Piloting, Informing, Embedding and Evaluating ePDP in the School of Arts, Media and Education (SAME) - what’s next

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Abstract

This work in progress report presents on-going research of the challenge and evaluation faced during the implementation of pilot studies of an ePDP exercise in the School of Arts, Media and Education at the University of Bolton in the UK. The inclusion of personal development planning is a University requirement for all programmes and was traditionally embedded through either text based and/or visual journal approaches used in the SAME (The visual journal has and continues to be an important aspect of personal development for Art & Design students at the UoB). With the emergence of new technologies that could support the traditional PDP the school explored a more flexible approach using an open source VLE (Moodle) to implement the existing PDP framework. The experience provided the school with data to inform full implementation of ePDP through Moodle and to further explore the optimum process, infrastructure and research that was needed to support future developments across the SAME more effectively.

The culture of ePDP is slowly changing due to the greater involvement of students and staff with technology and the challenge is to ensure that the PDP concept is fully and holistically understood and embedded within the SAME and on the agreed VLE platform the university is progressing to. The research report will inform on the preliminary results of the pilot and first year of implementation.

Keywords: ePDP, VLE, Art & Design, eLearning, flexibility, pilot

Rationale and Focus

The authors are involved in on-going research of the challenge and evaluation faced during the implementation of pilot studies of an ePDP exercise in the School of Arts, Media and Education (SAME), at the University of Bolton (UoB). The inclusion of personal development planning (PDP), is a University requirement for all programmes and was traditionally embedded through a text based/visual journal approach in Art and Design. With the emergence of new technologies that could support the traditional PDP the school explored a more flexible approach using an open source VLE (Moodle) to implement the existing PDP framework. The experience provided the school with data to inform full implementation of ePDP through Moodle and to further explore the optimum process, infrastructure and research that was needed to support future developments across the SAME more effectively.

In 1997 the Dearing Report recommended the introduction of Personal Development Planning (PDP) in Higher Education (HE). HEI’s were expected to introduce ‘progress files’ which would be used to record achievement (‘progress file’) and also ‘...monitor, build and reflect upon the personal development’. As a result UK HE moved toward the development of a PDP approach for students. At the University of Bolton a framework was developed (Burkinshaw, 2005) and this resulted in a validation process to embed PDP within modules. 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. 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 but identified that the potential application of technology in student PDP (WebCT) had resulted in issues which prevented progress at that time.

The departmental structure in place at that time resulted in a range of approaches within Art & Design, Cultural and Creative Studies and Education. This approach offered a useful opportunity to see how PDP in an ‘e’ context would work across the range 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 which ranged across HE4 – 6. In Art and Design PDP was embedded within a core HE4 module (Critical...
Studies 1). Particular problems associated with the Art and Design module had arisen as a result of PDP being defined as a learning outcome but carrying no assessment weighting which students found difficult to manage. 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 recommendations from the Goodrich (2007) report state 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’. A review of PDP in the Schools and its appropriateness was recommended and thus the e PDP (PIeR) project was developed in the SAME to attempt to respond to this need.

In 2007 the three departments of Art and Design, Creative and Cultural Studies and Education became the newly formed school of Arts, Media and Education (SAME). This provided the opportunity to look at PDP within the SAME’s Teaching and Learning and e-Strategies and their aligned approaches to and embedding of blended learning. As a result it was agreed through the Teaching and Learning Committee and in conjunction with the School’s E team to develop an e-learning approach to PDP.

As indicated earlier PDP in the SAME is located differently within the subject areas. In Art and Design it is situated in a core module ‘Critical Studies 1’ which contains the development of research and study skills, within Cultural and Creative studies PDP is embedded in a range of modules representing Media Writing and Production, Creative Writing, Film and Media Studies, English and History and similarly in different modules in Education Studies thus giving the project a large enough sample, including all of the Art & Design students as a large control groups to develop, implement and evaluate the ePDP project.

ePDP in Teacher Training (TT) is not included within this research as students on those programmes use a bespoke virtual learning platform (Reflect) as an interface to record Continuing Professional Development (CPD) and achieve Qualified Teacher Learning and Skills (QTLS) status once trainees have completed the course and begun their teaching careers and as part of the trainee programme with the Institute for Learning (IfL). However, the coordinator of the ePDP in TT was involved in initial discussions on the development of the ePDP across school to share good practice and experience using a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) for PDP in the TT programme.

