Meeting the needs of students within an institutional Personal Development Planning (PDP) framework: piloting, informing, embedding and evaluating ePDP in a School of Arts, Media and Education (SAME) at a UK University — the PIeR project.

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Meeting the needs of students within an institutional Personal Development Planning (PDP) framework: piloting, informing, embedding and evaluating ePDP in a School of Arts, Media and Education (SAME) at a UK University — the PIeR project

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Abstract

The Dearing Report (2007) with its recommendation for the introduction of personal development planning (PDP) in Higher Education resulted in the University of Bolton developing a PDP framework (2005). Implemented through a validation process across all departments of the university this was later evaluated by Goodrich (2007) who highlighted problems and lack of engagement with the process. The recommendations from this report came at the point of reconfiguration from departments to schools and thus offered the opportunity to develop, within the newly formed School of Arts, Media and Education (SAME), an electronic PDP (ePDP) approach in line with its new e Strategy. This action research project, based on O’Brien’s (1998) collaborative action research activity of practitioners wishing to improve their understanding of practice is underpinned by Cowan’s (2006) diagram of reflection ‘for’ ‘in’ and ‘on’ moving from prior learning to further learning.

The culture of ePDP in the School of Arts, Media and Education at the University of Bolton, in the United Kingdom (UK), is slowly changing due to the greater involvement of students and staff with technology. The challenge is to ensure that the PDP concept is fully and holistically understood and embedded within the different discipline groups in the SAME and on the agreed Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) platform the university is progressing to. This research paper reflects on the results, challenges and evaluation of the pilot and two further years of implementation of an ePDP exercise in the SAME.

This paper reports on an action research project that aimed to facilitate and accommodate an institutional framework with particular attention to the Art & Design subject area. This discipline illustrates the specific needs required to fulfil the University of Bolton (UoB) Portfolio framework, recommending some adjustments with the support of current UoB technology and exploring good practice opportunities that could be mirrored in other AME disciplines.

We wish to acknowledge and thank Richard Ashley, John Washington and Sarah Lawton for their efforts in the pilot implementations of the ePDP approaches in the SAME.
Introduction

In 1997 the Dearing Report recommended the introduction of Personal Development Planning (PDP) in Higher Education (HE) in the UK. HEI’s were expected to introduce ‘progress files’ which would be used to record achievement and also ‘...monitor, build and reflect upon the personal development’. As a result UK HE moved toward the development of PDP approaches for students (Dearing, 1997). Subsequently at the University of Bolton a framework was developed (Burkinshaw, 2005) and this resulted in a validation process to embed PDP within modules.

Table 1: UoB PDP Framework 2005

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Levels (*) (**)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>HE 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compile a record</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identify own strengths</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflect on effectiveness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identify own needs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plan action</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(*) Levels based on ‘credit and HE Qualifications’ guidelines (2001, November)
(**) Table content has been summarised from the original

Key features of the framework were its student focused activities around a structured on-going process involving - reviewing, reflecting, action planning, target setting and monitoring. PDP was intended to be embedded within curricula at each level of study and different modes of learning (including external to the university). Students were to be encouraged to reflect on their learning and career development holistically. The framework identified the use of technology to support the UoB PDP approach. It also recognised that the potential application of technology in student PDP (Virtual learning Platform - WebCT) had resulted in issues such as poor interoperability with Apple Mac computers which are the preferred platform for Art and Design students (who are the main focus of this project), and which prevented progress at that time.

PDP in the SAME

The departmental structure in place when the UoB PDP Framework was introduced resulted in a range of approaches to its implementation within the different disciplines of Art & Design, Cultural and Creative Studies and Education who make
up the School of Arts, Media and Education. The decision to implement an on-line approach offered a useful opportunity to see how PDP in an ‘e’ context would work across the breadth of programmes in these subject areas within the newly formed SAME.

Within the Cultural and Creative subject areas and Education Studies PDP was embedded in individual modules ranging across the HE4 – 6 levels (the three years of undergraduate study in the UK) of the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ) in the UK.

