design. I searched the web for some examples of this and found similar thinking by Dr. Helen Barrett who appears to be well regarded in the area of eportfolio research and application (she received the first EIFEL lifetime achievement award in 2007). Her comparison of Web 2.0 options indicates that the use of wikis etc. are positive in terms of portability and individualization but negative for assessment and security. I do think the security issues can be addressed with a suitable choice of application.

Barrett also trialed Mahara but entered a question mark under the portability criterion. I'm not sure why but this possibly means that the information in Mahara is not easily exported. Since the resource is free it can be continued to be used after college is finished.

3. Cost, value for money
I'm not clear on the cost of PebblePad and so can't really comment on this. My feelings on open source applications explained in 2 above are relevant here too.

Since Mahara is free one could argue that it provides good value for money. On the other hand, for roll out in a large institution, it may be necessary to hire and IT person to manage the delivery of the package. There may be a cost once the storage limit of 10 Mb per profile is exceeded. It is possible that this resource should reside on the college network which will avoid this problem but transfer the server cost to the institute.

4. Storage - remote or local
I think I'm correct in saying that all files, assets, etc. are stored on a PebblePad server. I could not find an answer to this question by searching the web. Remote storage is fine by me and I think it is the way of the future. Many people like to have a local backup and it's not clear how this can be for the PebblePad eportfolio.

The trial version for Mahara has a 10 Mb limit so the files must be stored remotely. This limit will be easily exceeded and will be a significant disadvantage. This may mean that files will have to be stored locally or in another location and summarized in or linked to from Mahara.

5. Interoperability with institutions and external systems
One must be a PebblePad user to communicate with another PebblePad user. It is possible to share files, assets and resources in PebblePad with others but they must also be registered users of the package. I think this is very regressive and very much against the open nature of the internet. I don't like this feature and think it is very big limitation. In the main, one's eportfolio will only be shared with the tutors or teaching team so sharing it openly may not be a major issue. However, I feel that it would be nice to choose to have some parts of the eportfolio open to the internet with other parts closed and available only to the invited. This is not possible with PebblePad.

Mahara appears to be more suited to social networking than PebblePad. There is a right hand banner with a list of groups that you are a member of and can communicate with.

6. Security/ privacy - control of access/ownership
PebblePad scores very highly here and it is totally secure and you choose who you share your assets with (provided they are other PebblePad users). You can also choose which assets to share.

I'm not clear on this but according to Barrett this is a secure resource that has access control features.

7. Functionality (what is actually needed/useful)
As I have yet to fully read about eportfolios, see many examples of others and develop my own, I'm not informed enough to confidently discuss this topic. My thoughts are that PebblePad has sufficient functionality to make a good eportfolio. Assets can be created within the PebblePad environment using the text editor; links can be added to external sources and urls; files can be uploaded so that images, documents, reports, videos, etc. can be added to the eportfolio. I do have one gripe with PebblePad in that the text editor is very poor – it does not have a spell checker and there is a noticeable time delay when typing, between pressing a key and seeing the character appear on the screen; this is particular problem when pressing the backspace delete button. This problem is avoided by typing the text in e.g. MS Word and copying the text into PebblePad.

I haven't spent time with Mahara but it seems to promise all the features of PebblePad except the web site or webfolio tool that is a nice feature of PebblePad.

8. Synchronous multi-user access
I'm not sure what the intention is with this measurement. It is possible to share assets with other PebblePad users but I don't know whether two or more can edit or view an asset at the same time. I imagine multiple viewing is not a problem as I sense this is very web based but that multiple editing is. It is possible to

select different levels of access when sharing from view only to edit so it is possible that two people may try to edit the same asset at the same time. I don't see this a regular occurrence and hence should not be a problem.

I presume that a similar concept applies with Mahara, but again, the social networking feature is much more highlighted in this package than in PebblePad.