It was hoped that this method would help to embed an e-learning approach across the overall subject areas which would inform and support students as they moved into study at levels HE5 and 6. Whilst acknowledging the blended learning ethos the university wished to move to, another factor was ensuring that students would have the longer term capacity to understand and use on-line portfolios for future employability through developing a holistic understanding of the flexibility of an e PDP as part of portfolio building and the ability to demonstrate transferable skills within this.

Based on the University of Bolton’s PDP framework around a table of development activity against skills, knowledge and understanding (this had previously been simplified in Art and Design as students had found the text based approach insensitive to their creative practice) it was agreed that the revised table would be used by all students involved in the pilot as a basis for evaluation and to create links to external websites, blogs etc., if students wished to do this.

Tensions occurred where the tradition of the visual journal had been embedded over a long period as the e tools did not appear to offer the flexibility of the traditional ‘hand drawn’ journal. 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. It is useful to note that many institutions now ask for e portfolios of work prior to interview shortlisting for undergraduate and postgraduate courses. There is sector research, including Allen and Moss (2005) within Art, Design and Media HE that has evidenced for some time employer concerns about students lack of ability to demonstrate evidence of transferable skills, communication and understanding of networking when applying for jobs or attending interviews.

ePortfolios can optimise the ability of students to demonstrate how they match the employer’s requirements, and as such can act as an evidence base for application and interview. It can also lay foundations for Continuing Professional Development (CPD) in professional life. Allen and Moss (2005) state that “The use of an
ePortfolio to support transitions between education and the workplace” and thus it is essential that our students are equally prepared for future progression or employment through this rapidly progressing approach.

Students, studying the selected modules were willing to engage in the new platform and minor adjustments were made following the initial pilot based on their recommendations and tutor findings at the first pilot stage. The Interactive Poster (viewable in the PIeR online blog at: http://pierproject.edublogs.org/) will describe the process using Cowans’ (2006) reflective diagram to underpin the action research approach (Kemmis from MacIsaac 1995).

**Literature Review**

This project developed as a collaborative action research activity where the participants are co-researchers and is 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 need to develop the use of e learning in the SAME.

Cowan (2006, p52) 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, fig 4.5, p53) which is viewed as a key tool in managing this research in context.

![Fig 1: The Cowan Diagram](image)

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.

The Action Research Cycle (figure 2) demonstrates the systematic tackling of a problem cyclically based on Cowan (2006). In practice, things rarely go perfectly according to plan first time round, the discovering of ways to improve the action plan in light of the particular experience and feedback from the students is a key factor in moving this ePDP project forward. One cycle of planning, acting, observing and reflecting, usually leads to another, in which improvements, usually suggested by the initial cycle, are incorporated. Projects often do not fit neatly into a cycle of planning, action, observation and reflection and thus it is perfectly legitimate to follow a somewhat disjointed process if circumstances dictate.

The combination of Cowan’s experiential cycle (figure 1) and the Action Research Model (figure 2) has allowed the use of this cyclical approach as a useful method to implement a standard electronic based PDP tool that can enhance the student experience in the SAME and inform the UoB PDP frame.
Fig 2: The Action Research Cyclical Model

The combination of Cowan’s experiential cycle (figure 1) and the Action Research Cyclical Model (figure 2), allowed us to develop an approach and a useful method to implement a standard electronic based PDP tool that would enhance the student experience in the School and inform the UoB PDP framework.