In Art and Design PDP was embedded within a core HE4 (first year of undergraduate study) module (Critical Studies 1). Particular problems associated with the Art and Design module arose as a result of PDP being defined as a learning outcome but carrying no assessment weighting. Students found this difficult to manage as they did not want to engage with a non-credit bearing learning outcome of a module. Little evaluation of the effectiveness of PDP was available until a report commissioned by the University (Goodrich, 2007) highlighted problems and some lack of engagement with the PDP process.

The Goodrich (2007) report stated that there was a need to ‘revisit and review the implementation of PDP studying at the University of Bolton’. To build on good practice in the report a recommendation was made that PDP should be foregrounded in Learning and Teaching and that this would ‘involve investment in resources of staffing and staff time for both academic and academic professional services’. The (PIeR) project emerged as one specific response to this report and to accommodate the UoB framework in a positive way. The decision to develop and implement an e approach is predicated on the SAME ‘e strategy’s’ reference to implementing technologies in all school processes.

As indicated earlier, PDP in the SAME is located differently within the discrete subject areas. Within Cultural and Creative studies PDP was embedded in a range of modules representing Media Writing and Production, Creative Writing, Film and Media Studies, English and History. Similarly PDP was embedded in different modules in Education Studies. As all Art & Design students were involved in undertaking the same module (Critical Studies 1), this provided the largest control groups to develop, implement and evaluate this ePDP project. Thus it was possible to do an intervention in Art and Design, the results of which would inform the other subject groups and the wider university community. This was also possible because of the embedding of PDP in a core HE4 module which included the development of research and study skills.

Electronic based initiatives have been implemented through the use of the Institute for Learning (IFL) Reflect Portfolio process in Teacher Training (TT) as this is an external requirement which removed this group of students from the ePDP development.

It was hoped that this ePDP initiative would help to embed an e-learning approach across the SAME, which would inform and support students as they moved into levels HE5 and 6 study. This also acknowledged the University goal of a blended learning ethos. Piloting with Art and Design students included a professional skills element as this approach would support their longer term capacity to understand, develop and use on-line portfolios aligned to opportunities for future employability through developing a holistic understanding of the flexibility of an e PDP initiative.
as part of portfolio building and the ability to demonstrate transferable skills within this. Managing an online identity is becoming increasingly important in developing the professional skills needed to meet sector demands and skills. This project was one approach in justifying the exploring of ePDP as a tool to develop those skills with students.

Based on the University of Bolton’s generic PDP framework around a table of development activity against skills, knowledge and understanding (Table 1) This had previously been simplified in Art and Design in 2006 as students had found the text based approach less helpful to their creative practice and it was agreed that the revised table (Table 2) would be used by all students involved in the pilot as a basis for evaluation and to create links to external websites and blogs which the students are able to do within the table by providing hyperlinks to their own websites and work in progress. This was particularly important in a subject area which traditionally uses the visual as a means of communicating skills, knowledge and understanding.

Table 2: The SAME PDP Table

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>To develop:</th>
<th>Skills</th>
<th>Knowledge</th>
<th>Experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reflection:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decide on areas you need to develop</td>
<td>a1</td>
<td>a2</td>
<td>a3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Planning:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identify urgent and longer term needs</td>
<td>b1</td>
<td>b2</td>
<td>b3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Action:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using feedback to turn planning into action</td>
<td>c1</td>
<td>c2</td>
<td>c3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Review:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Progress</td>
<td>d1</td>
<td>d2</td>
<td>d3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(adapted from the University of Bolton PDP framework 2005)

**Literature review**

This literature review deals with two strands of research relevant to this field, PDP research, including the use of technology in PDP activity, and the research design itself. Much has been written about PDP including the work of Clegg and Bradley (2006) on practice and process in models of PDP, Ward and Jackson (eds, 2001) Personal Development Planning through Institutional Case Studies. James (2004) looked at the tensions between the role of PDP and whether it enhances individual understanding in a creative arts environment. Whilst recognising the importance of this research, we have concentrated on reporting from a blend of findings from both Art and Design and generic literature around ePDP.

