PebblePad

CASE STUDY

"I know what I know now": Showcase portfolios in a graduate adult learning program

Dr Candyce Reynolds, Portland State University, US

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

THE CONTEXT

This case study takes place in a master's program in Adult Learning. This is a professional program in a college of education aimed at preparing professionals to work with adults in a variety of educational settings – higher education, corporate training and development, and community organizations. Many of our students are already practicing professionals and return to this program to expand their skills and thus their future opportunities.

THE PROBLEM

In a relatively condensed master's program (1½ years), students learn a lot in a short period. The program is centred on preparing students to be able to integrate the learning from their program courses and practicum experiences to deliver high-quality educational services in the future. Integrative learning has been noted as one of sixteen essential learning outcomes of higher education (AACU, 2008). Integrative learning refers to an individual's ability to apply knowledge and skills one has learned across time, context and with intention. Employers have criticized higher education for the difficulty that many graduates have in integrating and applying what they have learned in a program to the real problems in our community. In today's complex societies, one needs to be able to access and apply all that one has learned.

The program has defined learning outcomes and the faculty have taken special care to incorporate these outcomes in the course as well as the assignments so that students can demonstrate these outcomes at the end of their program and to employers. In spite of our best efforts, however, students can leave the program having difficulty articulating what they have learned in the program. This can have serious consequences for students as they look for work. They can say they have finished a degree but they cannot easily describe how this learning can be applied in a variety of workplace settings. In addition, it concerns us that our community may not benefit from the educational experiences our students possess.

We would like students to leave our program with the knowledge and skills that they have developed in our courses but to also be able to articulate them clearly. The process of developing this understanding will prepare them for the future but also serve as an opportunity to expand their work as reflective practitioners.

THE APPROACH

At the close of the program, students have always had to demonstrate their understanding of the learning outcomes from their studies. In the past, this has taken the form of a long reflective essay explaining their learning as well as a culminating theory-to-practice paper. PebblePad is now used as an eportfolio platform aimed at the following outcomes:

1. To help students reflect on their learning in the program, specifically what they have learned regarding the program learning outcomes.
2. To allow students to demonstrate their learning through sharing authentic representations of their learning (e.g., academic papers, presentations, etc.).
3. To provide a forum to integrate their learning through the development of their Guiding Principles for adult education.
4. To provide a repository for their theory-to-practice paper.

The eportfolio is developed during an end of program course. Students are encouraged to make the portfolio their own, designing the layout and providing visual and audio representations of their learning. Students are provided with a template that they can complete through guided reflection activities.

As an example, students are asked to reflect on a memorable learning experience they have had in the program and then map that learning experience onto the program's specified learning outcomes. Students then review the work they have produced in the courses and fieldwork to demonstrate their learning in the six program learning outcomes. Students provide both a reflection statement about what they have learned and how, as well as a piece of their work that demonstrates this learning.

For the guiding principles statement placed in their eportfolio, students are led through a series of reflective discussions and prompts to develop a concrete statement about what they believe about education, their strengths, and how their education has contributed to these principles. This integrative statement serves as the introduction to the eportfolio.

The eportfolio is considered a showcase of their work in the program. It serves as a tool for students to be able to reflect on their learning at the end of their academic program. It also serves as an assessment tool for the program. Faculty can review the eportfolios to determine if, how and where students have learned the content and skills that we have determined are important in our program. This program assessment has led to program changes and improvements.

THE RESULTS

As the title of this case study reflects, the biggest outcome is that students leave the program reporting that "I know what I know now." Our students consistently report on their exit surveys from the program that the eportfolio experience allowed them the time and space to understand and articulate their learning better. Students have described the process of preparing and writing their reflections for the program learning outcomes as an opportunity to practice interview questions when they have applied for a job.

In using the eportfolio for program review and assessment, the faculty has been able to understand where we need to improve. For example, the aggregate scores on one of our learning outcomes, Written Communication, went down over time. We used this data to facilitate a discussion amongst ourselves and develop new assignments that worked to improve student's understanding of what was expected of their writing and thus facilitated the improvement of their writing and the subsequent scores in our eportfolio rubric.

LESSONS LEARNT

No one likes change. Moving from a paper version of our final culminating project, to an eportfolio built using free software, to using the PebblePad platform was difficult for students and faculty. Coping and managing change were probably the largest barrier in this process. However, preparing a logical, easy to follow template, as well as a well-constructed rubric for both faculty and students, made the transition somewhat smoother. One other thing that we have learned from students is that they want to be using

the processes we share during the creation of the eportfolio before they need to create it at the end of their program. Students have insisted that they want to be doing the kind of reflection asked for in their eportfolios throughout the program rather than just at the end of their programs. As a faculty, we have begun to create PebblePad workbooks to facilitate this learning. This should help students be better prepared to reflect, gather their resources, and curate their work at the end of the program. In addition, they can build their integrative learning skills as they go.

IN BRIEF

- An essential learning outcome of an academic program should be integrative and applied learning. For this to happen, students need to be given the opportunity to reflect and integrate the learning they have done in the program. A culminating showcase portfolio is one way to do this.
- Guided reflection activities are helpful to students in building a showcase portfolio.
- Showcase portfolios provide authentic representations of students' learning which can facilitate faculty program review and assessment. They can be useful in pointing out areas for program improvement.

REFERENCES

AACU (Association of American Colleges and Universities (2008) *College learning for the new global century*. Washington, DC: AACU

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

𝕏 https://twitter.com/PebblePad

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