PebblePad

CASE STUDY

Implementing ATLAS to facilitate the double-blind marking of dissertations at the School of Divinity

Mate Varadi & Robert Chmielewski, University of Edinburgh, UK

PEBBLEPAD CASE STUDIES

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

THE CONTEXT

PebblePad is promoted and supported as part of the University of Edinburgh's Information Services (IS) service catalogue. In this context it was used at the School of Divinity which, in addition to the IS support, is also supported locally by an in-house learning technologist.

When it comes to facilitating the online marking of submissions, PebblePad is promoted at the University of Edinburgh alongside other solutions such as Blackboard Learn and Turnitin. During the last few years, a very large number of the University of Edinburgh courses have moved their assessment exercises from paper-based to online. For example, at the College of Arts, Humanities & Social Sciences most courses require their students to submit coursework and receive their feedback online. This has recently been expanded to include the marking of dissertations. However, mainstream VLEs and many other online tools are not designed to facilitate our double-blind marking workflow requirement for dissertation marking [1]. For this reason, the School of Divinity had been exempted from introducing electronic marking of dissertations.

However, the situation changed significantly in 2018 when the school was exposed to ATLAS as a potential solution which could support complex marking workflows [2]. This was followed by a series of meetings with the Head of Teaching to look at the specific requirements and align them with realistic timelines. As a result of these consultations, a prototype of the marking workflow was presented to, and later approved by, the School of Divinity's Board of Studies. The next natural step was to pilot the newly approved solution as part of a real-life Under-Graduate (UG) dissertation marking scenario, followed by the Post-Graduate (PG) one.

THE PROBLEM

The main aim of the project was to meet the challenge of introducing the system level change around the UG dissertation marking at the School of Divinity whilst ensuring that this change neither jeopardised the quality and value of the assessment and feedback nor created more/unnecessary work for the admin team. From the markers' perspective a straight-forward and intuitive platform was desirable, assuming such a platform was customisable enough to meet the marking requirements.

The project was formally overseen by the College Chief Information Officer and gained the support of the Professional Services as well as the school management. As mentioned before, the main driver for change was the College policy which requires the double-blind marking of dissertations. From a sustainability point of view, the electronic submission of dissertations and electronic release of results is now also mandatory.

The main outcome of the project would manifest itself two-fold. First, as a smooth transition experience from paper to digital for all the involved parties (students/markers/admins) throughout the 2018/2019 academic year. Secondly, as a welcome and established new way of conducting any future dissertation marking at the School.

Our main targets were:

- Providing the students with an easy way for submitting work and retrieving feedback.
- Ensuring staff engagement - this involved building on the expertise and opinion of academic colleagues who were also assigned crucial roles. We hoped that this distributed approach to change management, along with a bottom-up approach and involvement of stakeholders, would result in better buy-in and smoother transition.
- Creating a simple to use workflow with detailed documentation for the admin and academic colleagues as well as for the students
- Developing a workflow that supports both the initial marking stage and the reconciliation.
- Making sure that the new tool eases the administrative burden of the Student Services staff by eliminating the need for managing printed documents, whilst providing them with online tools for managing assignments, the markers, and tracking changes.
- Overcoming the professional culture clash and potential resistance where any complex online solutions, which require lots of initial time/effort, are traditionally less welcomed by the users.

THE APPROACH

The ATLAS-based double-blind marking workflow which we designed works on the basis that there are two separate workspaces (for submission and for the reconciliation of feedback). Using this method, both workspaces are almost identical apart from differences in the ATLAS Manager permissions settings. The submissions are manually moved from the first to the second workspace once the feedback is ready to be reconciled. This is because the markers need to be able to switch from the "blind" mode to the more open reconciliation mode where they are allowed to see each other's initial feedback comments. The columns in ATLAS feature a set of the 'feedback completed' icons which are used by the admin staff to judge when the files can be moved between the two workspaces. It is also possible to run the feedback reports to ensure that each of the markers have completed all the fields in their feedback templates. It is worth noting that the origins of this approach to facilitating double-blind marking in ATLAS can be traced back to our colleague Graeme Ferris who has successfully used a similar design at our Business School since 2015.

When introducing this concept to the School of Divinity colleagues, we began with a series of meetings during which ATLAS was looked at in detail by the Director of Undergraduate Studies in order to confront the two-workspace workflow with all the possible formal marking requirements. Throughout these meetings we studied the current paper-based procedure, including the marking templates. An "assessment champion" was identified with whom we did most of this work and who regularly reported back to the rest of their academic colleagues. This was especially helpful given the fact that the Board of Studies (which needed to be kept in the loop and needed to approve the project) only meets a few times a year. Using our model of communication, which also included other consultations, small workshops and the user testing sessions with academic colleagues (and later the Board of Studies), we fine-tuned the product and developed the support materials. The main stumbling block turned out to be the way in which the initial feedback and grade is recorded and released. Normally, we would expect the initial feedback and grade to be kept hidden (whilst attached to an Approvals response in ATLAS). The Board preferred for this to be partially released to the students. This meant that in ATLAS the initial feedback comments had to be saved as Feedback Comments whilst the initial grade was saved using the Approval tools (not to be released later to students).