**PDP research**

There is a growing body of evidence around the use of ePDP and ePortfolios and Logan (2007) highlighted the enhancement through digital portfolios, demonstrating subject expertise, skills and experience, of the student’s employment prospects through a digital approach. Concerns were expressed by respondents in Logan’s research about the loss of the ‘sense-based understanding’ in digital
portfolios. This was prevalent in for e.g. textile design. Logan informs us that Art, Design and Media (ADM) stakeholders saw the e Portfolio as an opportunity to develop wider communication about students and their development in a broader global environment. The Portolano project [http://www.eportolano.eu/index.html](http://www.eportolano.eu/index.html) is one example of an online community network which produced a professional guide to develop competency in the creative arts through the use of (e)Portfolios.

The findings of the University of Nottingham’s e Portfolio development team highlight in their early results and recommendations that we should ‘consider how student prefer to work (e.g. using technologies such as mobile technology, web 2.0) when thinking about the best way for them to carry out e Portfolio related learning activities’ and to ‘embed e Portfolio learning activities into lesson plans and curriculum (ePortfolios, 2009). Thus the embedding of technology through has been a key factor in the development of the project because of the strategic need to develop e learning in SAME.

Beetham (2008) highlights that ‘learning activity is a specific interaction of learners with others, using specific tools and resources, oriented towards specific outcomes’ and if we link this to practice in a digital age then arguably communication and social interaction are linked to the way learners in the world of work may collaborate with others, then the use of web2.0 technologies can be seen as one way of sharing knowledge building, networking and exchanging ideas. This may however, in the context of Learning Outcomes be, by default, planned as the development of evaluation, reflection and critical thinking skills through (e)PDP are in-built into validated modules.

The case studies undertaken by the JISC Technology Enhanced Learning project (2009) evidenced little difficulty accessing the technology (which replicates the PIeR findings) but did find that the rationale for using activities that were appropriately scaffolded to demonstrate their value was important (the UOB PDP framework being the scaffold for this project) and that the key to meeting and supporting student learning needs is the ‘pedagogy of planning tools’.

The Australian e Portfolio (AeP) final report (2008) specifically references the four principal JISC purposes of e Portfolios and the PIeR project links primarily with the fourth area:

- Supporting personal development planning (PDP) and continuous professional development (CPD)

- Providing scaffolding to support lifelong learners in reflecting on their current and completed learning, achievements and achievements and experiences, and on goals and opportunities, to guide learning (formal and informal) and professional development over time.

Key issues were identified by Drew et al (2007) on how e PDP is embedded in programmes and how this relates to the processes of action planning and reflection which occurs commonly in art, design and media. They highlight the importance of developing students’ e skills and their findings show that students based in these subject areas are more positive about e PDP overall.

Malins (2003) found a direct relevance of PDP in ‘a studio based context’ and, in evaluating the distinctive approach used, showed that ‘providing an appropriate
structure for assessment and reflection can support students in being more active and deeply engaged with this process’.

While the PIeR research is predicated on the requirement that students undertake ePDP, we must clarify here that ePDP may also be defined as part of a broader ePortfolio in any future development. Barrett (2010) makes a distinction between the process and product aspect of the portfolio:

*(The) difference between the portfolio as process (collection, selection, reflection, direction, presentation) and the portfolio as product (the notebook, the website, the CD_ROM or the DVD and the technological tools used to create the portfolio-as –product).*

can be clearly matched to the ePDP process implemented in the SAME where students are often replicating what they previously managed in paper format and have now translated into an on-line resource through process resulting in product. The understanding of what can constitute an ePortfolio is similarly described in the national audit of the AeP (p71) this is comparable to what could constitute an ePDP in the SAME if students use the framework as it had been originally designed and further developed in the school.