Sample discussion transcripts from the discussion board…
Thanks for that very extensive review of both the e-portfolio systems.
I would agree with the majority of the points made.
Pebble Pad to me was very interesting on first encounter but on subsequent uses I found it very frustrating as I wasn't sure as to why or how I was to use it. It was like walking along a beautiful shoreline with the waves lapping on the rocks and then entering a dark and dull cave where you couldn't see or hear anything and you weren't sure if other people were 'lurking' in the dark. It was if you had to post notices or draw diagrams on the 'cave' wall and then leave and return regularly but never know if anyone was looking at them or not or if other people where doing the same in the darkness also. I'm still not sure what the purpose of Pebbel Pad is. I have posted some reflections and experimented with the webfolio but what is the point if nobody is reading them or I can't see what other are posting in the 'cave'.
Mahara on the other hand seems like a normal website or VLE with Web 2.0 applications. At least there seems to be an emphasis on community and I can see a 'purpose' to the interface and the interaction.
In reality I haven't given a whole lot of time to either due to other committments but I hope to rectify that situation asap. Your review has encouraged me to have another look at them.
Regards,

Your analogy is beautiful. You could also have argued that we lived in caves once but have moved on since then! PebblePad has definitely avoided the online socialisation route. I'm wondering why. If the point of view is that an e-portfolio is an individual piece or compilation of work then there is no need for socialisation. Sharing it with assessors on an as needed basis is sufficient. Also, learning, and hence the need for online socialisation, can happen outside the eportfolio thereby keeping the eportfolio as the repository only of the work. The reflective aspect can also sit with this as it is an individual effort anyway. That may be the line of thinking in PebblePad. I'm off to a class now so don't have time to research how widely held this point of view is. Later.

So the idea is that you continue to reflect on your teaching and learning activities by posting material into PP and then you bring your assessor along the Pebble Pad 'shoreline' and into the 'cave' and show them all your postings on the wall? Are these postings to be just about the teaching and learning on this course or on all the courses and subjects we work on weekly or other extracurricular learning activities? In a year you could have a lot of material to show off? If you want this to reflect a lifetimes work then the 'cave' will have to be very large and not get swamped by the sea or buried by landslides before you can preserve its contents which may have lain dormant for years. I guess this is covered in the longevity/portability section of your review.
Regards,

A clever analogy..my worries are along those lines with PP..What will a potential employer or interviewer for promotion make of this scene into the future.

On first glance Mahara keeps the presentation more formal and classical.

I've not given this much time and consideration but I'm not inspired by the look of PP. I think those from the humanities may like the look and feel...Use science folk prefer the list of achievements in black and white.

Discussion re stakeholders/ eportfolio institutional implementation

On Tuesday we brainstormed a list of stakeholders Here are the list of possible stakeholders:
Cross border parties
Employers
Lecturers
Learning and Teaching Team
Students
Ethics Group
International Community
College Registrar
Government Policy Makers
IT / ICT Services
Department Manager
Finance
Trade Unions
External Examiners
Professional bodies involved in accreditation
Industry
Commerce

I think the profession or accreditation bodies must be first and foremost involved and committed as if we are to collect evidences over college and work they must be given credit and value.

There must be a purpose to every public entry, is it not just an elaborate CV? This is from a scientific mind, do we have a humanities view?

As someone who has changed careers three or four times over the last 25 years I would think that I would find it very difficult to encompass all I've learned or think I've learned formally and informally in a portfolio be it electronic on not. A lot of what I have learned is very hard to represent in words or images. A lot of learning in the workplace is about intangible skills to do with people and dealing with people, which can be difficult to express in a CV or a portfolio

I'd say the most important stakeholders for such meetings would be the lecturers.

Why? If you want to effectively integrate eportfolios into the HEI T&L process then you really need lecturer buy-in.

Lecturer buy in assumes lecturer prior knowledge and experence of e portfolios. They should be present and feel part of the process. The above could also be said of students and department managers. A lot depends on how the project is presented at the initial meetings (or prior warming up 1to1 meetings) as part of a change management strategy.