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Embedding holistic learning: Designing curated eLearning processes for social work students

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La Trobe University is implementing a new Social Work course. Several evidence-based curriculum design and teaching innovations have been identified as having the potential to support both new explicit and implicit curriculum. This paper reports on the introduction of an innovative learning technology solution to promote a student centred learning approach. The use of the technology is novel to social work coursework education so evaluating the impact on supporting learning outcomes addresses a current gap in the research literature. Supporting a student centred approach, the innovation amalgamates ePortfolios with Moodle LMS to capture learning activities and assessments in their own digital space. The project has been a collaboration between the Social Work discipline and Technology Enhanced Learning Services. Findings from our evaluation show that the use of ePortfolios is consistent with transformational learning principles whereby the software application enables critical reflection, a sense of ownership over learning and the opportunity for students to be creative. The innovation also empowers students to develop a portfolio of curated reference material along with indivdiualised evidence of knowledge that can be utilised beyond graduation for potential employers or opportunities for further study.

Keywords: ePortfolios, PebblePad, Moodle, LMS, Innovation, Assessments, Learning Activities.

Introduction

In 2021 La Trobe University rolled out a newly accredited Bachelor of Social Work (Honours). Underpinning the course is a theoretical framework which articulates the values, theories, learning outcomes and graduate capabilities that inform curriculum design. In short, the course promotes holistic capability using a social justice lens, a student centred approach and a focus on self-awareness and critical reflection. The actual subject design process required the identification of learning tools that would support the course framework. In doing so we aspired to have an implicit curriculum (CSWE, 2015) that is consistent with our explicit curriculum. The use of technology such as digital workbooks, or ePortfolios, is consistent with the aim of a student-centred approach which encourages deep learning (Baeten, Kyndt, Struyven, & Dochy, 2010). However, there was no research about the use or learning benefits in social work coursework education. This paper presents an overview of the design, implementation, and evaluation of the embedding of digital workbooks in the first year of a new social work course. The findings contribute to addressing the gap in research about the learning benefits of student-centred technologies in social work education.

Context: Facilitating learning that stays with students

The design process for a new social work course at La Trobe University commenced in 2019 with the aim of delivering the first year in 2021. Student feedback and current course evaluation processes provided rich data on the existing strengths, shortcomings and challenges that could be considered in the development of the new design. Prominent amongst student concerns about the learning process was their experience of the course as a series of subjects which didn't necessarily give them a picture of how their learning came together. Teaching staff felt students needed to be able to exercise more independence in how they used subject material and also wanted to encourage greater active reflection. As a result, ePortfolios were identified as a possible learning technology that would address these shortcomings and concerns that were also a weakness of the existing Learning Management System (LMS).

As one example of software facilitating ePortfolios, the nature and function of Pebblepad is best described in this definition by Sutherland (2007) as cited in Awang (2008). It is:

> A system which allows users, in any of their learning identities, to selectively record any abilities, events, plans or thoughts that are personally significant; it allows these records to be linked, augmented, or evidenced by other data sources and allows the user to integrate institutional data with their personal data. It facilitates self-awareness, promotes reflection, supports enrichment through commentary and feedback from the recipients of shared assets. It grows, develops, and matures as the user accesses it, without constraint, over time. It provides tools for aggregating assets in multiple forms; for telling myriad stories to diverse audiences and ensures absolute user-control over what is shared, with whom, for what purpose and for how long. It is a personal repository; a personal journal; a feedback and collaboration system; and a digital theatre - where the audience is by invitation only" (p. 75).

PebblePad ePortfolios have been used as a tool for work/placement-based learning in social work courses across Australia (O'Keeffe & Donnelly, 2013; Venville, Cleak & Bould, 2017). However, the software has not been used as an integral learning tool within the coursework component, and there is no research about its use in social work education to achieve specific learning outcomes. This is despite the Australian Association of Social Workers Education and Accreditation Standards (AASW, 2020) requiring courses to apply practice-relevant technology in social work education. Based on pedagogical evidence from other disciplines in which transformational and reflective learning process were central to learning outcomes, course designers agreed to integrate PebblePad digital workbooks into the first year of the new course. A longer term aim was to use the findings of the first year evaluation to inform the use of digital workbooks throughout the course.