*Research design*

This project developed as a collaborative action research activity where the participants are co-researchers; an approach often applied in real situations and by practitioners wishing to improve their understanding of practice (O’Brien, 1998). Thus the project developed as a result of a particular strategic need within the university and SAME to develop the use of e learning more widely in the school.

Cowan (2006, p. 52) references the circling of the Kolb experiential cycle from suggested literature as ‘depressing or misleading’. This led to the development of the Cowan diagram (2006, Figure 4.5, p. 53) which is viewed as a key tool in managing this research in context.

*Figure 1: The Cowan Diagram*
This diagram embeds reflection ‘for, in and on’ action whilst moving from prior learning through exploration and consolidation to further learning thus adopting a Schönian approach combined with the features of Kolb in a horizontal helix. This methodology is particularly reflective of the learning process in creative subjects where learning may not always go in a continuous circle but go back and forwards within the reflective loops and is indicative of the cyclical action research model developed by Kemmis (from MacIsaac, 1995) where there are four steps – plan, act, observe and reflect. This can be clearly seen in the development of the interactive poster where the piloting, informing and embedding follow the reflection ‘for, in and on’ based on prior knowledge, exploration, consolidation and further action.

Figure 2: Interactive Poster adapted from Cowan’s diagram

ePDP in art and design — issues and constraints

The long standing model of the visual journal in Art and Design led to some tensions from embedding PDP within it and in particular through using an ‘e’ approach. The clash of cultural language with a set framework of ‘plan’, ‘do’ and ‘review’ does not sit well with ideas generation in an open ended, creative, organic development through the visual journal. PDP as reflective practice has been central to learning in Art and Design for many years. Whilst often informal and often oral, once PDP was formalised through national policy, many staff resisted the top-down approach whilst failing to recognise the good practice generated by their own sector.

The ‘e’ tools previously used (WebCT and Web2.0), were also less flexible than had been anticipated for this visual environment given the lack of a relationship from the drawn image to the original university framework. This may however have been an initial problem with staff who, in some cases, did not identify with the use of the technology for this particular aspect of the student experience. On the other hand students’ perceptions, knowledge and use of e learning is primarily based in a visual context and experience in Art and Design. It is useful to note that many institutions now ask for e portfolios of work prior to interview and shortlisting for
undergraduate and postgraduate courses and it is essential that UoB students are equally prepared for future progression or employment in a highly competitive market.

It is important that for acceptance a PDP process recognises and is sensitive to the range of tacit, embodied and sensory forms of knowledge commonly situated within Art and Design.

Students, studying the selected module (Critical Studies 1) in Art and Design were consulted and were willing to engage in the project. The Interactive Poster (viewable in the PIeR online blog at: \[http://pierproject.edublogs.org/\]) describes the process using Cowans’ (2006) reflective diagram to underpin the action research approach (Kemmis, from MacIsaac, 1995).

Following the initial pilot based on student feedback and tutor findings and using an action research approach the project has engaged with, and foregrounded through a table of development activities against skills, knowledge and experience. Students were able to use the revised SAME framework to create links from within the table, to external websites, blogs and other online communication tools.

The following table (table 3 below) presents an overall view of the ePDP project in the SAME and is followed by a commentary of the different phases of the project and the process of the SAME ePDP initiative.

**Table 3: SAME ePDP Initiative**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pilot</th>
<th>Summary of ePDP pilot initiative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VLE</td>
<td>WebCT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student group</td>
<td>A&amp;D Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creative Writing</td>
<td>Education Media</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PDP Table</td>
<td>Original &amp; adjusted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key activities</td>
<td>Staff development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Student's training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Test WebCT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Table adjustment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pilots</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The first pilot was organised in the academic year 2007-2008, using the UoB VLE at the time (WebCT). Staff development was delivered for the coordinator of the pilot, who delivered the other staff and students training (2 members of staff, approximately 120 students). After 4 weeks, students and staff were surveyed to gather feedback from their initial experience of using the resource. Minor
adjustments were made based on their initial recommendations (location of displayed table, and minor navigation issues). At the end of the semester another survey was sent, and this provided evaluative feedback to inform the next stage of piloting.

