PebblePad

CASE STUDY

Knowledge serves us all: Integrative eportfolio practice at Portland State University

Vicki Reitenauer, Rowanna Carpenter & Annie Knepler, Portland State University, US

STORIES OF INNOVATION TOLD BY THOSE CHARTING NEW COURSES IN LEARNING, TEACHING AND ASSESSMENT.

THE CONTEXT

University Studies, Portland State University's (PSU) signature interdisciplinary general education program, spans all four years of the undergraduate experience and combines several high-impact practices (common educational experiences, first-year seminars and experiences, service learning, learning communities, writing-intensive courses, and eportfolios). In the 2017 and 2018 academic years, the Program endeavored to distill its particular pedagogical "brand" into a vision and mission statement, something that had not been done at any point in the Program's 25-year history. Through a multi-faceted, inclusive process, Program stakeholders agreed to adopt the following statements:

University Studies Vision

Challenging us to think holistically, care deeply, and engage courageously in imagining and co-creating a just world.

University Studies Mission

Our inclusive, interdisciplinary, and inquiry-based pedagogy

- provokes students to build self-efficacy through relational learning across difference.
- encourages a community of educators to practice engaged teaching for transformative learning.
- advances civic engagement, reflective practice, and the scholarship of teaching and learning.

The adoption of these statements has allowed and inspired Program constituents to investigate ways to both expand and deepen engagement among students, faculty, and administrators, and to advance and capture that engagement through the use of eportfolios.

THE OPPORTUNITY

We see our orientation to this case study (and the on-the-ground work which gave rise to it) to be about capitalizing on opportunity, rather than addressing a problem. With this refreshed articulation of the Program's vision and mission, faculty and administrators recognized an opportunity to explore and expand the practice of critical reflection through the use of eportfolios among the Program's constituents.

Since the adoption of PebblePad as PSU's official eportfolio platform, University Studies has been the institutional unit to use the platform in the most consistent and sustainable way. Since the founding of the Program in 1994, students in the year-long Freshman Inquiry (FRINQ) have produced portfolios as evidence of their engagement in this course, and these portfolios have been foundational to both integrative student learning and programmatic assessment ever since. The vast majority of FRINQ students now produce their portfolios through the use of PebblePad, and faculty, administrators and graduate students from across the University engage with PebblePad during end-of-year assessment processes. Given the renewed focus on the Program's vision and mission, with its emphasis on the practice of critical reflection across constituencies, we realized that we could advance portfolio thinking and integrative learning not just with, for, and among our students, but with, for, and among faculty and administrators, as well.

THE APPROACH

PebblePad in FRINQ courses

University Studies implemented the use of portfolios when the program was founded in 1994 to help students gather their work and share it with a broader audience. In 2000, the program began to adopt the use of electronic portfolios (eportolios), making it easier for students to track and share their work. PSU's adoption of PebblePad in 2015 allowed for a unified platform that students could use for their eportfolios and provided better systems for tracking student work. Furthermore, it also helped us to address the issues of privacy and sustainable access, two issues of concern for both faculty and students. When students use free website platforms, they have little control over who can access their site. PebblePad, on the other hand, allows students to determine how their work is shared and with whom. PebblePad also allows students to access the work they do on the platform after they graduate. Imagine putting several hours into developing materials only to lose them after you leave an institution. As we document below, the adoption of PebblePad has also provided us with new opportunities and more robust tools for assessment.

At this point in the University Studies program, students' use of PebblePad is most consistent at the FRINQ level. FRINQ is a theme-based, year long seminar where learning is scaffolded and framed around four key goals: Inquiry and Critical Thinking; Communication; Diversity, Equity, and Social Justice; and

Ethics, Agency and Community. These goals help shape the specific objectives and assignments of the course and provide students with language that helps them analyze their own learning. All FRINQ students create an eportfolio which they develop throughout the year.

Though FRINQ eportfolio assignments vary slightly, the standard assignment includes some version of the following:

- A homepage that engages the audience and introduces readers/viewers to the student's interests and goals.
- A page for each University Studies goal (4 pages total). On these pages, students introduce the goal and articulate their own understanding of the goal. Their interpretation of the goal should include specific examples from their experience in the FRINQ and beyond, and they also include at least one specific assignment from the FRINQ that they feel represents that goal. In some classes, students are also encouraged to include assignments from other classes that may relate to the goal, allowing them to connect their experience in FRINQ to their other coursework.
- A final reflection for each term where students consider what they learned and how they might apply it. As first-year students they might also reflect on the college experience as a whole, helping them to think through the transition to a new place.