Fig 3: Interactive Poster

There is a growing body of evidence around the use of ePDP and e-portfolios 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. This does not appear to have been a major concern during this project and may relate to the fact that the focus has been on ePDP rather than specific portfolio building. 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 University of Nottingham’s e Portfolio development team highlight in their early findings and recommendations that we should ‘consider how student prefer to work (eg mobile technology, web 2.0) when thinking about the best way for them to carry out ePortfolio related learning activities’ and to ‘embed e Portfolio learning activities into lesson plans and curriculum’. The latter has been a factor in the development of the project because of the existing embedding of PDP within modules in the SAME.
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'.

Key issues were identified by Drew et al (2007) on how ePDP 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 that students based in these subject areas are more positive about ePDP overall.

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 the use of web2.0 technologies can be seen as one way of sharing knowledge building and exchanging ideas.

We could ask if ePDP has got to this stage yet?, arguably it has as students link their PDP to eg social networking sites where this collaboration and interaction is happening, even if students do not recognise this as such. 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 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 key to meeting and supporting student learning needs is the 'pedagogy of planning tools'.

The Australian e Portfolio (AeP) final report (2008) references the four principal JISC purposes of ePortfolios and the link for the PIeR project lies 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.

This research report highlighted the potential value of ePortfolios for academic staff (p43) with similar aims to the JISC principle above. While the PIeR project was primarily about students, staff development has, we would argue, 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.

While the PIeR research is predicated on the requirement that students undertake PDP much of the literature and projects are based around portfolios and we must distinguish here that ePDP could also be defined as part of a broader ePortfolio in any future development. Barrett (2008) distinguishes 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)

Both of these 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. The understanding of what can constitute an ePortfolio is similarly described in the national audit of the AeP (p71) 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.

**Methodology**

Using the action research principles, the project has engaged with and based on the University of Bolton’s PDP framework which is foregrounded through a table of development activity against skills, knowledge and experience (table 1). Students were able to use the revised framework to create links to external websites, blogs, and eResources, from within the table.
Tensions occurred where the tradition of the visual journal had been embedded over a long period of time as the interactive tools did not appear to offer the flexibility of the traditional ‘hand drawn’ journal. Consequently, the main obstacle in the visual art subjects was to face the challenge of trying to adapt emerging technologies to their specific needs for PDP within specific modules. Some academic staff were specially reluctant at first to use technology to substitute the historically ‘hand-drawn’ journal. These member of staff, in some cases, clearly did not identify with the use of any technology in this particular aspect of the student experience. As mentioned before, it is becoming more common for institutions and industry to ask for e portfolios of work prior to interview and it is essential that our students are equally well prepared.

The SAME PDP Table
(adapted from the University of Bolton PDP framework 2005)

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

Table 1

The first pilot was organised in the academic year 2008-2009, using the UoB VLE at the time: WebCT. After 4 weeks, students and staff were surveyed to gather feedback from their initial experience of using the online resource. Minor adjustments were made based on their initial recommendations. At the end of the semester another survey was sent, and this provided evaluative feedback to inform the next stage of piloting. By this time, the UoB was introducing a new test-bed VLE (Moodle).

The majority of the comments highlighted the poor flexibility and interactivity of the VLE resource in comparison with some other free online resources (e.g. EDUBLOG, WordPress, etc) that have been used in parallel by some students and staff to complement their paper-based PDP. Some students were reluctant to use ePDP/PDP as, while it was validated in modules and articulated as a separate Learning Outcome which from the student point of view, “didn’t carry a mark”. The feedback set a benchmark and challenges for the second pilot which used the UoB newly tested Open Source VLE (Moodle), which was expected to have a more flexible, friendly interface, interactivity and ease of use, while recognising that this was supported with limitations.