60% of the comments from the end of semester feedback survey highlighted the poor flexibility and interactivity of the VLE in comparison with some other free online resources (e.g. EDUBLOG, WordPress, and alike) for those students and staff that have used such online free tools. Some students (20%) were reluctant to use ePDP/PDP, while it was validated and articulated as a separate Learning Outcome in modules. Students consider it ‘irrelevant’ since it ‘didn’t carry a mark’.

The feedback set a benchmark and challenges for the second pilot which used an Open Source VLE (Moodle), which was expected to have a more flexible, friendly interface, interactivity and ease of use. After running the second pilot (academic year 2008-2009), with 150 students, using the new UoB VLE, preliminary outcomes from a feedback survey showed that while Moodle resulted in a more flexible VLE for ePDP, cross platform and cross browser issues were still apparent particularly the compatibility with Apple Mac’s used in Art & Design (40% of AME students and staff use Apple’s platforms). Some students (35%) still complained about the usefulness of the SAME PDP table (table 2), which they found ‘restrictive and sometimes confusing’ as a tool to promote true reflection and this compared with some staff concerns about the same issues. This led to belief that both, students and staff require more holistic support for understanding and applying PDP within the school, despite the technology and a more flexible approach to the use of the existing PDP framework to cater for the diverse range of disciplines in the SAME.

The third pilot (2009–2010), involving 180 undergraduate students completed ePDP training using the newly upgraded VLE and with an extra induction on PDP concepts and importance. A feedback carried out at the end of semester 1 showed that a vast majority of students (85%) engaged with the new technology and did not miss the old paper-based PDP.

In addition, new tutors have been more open to the use of the VLE platform due to leadership in the SAME on eLearning and T&L. Combined efforts to disseminate good practice examples and collaborative support via meetings, committees, the school website and staff development events have kept ePDP on the SAME agenda. Some tutors have volunteered to get additional training and test the resource in their modules. Familiarity with the system makes it much more accessible for many tutors (a series of promotional training sessions about the new VLE and the integration of the ePDP within it, was organised for the two semesters). Tutors’ feedback (3 out of 5 qualitative comments on feedback surveys) continues to request greater flexibility in the way the work is completed (more interactive PDP table), however, current University ICT support resources limit any further development on this.

The key issues raised by the students and academic staff involved in this last piloting include:

(i) **The ePDP Form**

In all sessions the layout/structure of the ePDP form (table 2) was the subject of debate: the students found it difficult to understand and many said it was confusing, with misleading headings. In discussion the students thought it would be better if the headings were clearer and not formatted into a table,
making it more flexible, open and/or interactive. Essentially, this is largely an issue that has to be considered within the scope of what is currently available in Moodle. A new software integration is emerging (Moodle and Mahara), and the SAME eTeam is exploring the possibility of implementing ePDP using Mahara (a bespoke ePDP resource that could solve issues of interactivity, privacy and communication within the VLE) once it has been fully integrated with Moodle in the University.

(ii) **Privacy**

There was minimal feedback in relation to Moodle’s blog privacy settings: most students were happy to publish their entries and make them available to their peers (using the ‘public’ feature available in Moodle) and this was in contrast to the cohort of 2008/9 when a greater number of students were unhappy with the notion of making their thoughts public. It is believed that the extra induction on the holistic concept underpinning PDP, mentioned earlier, made them aware of the potential impact of using this facility to enhance their learning experience.

(iii) **Mature students**

The drop-in IT training sessions were mainly attended by mature students who had little or no experience of using computers. One to one sessions were arranged for a small number of individuals therefore ensuring that students who had particularly poor IT skills could complete the ePDP.

(iv) **Monitoring participation**

The students individual blogs were regularly monitored to ensure that they were complying with the assessment criteria. It is however difficult to accurately assess how individual students were progressing because a large proportion of students may have been recording information in another format in order to paste into Moodle at a later date.

