Introduction

The Dearing Report (1997) 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 (2007) and more recently to Faculties (2011). This recent change has offered the opportunity to progress with the development, within the newly formed Faculty of Arts and Media Technologies (AMT), of an ePDP approach in line with its eStrategy plans. 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.

This review reports on an ongoing project that aims to facilitate and accommodate an institutional framework with particular attention to the Art & Design subject area. This discipline choice 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 AMT disciplines, and to inform other University faculties.

Progression

Based on the University of Bolton’s generic PDP framework around a table of development activity against skills, knowledge and understanding (Table 1), this was simplified in Art and Design as students had found the text based approach less than helpful to their creative practice.

Further discussion with other departments within the faculty disciplines in the then School of Arts, Media and Education (SAME), progressed to an agreement on a ‘revised PDP table’ (Table 2) that 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.

**Table 1. UoB PDP Framework 2005**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LEVELS (<em>) (</em>**)</th>
<th>HE 1</th>
<th>HE 2</th>
<th>HE 3</th>
<th>HE 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Compile a record</td>
<td>Select and justify evidence</td>
<td>Evaluate appropriateness of materials</td>
<td>Make informed judgements</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identify own strengths</td>
<td>Evaluate own strengths &amp; weaknesses (from evidence)</td>
<td>Evaluate own strengths &amp; weaknesses (from evidence, career plans and work)</td>
<td>Evaluate factors</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflect of effectiveness</td>
<td>Reflect on and review effectiveness</td>
<td>Reflect on and appraise</td>
<td>Reflect on, and during own performance, appraise</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identify own needs</td>
<td>Review and prioritise</td>
<td>Evaluate own effectiveness. Set targets</td>
<td>Evaluate own effectiveness. Revise targets</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plan action</td>
<td>Review action plans</td>
<td>Evaluate the effectiveness</td>
<td>Evaluate the effectiveness and implement</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

**Table 2. 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>
</tbody>
</table>
**Research foundations**

In order to support a further development of the PDP within the Faculty, a project was developed (PIeR project) 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 AME to develop the use of e-learning more widely in the school.

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) shown below (Figure diagram 1), 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 Schōnian 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.
PDP in Art and Design – Issues and Constraints: Is technology the answer?

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 Free Cloud Technologies), 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 short-listing 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/](http://pierproject.edublogs.org/)) describes the process using Cowans’ (2006) reflective diagram to underpin our 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 table 3 presents an overall view of the ePDP project in the SAME and is followed by a commentary of the different phases of the project of the process of the 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>Student group</td>
<td>Moodle (upgrade)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PDP Table</td>
<td>Original &amp; adjusted table</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key activities</td>
<td>- Staff development - Student's training - Test WebCT - Table adjustment - Pilots - Usability and accessibility Adjustments</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

After a number of pilot runs, the following key issues were raised by the students and academic staff involved in the trials:

(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 emerged (Moodle and Mahara), and the AMT eTeam has started piloting the use of Mahara (a bespoke ePDP resource that could solve issues of interactivity, privacy, portability and communication within the VLE).

(ii) Privacy
There was minimal feedback in relation to Moodle's blog privacy settings on the 2010/11 pilot: most students were happy to publish their entries and make them available to their peers (using the “public” feature) and this was in contrast to the cohort of 2008/9 and 2009/10 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.

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.

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The PIeR project (http://pierproject.edublogs.org/)

SAME Learning, Teaching and Retention Plan (2007 - 2011)

SAME Local Strategic Plans: 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010 (AMT strategic plan was under development when this paper was produced). These plans included the ‘e’-Strategy for the school.


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