FRINQ students generally develop the eportfolio throughout the year, writing a reflection on one or two goals each term and developing a reflection in response to slightly different prompts each term. This scaffolded approach allows faculty to provide feedback throughout the year and helps students build on their thoughts about their own learning. One benefit of PebblePad is that students can submit their eportfolio once at the beginning of the year and faculty can see the updates as students add and make changes to their eportfolio.

PebblePad and assessment

From a technical standpoint, the campus-wide adoption of PebblePad solved some ongoing assessment challenges. Previously, our FRINQ courses used a range of tools such as Google sites, Wix, or Weebly to develop eportfolios, which led to challenges of access to materials, privacy, and navigation during the assessment process. Since adopting PebblePad, 85% of our FRINQ portfolios are constructed using the tool, and almost all faculty use ATLAS to collect portfolios, greatly streamlining our assessment processes.

More importantly, our portfolios provide the basis for an assessment process that is grounded in our students' work and based on our approach of treating assessment and faculty support as integrally connected. We select a sample of portfolios to review at the end of the year and invite a wide range of faculty, academic advisers, librarians, and graduate students to participate in our review. Some faculty teach FRINQ, but many do not. We intentionally gather everyone together on one or two days to participate in the review. We discuss our understanding of the focus goal and the rubric, spend most of the day reviewing portfolios, and then reconvene to discuss observations of the process and the portfolios. Faculty find the opportunity to see into other courses invigorating and inspiring. Many take notes along the way and leave with ideas for new assignments and readings. A year-long interdisciplinary inquiry-based course which incorporates group learning and community-based experiences, and weaves

together the humanities, sciences, social science, and writing, FRINQ is dynamic and can be difficult to describe. All participants report that the portfolios bring to life, in a small way, the experience of a FRINQ course, which can be hard to comprehend from the outside. This is particularly useful for academic advisers, librarians, and others who work with FRINQ students but don't experience FRINQ themselves. As we adopted PebblePad at the FRINQ level, opportunities to use it at other levels of our program have emerged. We review course portfolios to assess sophomore and senior courses and have successfully deployed PebblePad templates to collect faculty reflection and course materials to support that review.

<u>Faculty Support</u>

In the 2018 academic year, University Studies sponsored a faculty support program called "Cultivating Your Professional Identity" (CYPI) to offer faculty across departments and ranks an opportunity to develop their identities and aspirations in community with each other. Faculty met throughout the academic year in formal group gatherings and in informal "buddy" check-ins, pursued their individually chosen faculty development plan, and created a professional eportfolio reflective of their professional identities. At the end of the academic year, faculty presented their eportfolios to their colleagues in a celebratory gathering. Many continue to keep up with their eportfolio, and now use PebblePad as the platform for their promotion and annual review files.

THE RESULTS

<u>Students/FRINQ</u>

The use of eportfolios supports student learning in a number of ways, though not all are specific to the adoption of PebblePad. The use of eportfolios encourages students to reflect on their learning, developing their metacognitive skills and encouraging them to consider not only what they've learned but how they learn. As the University Studies mission states, we want to encourage self-efficacy and agency in students, qualities that involve learning how to learn rather than just the specific learning of content. ePortfolios also help students consider issues of audience and purpose. Students are asked to develop their eportfolio for a general audience that is interested in their work. In developing the eportfolio students consider what this audience needs to know about course materials, assignments, and activities that may not be obvious to someone outside of the class.

One of the less recognized and perhaps undervalued aspects of the eportfolio is the role it plays in prompting important memories and stories, and for this purpose PebblePad has been particularly helpful. Students and faculty can return to an eportfolio as they prepare for new experiences (e.g., jobs, internships, or graduate school) or write cover letters or recommendations. As faculty, we hear from students who later see the purpose of their eportfolios, and we are able to use the eportfolio when writing references for students. Students can store their materials in PebblePad, returning to them, redesigning, and sharing them as needed, and the ATLAS tool makes it possible for faculty to find, track, and revisit students' work. This tool would be even more valuable if students were encouraged to revisit and revise their eportfolios throughout their studies at PSU.

<u>PebblePad assessment</u>

The adoption of PebblePad as the campus-wide eportfolio platform has helped streamline the administration of University Studies' assessment processes, leaving more time to focus on the important tasks of analyzing, interpreting, and using assessment data and results. A PebblePad administrator is easily able to manage the selection of our sample of portfolios and collect them into an assessment workspace in ATLAS. The ability to copy a portfolio into the assessment workspace has allowed the Program to develop an assessment archive without compromising our faculty's ability to access their students' portfolios. Portfolio reviewers can be added to the assessment workspace and then have seamless access to the portfolios they need to read.

