



CASE STUDY

How do we grow great teachers? A portfolio approach to assessment, learning and teaching

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PEBBLEPAD CASE STUDIES

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

THE CONTEXT

Poor results from recent international testing is causing further pressure on the Australian Education system and teachers (Baker, 2019). While a number of reasons for the weak showing have been mooted, inadequate teacher capacity is invariably mentioned as a cause for concern. Initial Teacher Education (ITE) providers are well aware of the challenges for teachers and, regardless of the perceived link between teacher quality and poor test outcomes, all stakeholders, including ITE providers, can agree that if graduates are of high quality and are well-equipped to deal with contemporary classroom contexts, then it is likely that the outcomes for learners will improve.

One of the more significant problems for teachers today is the lack of engagement that students seem to have with classroom learning. Whether this is derived from the excessive use of mobile technologies, a disconnect between school and out-of-school, or simply that students don't see the relevance of formal learning (including testing) in an increasingly complex world, the task for any teacher is to facilitate connections for every learner. To do this, the teacher needs to obtain a detailed understanding of each student to know their strengths and weaknesses, in order to effectively lead them along their learning pathways. A good teacher constantly thinks, reflects, and seeks ways to navigate through difficult circumstances in order to maximise learning outcomes for all students. This teacher will achieve results where a lesser teacher may fail to engage and inspire many of the students they work with.

So, the challenge for ITE providers is to produce teachers who can approach their work in this way. It is not enough for student teachers to acquire curriculum content, management strategies and pedagogical theory. They must see their teaching through a problem-solving lens and take a reflective approach to everything they do. Most importantly, they need to be able to engage with their professional context and ensure that they learn and grow as they work. Just as children need to tune in to their own learning, so too do their teachers. This learning journey approach is relevant for all learners, regardless of the context.

THE PROBLEM

While ITE providers may have a firm idea of the type of graduate that is required, establishing this sense of deep engagement with all pre-service teachers is difficult. While some students are highly connected with their professional aspirations, other students lack direction and/or have external interests and commitments that compete with their study. Many students work more hours than they study and/or they might have family responsibilities or other outside interests that distract from their learning. All these diversions give students less time to immerse in learning to be a teacher.

Unfortunately, a strategy often adopted by busy students to cope with their workload is to minimise their interactions in a unit of work to the basic requirements and focus mostly on the assessment tasks. This means that unless a learning activity is integral to the assessment, there is the temptation to gloss over it or ignore it completely. Then, the assessment tasks are completed in isolation from much of the content in the unit. Consequently, the assessment product is more likely to be a superficial production, possibly done in a hurry, and something that is unlikely to represent learning towards professional readiness. While it may be possible for this student to progressively complete units and even the course, much of the deep learning and connection will be absent. Unfortunately, this person won't be the work-ready graduating teacher that is going to make a difference in the classroom.

THE APPROACH

The Bachelor of Education course at the University of Tasmania is using PebblePad to implement a portfolio approach for teaching and learning (Masters, 2016). The rationale for this approach is that a course-long, organic portfolio provides students with tangible evidence of their learning journey. The process of "portfolioing" assists students to treasure their learning experiences and celebrate their achievements as they travel towards a professional destination.

The key to ensuring that the portfolio is core to the program is to align it tightly with assessment requirements. In the Bachelor of Education, it is promoted that every unit should have at least one major PebblePad-based assessment task aligned with the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (APST). This key task should build progressively and capture the core elements of the unit, enabling the student to accumulate artefacts that demonstrate the APST at the graduate level. As the student progresses through the course, the content in their PebblePad store becomes a rich collection that substantiates their learning. A capstone task, called the Graduate Teacher Performance Assessment (the GTPA), then utilises a PebblePad workbook to help the students present their accumulative teaching expertise, mapped against the APST suite of standards.

As assessment is a key driver for participation, it makes sense to construct the assessment as the backbone for the curriculum. The portfolio approach to assessment does exactly this (Clarke & Boud, 2018). In this approach, formative and summative assessment are woven into a program-wide portfolio that is built progressively and systematically. This method, therefore, facilitates a very different relationship between the academic and the preservice teacher (Oakley, Pegrum, & Johnston, 2014). Rather than the students periodically producing and submitting assessment items for marking, the academic serves as a mentor and provides advice and feedback progressively as content is constructed. While these products may still be marked, the assessment procedure is more subtle and something that fades in the learning and teaching cycle.

THE RESULTS

The shift to portfolio-based assessment has required a significant rethink of traditional assessment practices. Rather than simply designing a discreet task to address learning outcomes, unit coordinators need to first imagine the PebblePad resources and assets that will clearly demonstrate the relevant APST for the student's portfolio and then backwards map to shape the assessment tasks. In this model, unit coordinators can no longer simply select an assessment mechanism that is their preferred format or something that is convenient for marking. Instead, they need to consider the suite of assessment from the student's perspective and work together with other coordinators to ensure that the resulting portfolio collection provides a comprehensive representation of the key learning outcomes from the complete program and the entire set of APST for graduates.

For the student, the portfolio approach can be used to challenge the perception that a university course is simply a collection of years, semesters, units and assessment tasks – a series of hoops to jump through to get a qualification. The portfolio is a mechanism to track the learning journey towards professional competence. While this content may be used to support external validation, the most important function is that it allows the student to reflect on how they have grown and developed as a teacher. Further, through the process of portfolioing, the student is developing skills that will allow them to be a reflective teacher who knows how to demonstrate the impact of their work with the children that they teach.

LESSONS LEARNT

This approach requires a dramatic shift in the way both academics and students think about assessment. While it would be nice to have an instant commitment from the entire teaching staff, the reality is that change in the Faculty happens slowly and PebblePad based tasks are still seen by some as peripheral and an optional extra. This is, however, gradually improving as the early adopters produce demonstrable results that show how effective this form of assessment is.

Students also find old habits hard to break. By the time that they start their university studies they have already experienced years of formal education and assessment. Unfortunately, the practice of rushing assessment at the last minute is often well established by the time they begin their ITE program. The idea that they participate in 'assessment AS learning' (Dann, 2014), where they complete their assessment continuously across their course can be exhausting, particularly when they are asked to reflect continually. This ability, however, is essential for a teacher and it gets easier with practice.

Ultimately, the assessment in the course should cease to dominate so that students complete their assessment seamlessly as part of their transformation from student to teacher. The true magnitude of growth will be seen as the student looks back over their portfolio and witness how their pedagogy has developed over the semesters.

IN BRIEF

- A great teacher can think, reflect and act in order to maximise learning opportunities for their students.
- It is essential that Initial Teacher Education providers instil this growth mindset with their graduates and empower them to be strong and effective teachers.
- A portfolio-based approach to assessment places the emphasis on progressive learning and reflection and it supports pre-service teachers to develop a consequential understanding of themselves as learners and ultimately the learners that they will teach.

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