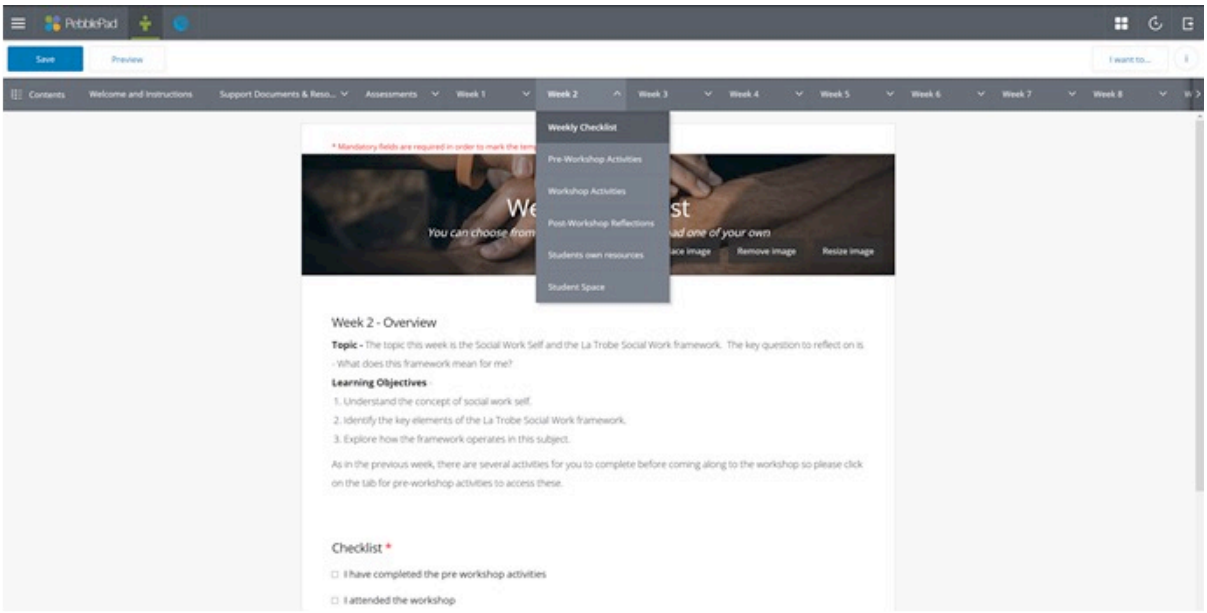
The pedagogical benefits of ePortfolios are well documented, particularly in promoting reflective learning, collaboration, preparation, and organisation (Arnold & Kumar, 2014; Joyes et al, 2010; O'Keeffe & Donnelly, 2013). The La Trobe course that is the focus of this paper is built on a holistic approach which identifies knowledge, skills, self-awareness, critical thinking and ethical decision making as the key elements of a professional education (Beddoe, 2004; Bennett & Green, 2019; Bogo, 2018;). Thus, the benefits of the technology of ePortfolios is well matched to our stated learning outcomes. In addition, transformational learning processes are a key element in a social work course that requires students to explore, reflect and analyse their own, and others, values, perceptions, and actions (Jones, 2009). Transformational learning "captures the process by which students engage in their learning, experience a change in perspective, of themselves or society, and then enact their new understanding" (Damianakis, 2019 cited in Damianakis et al 2020, p. 1). The sense of ownership an ePortfolio provides enables students "to originate and maintain 'conversations' about their learning and by doing so they become active in formative assessment rather than passive receivers of graded results … as students are encouraged to take responsibility for what and how they learn" (Pelliccione & Dixon, 2008, p. 752)

Description of ePortfolio Design - Subject Structure, Content, Activities and Assessments in a Student ePortfolio

In the new first-year first semester subject in which ePortfolios have been embedded (Being a Social Worker) students are oriented to university study, specifically the development of basic research, writing and oral communication skills. All subject activities are provided and completed in PebblePad using a consistent week by week structure. The structure supports engagement by enabling pre workshop activities that assist the student to identify what they may wish to explore further in face-to-face learning (Figure 1). Students are then provided an outline of what to expect in their workshop and then, importantly, they have a dedicated post workshop reflection using a prompt question. Further, there is a section called Student Space for their own resources, notes, etc. The subject content covers the key aspects of how social work is understood, particularly what it means to be a social worker and how social work is expressed across its many domains of practice and fields of practice. Students explore their personal values and the professional values and ethics of social work beginning with understanding the concept of self and The Professional Self.

With a consistent learning sequence and structure this subject provides students with a regular weekly approach that aims to be coherent and consistent thus promoting clear expectations as to what is required of them. The subject provides content, learning activities and the students' own assessments to keep and refer to throughout their course and beyond graduation. While not all learning activities are compulsory, the subject builds first year students' capacity for self-directed learning and increases their accountability for their own work (Kaighin & Croft, 2013). For example, providing students with a weekly checklist that outlines the activities to be completed including readings, viewings and other multi-media components that are all contained in the ePortfolio. This process enables building of a portfolio of curated learning resources that includes subject content, learning activities and assessments that are accessed and completed in an ePortfolio that remains with the student.