(v) **Extending the ePDP**

Very few students appear to have taken the ePDP further, by for example adding text entries; external links; personal images, etc, after the end of the academic year. 30% of students commented in the feedback surveys on the editing features of Moodle being quite daunting for those unfamiliar with web based formatting.

**Strengths and opportunities for improvement in ePDP — learning from each implementation?**

In general, students’ ePDP had identified areas in which they felt the need to improve and, taking cues from the module content and assignment briefs, they articulated ways in which they could improve their own performance in terms of deeper research, better time management and checking progress with teaching staff.

These findings give insights into the impact of the teaching and learning methods used which, in this recorded instance, were designed to help visually orientated students to acquire research skills and engage with a written assignment with confidence and a degree of independence. Thus, the information obtained via this kind of qualitative response is useful, not only in evaluating the particular module in which ePDP was embedded but has also demonstrated a broader potential for ePDP in future.
Overall, the ePDP training sessions and pilots were successful; however, future continuous evaluative feedback from the module tutors and students should provide a richer measure of its success. The upgraded Moodle system made the ePDP a more efficient task, however some issues prevailed (lack of full table interactivity, flexible resources, and privacy of entries), and this is the main reason why it is imperative to carry on testing better software available, reliable, UoB supported and efficient (i.e. Mahara) to ensure quality in the teaching and learning experience in the School.

Whilst staff feedback has not been a formal part of the evaluation, anecdotal evidence from (one) staff member implementing ePDP described security as ‘too high – students can’t input without lowering security but can view existing work’.

Another member of staff had identified ePDP as an additional module evaluation tool in the way students had used ePDP as part of their learning experience:

> When considering the ePDP obtained from the level 1(HE4) discipline X students in 2009/10 ePDP appears to be effective as a means to ascertain the efficacy of the teaching and learning methods employed along with the students’ assessment of their own performance within a module and their perceptions of their learning needs. This stands in contrast to the student evaluation forms that encourage a very broad evaluative approach reliant upon judgements of the performance of the tutor rather than, as in the case of ePDP a detailed, reflective, student-centred personal response.

Staff involved in implementing ePDP reported the training for students (and staff) was largely successful and reflected in the number of staff/students who engaged with ePDP during this development period. In general, students had identified areas in which they felt the need to improve and, taking cues from the module content and assignment briefs, they articulated ways in which they could improve their own performance in terms of deeper research, better time management and checking progress with teaching staff and evidenced in their on-line PDP.

The ePDP experience to date is based on an approach to embed the ePDP system and to gain understanding across the SAME. This has demonstrated that it is possible to develop a bespoke learning experience through ePDP enabling appropriate and considered approaches to ePDP to meet the diverse needs of the SAME student population and to ensure that we are innovating within the constantly changing technologies.

There is clearly a need to understand the extent of PDP within curriculum and adapting it to continuously changing new technology. In a mixed economy school, with a rich and diverse range of subjects, the appropriateness of the approach chosen within the current inflexibility of the PDP framework (and ensuring security of the virtual space for students) are a major consideration for future and on-going implementation.

Continuing to manage this for students will be key to their collective and individual ‘buy in’. Evaluation to date has shown that ‘e’ itself is not an issue, rather the purpose of PDP within their overarching student experience of HE. Staff and students demonstrated positive engagement with the project developments and as a result demanded more from the technology at each stage.
While the PIeR project was primarily about students, staff development has occurred implicitly in the implementation and supporting of students with ePDP. While requiring students to reflect on their learning etc. through the ePDP process we could expect but not assume that staff are also reflecting critically on their learning. The transition from the UoB framework to a flexible, fit for purpose ePDP will demand a more critical and reflective approach from staff and students enabling personal ownership and identity of the outcomes.

References


SAME Learning, Teaching and Retention Plan (2007–2010)

SAME Local Strategic Plan 2007, 2008, 2009


**Biographies**

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