<u>Faculty Support</u>

Faculty engaged in CYPI reported impactful learning and growth related to their personal, professional and scholarly lives. Through end-of-term written reflections and one-to-one interviews at the end of the program, participants identified the deep value of relating formally and informally with their colleagues in a variety of formats and settings, noting that these created a context for clarifying their professional aspirations, setting a course for future achievements, and communicating their accomplishments through the eportfolio. In particular, self-authorship through the development of eportfolio content, and the support they received for that from colleagues, allowed for professional breakthroughs (including first-time scholarly publications and conference presentations) for several participants.

LESSONS LEARNT

<u>Students</u>

As with any coursework, students need to understand the purpose and objective of the eportfolio assignment, as well as the possibilities for PebblePad as a tool. Students, particularly those who are in their first year of college, may not recognize the importance of documenting, synthesizing, and reflecting on their work. Over time, we have learned the importance of explaining to students how and why their eportfolio, and the materials they keep in PebblePad, could be relevant. We know that metacognitive reflection leads to deeper knowledge and helps students make connections. Furthermore, having access to stories and examples of everything from group projects to research essays can serve as important reminders as they apply for internships or jobs. We often tell our students that they will likely be asked at some point to describe a time that they have collaborated with others and what they learned from it. If they don't write it down and reflect on it soon after the experience, the details will likely become vague and harder to access.

In regard to barriers, students face some challenges when it comes to designing eportfolios in PebblePad and understanding how to access certain functions. Many students don't find it to be intuitive or similar to technology or platforms they have used in the past. Over time, we have developed templates and examples to help students learn the basics, and many students have used their own skills to invent new possibilities for adapting the design to suit their needs, but some users still feel like the tools are confusing or limiting in some ways.

PebblePad and assessment

In order for assessment to go smoothly, it is important that faculty understand the process early on. Although the University Studies' assessment day happens after the academic year is over, faculty can begin collecting eportfolios via ATLAS in the beginning of the academic year. Communicating the value of ATLAS and the assessment process early allows time for faculty to learn to use the tools and for the Director of Assessment to troubleshoot any misunderstandings or technical issues well before the assessment process gets underway.

Faculty Support

While faculty experienced deep meaning and value in their engagement with each other in CYPI, many also identified challenges in understanding how to most effectively deploy technology to tell their professional story and in simply using the technology. The facilitation team for the CYPI series underestimated the needs of participating faculty for hands-on mentoring and support for their eportfolio development, including among those faculty who advance eportfolio use with their own students. While we created voluntary ad hoc workshops for faculty to actively build their eportfolios in community with each other and one of the facilitators, we will embed skill-building in future program offerings.

IN BRIEF

- We overestimate participants' skills in using technology at our peril. While many faculty assume that their students arrive in their learning spaces with aptitude for working across multiple platforms, we have experienced tremendous diversity in levels of skill, interest, and resilience relative to the use of technology. This has been mirrored among faculty and administrator participants as well. The lack of resilience in addressing technical challenges creates a real roadblock for eportfolio makers across skill-level differences.
- Integrative learning, including that which is advanced through portfolio thinking and development, is relational learning. To meaningfully advance whole-person learning and growth, what is perceived to be distinct and discrete must be put in conversation, reflected on, and seen anew. When individuals can engage in this sort of intrapersonal integrative work while also being in relationship with each other, the power of that learning exponentially grows.
- It is essential that faculty and students see the purposes and possibilities for eportfolios and the other integrated tools that PebblePad provides. As we move forward, we could provide more resources to help faculty articulate these purposes and possibilities so that they can recognize them for themselves and better articulate them to students.

REFERENCES

Carpenter, R.L., Knepler, A., & Reitenauer, V.L. (In press). Cultivating your professional identity: Supporting faculty professional development across rank and discipline. *Peer Review*.

Reitenauer, V.L., & Carpenter, R.L. (2018). Assessment as critical programmatic reflection. *The Journal of General Education 67*(3), 226-245. https://www.muse.jhu.edu/article/742718

University Studies Assessment Reports. (n.d.). Retrieved from https://www.pdx.edu/unst/university-studies-assessment-reports

This Case Study is from PebblePad's 2020 *'Charting New Courses in Learning and Teaching'* conference.
To download all of the Case Studies from this event, head to https://hubs.ly/H0rFypx0

AN EXPERT TEAM

YOU CAN DEPEND ON

GET IN TOUCH

There are an awful lot of things that make PebblePad unique. Not least the fact that it's a platform designed by educators for educators. Indeed, the PebblePad team is bursting to the seams with innovators and practitioners, all of whom learnt their craft in teaching roles. If you want to talk to a team who really understands your world, get in touch.

PebblePad HQ (UK)

01952 288 300

PebblePad North America

(864) 650 5406

PebblePad Australasia

0400 899 820

✉ hello@pebblepad.com

🐦 https://twitter.com/PebblePad

in https://www.linkedin.com/company/pebblepad