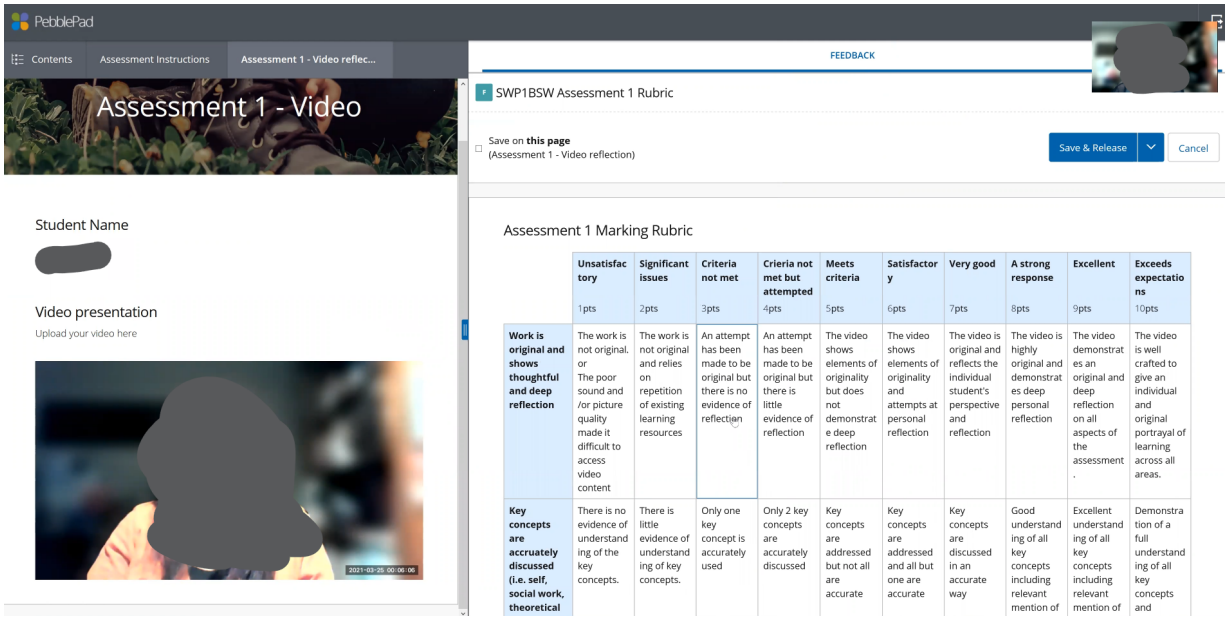
Figure 1. PebblePad Weekly Workbook – Learning Activities Structure



Innovative Assessments (Idividual and Group) with Clearly Defined Feedback Rubric

Being a Social Worker's seamless design incorporates the students' assessment information and support and links off to each of the Assessment Workbooks. This approach gives students a workbook that contains everything they need to successfully complete this subject. The subject's assessments have been set up with rubrics for easy marking and student feedback that is clearly defined (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. PebblePad Assessment 1 Feedback Rubric



The assessments include an individual reflective video, a group digital poster and a traditional reflective essay. The workbook structure supports creative and reflective responses. For example, students were asked to look back at the reflective video they made in Assessment 1 as part of their task in Assessment 3. By doing so they had an accessible way of evidencing how their understanding of 'what social work is' may have changed during the semester.

Method

The ePortfolios were rolled out in the first year of the new Bachelor Social Work (Hons.) in Semester 1 2021. One hundred and twenty students across five campuses created and maintained a PebblePad digital workbook (ePortfolio). Students accessed all learning materials via their workbook thus making them active users before, during and after face-to-face weekly seminar workshops.

Formal student feedback surveys were conducted in weeks 10 and 11 of a 12-week semester with a response rate of 37%. These anonymous online surveys explored the learning experience and learning outcomes collecting both quantitative and qualitative responses.

The subject teaching team included continuing and casual teaching staff all of whom were experienced social work practitioners. One of the casual members was also new to higher education teaching, the others had between 3 and 20 years' experience in higher education. All members of the teaching team were asked about their experience of Pebblepad using an online feedback process.

Findings

Findings from both student and teaching staff data is presented under three themes: design, implementation, and perceived learning benefits.

Design

Students found the design and learning activity content of the workbooks logical and engaging. The course was very comprehensive in its subject matter and design, easy to understand and relate to. (Student). The prework was very engaging each week. (Student)

Implementation and Use

Despite the variety in their previous teaching experience and contexts, all teaching staff found the use of ePortfolios a positive innovation both in concept and practice.