Our preparatory work also included sessions with the school's admin staff in order to introduce them to the set-up, the way in which students were going to be linked with their markers (using the Sets tool), the different roles in ATLAS, and the overall workflow including troubleshooting.

Before the marking began, we hosted an "online dissertation marking launch" event and a few drop-in sessions (including one to one support meetings). Continuous support was provided to both admin and academic colleagues throughout the duration of the pilot. This was all underpinned by an intranet site which contained a list of the known issues and FAQs.

The following is a list of the core ATLAS activities which helped us prepare for the launch of the pilot:
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  • Generating a direct PebblePad link for students to submit dissertations (whilst informing them how to obtain the feedback).
  • Setting up two different workspaces to cater for 1st marking and reconciliation.

- Distributing the different roles for markers, admin, Academic Misconduct Officer and external examiners.
- Converting paper-based forms into PebblePad templates.
- Establishing how to generate/use the feedback template reports when downloaded as csv files in order to:
  - » track marker's progress.
  - » check whether feedback comments and approvals were used appropriately.
  - » check if all forms and comment spaces were completed.
- Understanding how and when to enable the Turnitin plugin to check for similarity scores.
- Setting up the Assignment deadlines and other related settings.

THE RESULTS

All 66 submissions intended to be processed via ATLAS were successfully marked with the feedback reaching the students seamlessly and on time. During the submission, marking, and the feedback release periods the system did not experience any technical issues, or outages, and remained fully functional with no reports of unexpected behaviour. We also received very few emails from students, which confirmed our initial assumption that the new process was very student friendly.

Another welcome outcome was the work we put into converting the marking templates into PebblePad templates which resulted in an internal feedback template review exercise at the Board of Studies level. This meant that the early ATLAS workflow prototypes had to be re-adjusted to match the new model. The change meant that the initial tutor feedback was going to be released alongside the reconciled feedback.

Whilst receiving a very small number of support calls from staff members during the marking stage, we were told by the school's admin office that the overall impression of the new setup was positive. Moreover, the project produced a collection of detailed step-by-step support materials designed for all the three main audiences.

The successful pilot paved the way for the PG dissertation marking to be carried out in ATLAS.

In short, our pilot established ATLAS as a suitable platform and a vehicle for the online double-blind marking of dissertations at the School of Divinity.

LESSONS LEARNT

Engaging markers and the admin staff at the beginning of the process and highlighting all of the steps of the workflow with clear justification for the proposed change is crucial. Even then, there will always be some resistant tutors who find it hard to break away from the traditional way of conducting marking. A series of open support sessions where such colleagues were encouraged to voice their concerns was used here to amend and enhance our final design. This meant that the markers' voices were being heard during the change process and thus reduced the amount of resistance to this change.

When deploying any online tool on a live basis for the first time, the work of all involved needs to be monitored continuously. Despite the assumption that the guidance provided was straight forward and simple, simple mistakes can still be made, e.g. using a feedback template intended only for the internal use as an external one, missing a rubric cell, or not clicking on all the save buttons.

As mentioned before, the successful UG dissertation pilot ensured that we were ready to move onto the PG dissertation marking area which was going to be based on the same ATLAS workflow. However, this time the internal feedback was recorded using Approvals (for it to remain unreleased). Our support effort was based on the assumption that after the UG marking pilot the markers were already very familiar with the ATLAS interface and the overall workflow (despite the slight change in how the internal comments were recorded). At the end of the PG marking pilot, we found out that the slight change in the workflow was enough to make some of the markers confused, despite taking part in an almost identical UG pilot.

As a more general reflection, our PG dissertation marking experience raises an interesting point about the amount and type of support effort needed to train markers who are using ATLAS. We concluded that even the smallest of changes to the workflow can appear confusing to users who are not using ATLAS on a daily basis, and therefore require carefully executed induction sessions, workshops, etc. Additionally, as learning technologists we worked on the assumption that we were given all the relevant requirements information to prepare our support effort. However, some of these requirements only reached the surface in the middle of the marking exercise (e.g. the short turnaround times stipulated for marking of the PhD thesis required a different work schedule). As one of the "lessons learnt" we suggested that the admin staff should monitor the workspaces on a daily basis to ensure more timely flow of files between the two workspaces. In conclusion, we can never underestimate the value of a very thorough and ongoing needs analysis – even after the successful pilot run.

IN BRIEF

- ATLAS is normally supported centrally, but for online double-blind marking to work, local learning technology support is necessary.
- Make sure you allocate time for, and capitalise on, staff engagement (including feedback gathering and incorporation, and assignment of roles).
- Keep everything well-documented – with FAQs based on real user experience (reports).
- Keep workflows identical for different marking events, e.g. UG and PG.
- Identify champions in both the academic and admin teams with whom you can work more directly (and easily) and rely on them as vanguards.

REFERENCES

[1] Moderation guidance. Institute for Academic Development. University of Edinburgh. Retrieved from https://www.ed.ac.uk/institute-academic-development/learning-teaching/staff/assessment/moderation-guidance

[2] PebblePad and ATLAS help videos. University of Edinburgh. Retrieved from https://media.ed.ac.uk/channel/PEBBLEPAD+AND+ATLAS+HELP+VIDEOS/117600732

This Case Study is from PebblePad's 2020 *'Charting New Courses in Learning and Teaching'* conference.
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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