After running this second pilot using the new UoB VLE, preliminary outcomes 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 the Apple platform). Some students still complained about the usefulness of the SAME PDP table (table 1), 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.
Implementation of epdp for Art & Design students 2008/2009

Due to the strong paper-based nature of the Art & Design students’ journal, a selected 180 (approximately) undergraduate students completed epdp training which was implemented in two distinct phases:

- Students were introduced early in the semester the ePDP by Students attending and saying demonstrations of the epdp system in HE4 Critical Studies sessions (weeks 1-6) of the BA (Hons) programmes: Graphic Design, Animation and Illustration, Fine Art, Photography, Textiles, Interior Design. Art and Design.
- Staff conducted drop in sessions each Tuesday afternoon from week 7 of semester 1 to offer support and more individual help in using Moodle.

The first stage of the implementation did not evidence major issues with the use of technology. A feedback carried out at the end of the semester showed that a vast majority of students engaged with the technology and the transition between paper-based to electronic based was achieved without many problems. The “summative” ePDP table they needed to complete, was adjusted to the technology (making it simpler to complete). Students understood the basic “copy-paste” of information they needed to complete on the table, although it was soon apparent that most students expected more interactivity from the eResource, which was limited by the VLE (WebCT and later a test with Moodle platform).

Analysis/Feedback – 2009/2010

This academic year (2009-2010) roll out was much smoother due to less technical issues (the full implementation of the new VLE in the university – Moodle-supported this), local issues that arose were addressed.

In addition, tutors have been more open to the use of it. Familiarity with the system makes it much more accessible for many tutors (a programme of training sessions about the new VLE and ePDP were organised for the two semesters). Tutors’ feedback continues to request greater flexibility in the way the work is completed, and this continues to be a challenge for the School due to the variety and richness of the approaches (Art & Design, Cultural and Creative Studies and Education), all with different practices and needs. Some believe the table is still restrictive and confusing in part.

Throughout all sessions, the Moodle system has run smoothly; this allowed for trouble free demonstrations to students of 45 mins to 1 hour in duration.

The key issues raised by the students included:

(i) **Privacy**
There was minimal feedback in relation to Moodle’s blog privacy settings: most students were happy to publish their entries as public 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. This feature has become an essential part of any ePortfolio in order to move to into a more flexible tool for future progression or employment opportunities (the ability to allow external access to some or all ePortfolio content).

(ii) **Mature Students**
The drop-in 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.

(iii) **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.

(iv) **Extending the epdp**
Very few students appear to have taken the epdp further: adding text entries; external links; personal images, etc. This is almost certainly due to the editing features of Moodle being quite
daunting for those unfamiliar with web based formatting. An advanced user testified that whilst the formatting tools are similar to those of MS Word it is not as intuitive particularly when working in tables, or creating additional blogs.

(v) The epdp Form
In all sessions the layout/structure of the epdp form was the subject of debate: the students found it difficult to understand and many said it was confusing. 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 (the new upgraded version is currently being tested in the UoB) and for next academic year it would be prudent to have a debate over how this format could be changed with the new Moodle or the use of a new software that could be integrated within Moodle.

Overall evaluation
Overall, the epdp training sessions were successful; however, future evaluative feedback from the module tutors should provide a richer measure of its success. The Moodle system which is in the process of being upgraded, should make the implementation of future ePDP a more efficient task.

Whilst staff feedback has not 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’.

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.

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.

While completing the 2009-2010 piloting project, an alternative ePDP software development has been identified by the project team, and potential integration with this bespoke ePDP software with the UoB VLE seems to be a more appropriate solution for the SAME ePDP approach and will further inform and support the UoB ePDP implementation across schools.

Conclusion/Recommendations
While the ePDP experience to date is based on an approach to gain understanding across the SAME, the opportunity to develop a bespoke learning experience through ePDP is possible, thus 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.

A key question to be addressed for future implementation is to ask - is PDP misleading – rather is it life-long learning? 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.
Managing 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.

The authors believe that the next, natural step of this research will have a dual purpose: to test a new tool (integration of a new bespoke ePDP software and the UoB VLE) along with a comprehensive staff development program to ensure that all SAME staff have a full grasp of the UoB purpose of PDP to enhance its student learning experience.

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