In the early weeks of the subject, teaching staff enabled students to familarise themselves with the workbook concept by using activities which required them to save an asset and add it to their workbook and to write their reflective comments in the post workshop reflection section. Slowly building their knowledge and skills in the use of the workbook mirrored their growing subject content knowledge. Students expressed varying levels of comfort with using PebblePad. For example, one student stated that "the PebblePad (sic) system can be hard to navigate, especially around the assessments".

The three assessment pieces students were required to submit were successfully done via PebblePad in over 96% of cases. There was only one student who required one on one assistance with all three assessment submissions.

Learning Benefits

The aggregated data from student feedback survey indicated that students scored the subject as a whole as 4.59 out of 5. This is well above the median score for subjects in the same discipline, school, college, and university. Specific results are in Table 1:

Table 1: Student Feedback

Area of feedback	Score out of 5
The subject enabled me to achieve the learning outcomes	4.49
I found the subject to be intellectually stimulating	4.55
Overall, the amount of work required of me for this subject was appropriate	4.53
Helpful adjustments were made to the subject to support online learning	4.53
I found the resources provided for the subject to be helpful	4.62

Additionally, students reflected on the learning environment that was created.

> This subject feels like a safe space to communicate and share ideas and thoughts. (Student)
>
> This included how they were able to interact with material through their workbooks. Creating the reflective video was really valuable, readings were clear, and podcasts and narratives were relevant to assessments. (Student)
>
> I liked how this subject opened my mind up to a broad range of aspects I wouldn't of thought would relate to social work. (Student)
>
> It felt like this was what I have come to university to learn. The teacher was amazing, and I have enjoyed the varied ways the content was provided, for example, readings, podcasts, videos etc. (Student)

Discussion

The findings evidence both students and teaching staff experienced the design and use of PebblePad ePortfolios as supportive of student centred learning and a transformational learning objective. For example, through encouraging engagement with a range of learning activities prior to face to face learning experiences students were encouraged to prepare and reflect resulting in a more active learning process. As Beaten and colleagues (2010) identified in their review of student centred learning approaches, there are a range of contextual, perceived contextual and student factors that influence learning outcomes. In this evaluation examples of each category of factors were identified.

Firstly, student factors. A key learning has been the requirements of implementation. For example, there was a broad range of digital literacy and confidence amongst beginning students. A small percentage of students did not submit their first assessment without one on one assistance despite the production of brief videos to demonstrate how to upload. Rather than see this as a barrier to the use of ePortfolios we consider this to be an intrinsic area of learning for students who will be entering a workplace where they are expected to have the required ability and confidence to use a range of technology. The evaluation provides indications of how we can better support students to build their digital skills.

The dominant perceived contextual factor impacting acceptance of portfolios was workload. This was evident amongst both students and teaching staff who saw the use of new technology as "additional". This is a common reaction to innovation where implementers need to be attentive to a resistance to change (Atkins & Frederico, 2017). A similar dynamic occurred when blended learning strategies were first introduced. In future we will provide further support to teaching staff to build their digital skills prior to semester commencing.

Building the skills of teaching staff is a key element in successful implementation.

Factor and cluster analysis on the relationship between teachers' approaches to teaching and students' approaches to learning indicated that students of teachers who reported adopting approaches to teaching that were more oriented towards students and to changing students' conceptions, reported adopting significantly deeper approaches to learning (Baeten, Kyndt, Struyven & Dochy, 2010, p. 247).

The primary contextual factor was the need to have some face to face seminars online rather than face to face due to Covid restrictions. Unsurprisingly, students who had online seminars found it more difficult initially to build their familiarity with the workbook processes such as saving their work as assets.

Conclusion

Implementing educational innovation is often limited to the course content and facilitation. This project demonstrates the use of ePortfolios as a platform for supporting transformational learning (Jones, 2009) and a student centred approach (Baeten, Kyndt, Struyven & Dochy, 2010) within a professionally accredited social work course. It promotes consistency between implicit and explicit curriculum (CSWE, 2015).

Enabling students to take increasing responsibility for their own learning, to reflect on their developing knowledge, skills and beliefs, and maintain an ePortfolio of learning material and completed assessments are strategies that support stated learning outcomes for graduate capability (AASW, 2020).

This project was only possible because of the collaboration between social work academics and educational designers. The reciprocal trust and respect that was required should be something that is built and nurtured throughout implementation. We are currently designing and implementing the use of ePortfolios in the second year of our course.

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