Flourish—the eCPD project

Sarah Chesney,
Centre for the Development of Learning and Teaching
University of Cumbria

E-portfolios are becoming a familiar tool in education. Use has focused currently on students rather than academic staff. We wanted to make it easier for academic staff at the University of Cumbria to organise their records of learning and achievement for their own professional development.

In the JISC-funded Flourish eCPD project we encouraged staff to build e-portfolios that would help them apply for professional accreditation and gain academic qualifications. We believed this would help them store and reflect on evidence of their development.

Five goals of Flourish
- Pilot e-portfolios with staff as part of their appraisal process
- Embed e-portfolios in a postgraduate teaching and learning course (PgCinLTHE)
- Record and share experience of attending conferences
- Work with professional accreditation bodies to evaluate the efficacy of applications by e-portfolio
- Use e-portfolios to enhance cross-departmental relationships between staff in the newly formed University of Cumbria

http://www.flourishproject.org

Foreword

Professor Liz Beaty

Flourish Report

Effective use of new technology is an important employability skill. Students expect their teachers to be adept with online communication and to enable use of available software for learning. Academics therefore have the double challenge of developing their own skill in using new technology whilst keeping up to date with how these tools might be needed by students when they graduate.

Most professions require their staff to undertake regular updating and we can expect that personalised learning systems will increasingly become part of professional practice for our graduates. Encouraging use of new technology through the personal development portfolios therefore has an advantage for students on vocational courses.

Higher education has new professional standards for teaching and modern academics must negotiate a complex weave of discipline based and educational based professional practice. This added challenge can be difficult to graft on top of all the other updating that academics need. Documenting activity and the learning that flows from it can be tiresome, especially since the significance of what is learnt can be difficult to articulate. So, processes to support reflective practice have become an essential feature of effective professional development and e-portfolios provide a powerful on-line tool.

So the modern academic finds themselves in the same place as their students – needing to document and reflect on their professional development and to keep up to date with innovative technology tools.

The Flourish project helps staff to become adept at using new technology to document their own professional practice. The processes at once support development of a 21st century approach to professional learning while encouraging staff to become familiar with the very habits they are encouraging in their students. A "win win" project, for sure.

Professor Liz Beaty
Director of Strategic Academic Practice and Partnership
July 2009

Introduction

We wanted to ease the administrative burden for staff who were overloaded with a paper-based system for organising their records of learning and achievement. From March 2007 we offered all staff at the University of Cumbria the opportunity to have their own PebblePad personal learning system (PLS).

By the end of Flourish in March 2009, around 600 staff out of a possible 1,800 had an account. We supported staff and showed them how to use their PebblePad accounts to:

• do their annual appraisals
• apply for University of Cumbria teaching fellowships
• submit assignments for academic qualification
• submit evidence for professional accreditation.

Before Flourish: paperwork overload

Action research

Flourish used an **action research** approach, where we took lessons learnt from one iteration to improve the next stages of the process.

> *"Action research is open ended. It does not begin with a fixed hypothesis. It begins with an idea that you develop. The research process is the developmental process of following through the idea, seeing how it goes, and continually checking whether it is in line with what you wish to happen." (McNiff, 2002).*

We used an **appreciative inquiry approach** to action research, to identify and develop 'what works' rather than focus on problems. Cooperrider and Whitney (1999) describe appreciative inquiry as:

> *"... the art and practice of asking questions that strengthen a system's capacity to apprehend, anticipate, and heighten positive potential."*

From day one of Flourish, we introduced PebblePad into real-life, authentic work settings. We were careful to stress to everyone that the aim of Flourish was not to evaluate the PebblePad software, but to evaluate the use of aspects of a personal learning system for continuing professional development. We welcomed feedback from users at all stages of the project. **Informal** feedback included chance conversations and comments at the workshops; **formal** feedback included anonymous online surveys, one-to-one interviews, focus groups and blogging.

Management support

We knew we would need support from senior managers to ensure the success of the Flourish project. Being able to refer to senior managers as supporters of Flourish has helped us persuade staff to explore the opportunities an e-portfolio offers them. Two members of the university's senior directorate sat on the Flourish project management board.

Regular meetings between the project partners, the University of Cumbria and Pebble Learning helped us to:

• build trust
• give feedback
• align the work being done for Flourish with the aims and objectives in the bid.

A spirit of critical friendship between the partners ensured that the work relationship remained cordial and mutually beneficial. The software developers gained feedback from users in authentic situations, which helped them improve the PLS.

Exploring the benefits

We encouraged staff to explore the benefits of using a personal learning system with:

- self-enrol workshops
- e-learning retreats
- small grants to explore use of the PLS alongside existing working practices
- animations explaining the benefits of using an e-portfolio for CPD.

Self-enrol workshops

These workshops were an effective way of introducing e-portfolios, and they were well attended by interested individuals and e-learning champions. However, they were a slow way of engaging whole departments, and it sometimes took months for the Flourish message to percolate through to a wide range of colleagues. They were also labour-intensive for us, and we found them hard to sustain in remote campuses.

E-learning retreats

Staff often tell us they do not have time to develop e-learning skills. So we arranged two e-learning retreats away from the usual work setting. We wanted people to explore the PLS in a low-risk, informal setting where they would receive intensive specialist support.

Successful applicants had to be part of a team. Before the retreat we asked them to identify an area of working practice to focus on. We designed activities to help them:

- learn how to use the software
- build a team spirit
- develop their team project plans.

Outcomes

Staff confidence in using the PLS grew, some choosing to start using it with students, others continuing to use the PLS for the activity identified for the retreat. Staff gained an overview of how e-portfolios are being used across the sector, not just at the University of Cumbria. Some people have developed an intense interest in e-portfolios, attending e-portfolio and e-learning conferences

and contributing to internal debates about the use of e-portfolios with students across their faculty. Staff recognised that meeting teams from other faculties broadened their view of the organisation. They could learn how colleagues in other disciplines approach CPD and personal development planning. They have kept this interest and asked us to set up a user group. Everyone agreed these two-day retreats were excellent for staff development. One faculty has decided to run their own two-day retreat to see how a PLS can help them monitor and share teaching practice internally.

Grants to support staff

In the second year of Flourish, we invited academic staff to apply for funding, allowing them time to find out how a PLS could best improve their practice and give us regular feedback using the PebblePad blog tool. We encouraged 10 successful applicants to write a weekly blog entry describing how their use of an e-portfolio was progressing. They used their e-portfolios to:

- support research in the Faculty of Health
- support collaborative research in the Faculty of Education
- document and reflect on working practices in the Faculty of Education
- support peer observation in the Faculty of Business, Social Science and Sport
- prepare for appraisal in the Faculty of Education.

These small-scale projects have encouraged the staff involved to think about how to use the PLS effectively, compare it with other applications and consider their personal development.

Outcomes

Staff have grown in confidence using the PLS for their own development. Most feel that they would use an e-portfolio with their students. Staff who blogged regularly said they wanted to explore other technologies to support learning, such as:

- using audio files to give student feedback in a blog
- using blogs to communicate with their students.

Staff who used the PebblePad blog commented that keeping this record helped them manage their work, either because they could:

- record and reflect on how much they were doing; or
- use their activity in their PLS (for example, documenting research activities) as evidence when appraised.

They said it hadn't been easy to keep a blog, but after eight weeks, they felt they had formed a habit of recording their activities and hoped they would continue with this way of recording their development.

Those who blogged regularly appreciated receiving feedback.

Towards the end of the project, the Faculty of Education announced that it was encouraging staff to use the PLS for appraisals. The staff using PebblePad began to see how this tool could reduce duplication of effort **and** show how they were meeting their objectives.

Animation

We posted a short animation on YouTube, which was easy to access for staff who had an internet connection. This provides a quick summary of the benefits of using an e-portfolio for CPD.

Challenges and how we met them

Inappropriate content
What would we do if account holders published defamatory, obscene or unlawful content?

→ We worked with the University of Cumbria's data protection officer and a representative from JISC Legal, to write a guidance document about this.

Project perceived as short-term
Staff expressed concern that they would not be able to access their account after the project was over. They regarded the project as a 'pilot' while we regarded it as a 'pathfinder' exercise designed to end with eCPD as a required and accepted part of the culture at the University of Cumbria.

→ We have reassured staff about the facilities for exporting the work in their e-portfolio locally. We have also tried to convey that Flourish is a pathfinder activity rather than a 'project'.

We have kept Flourish work on the agenda of committees such as the Learning, Teaching and Assessment Committee.

Technical issues
Not all staff PCs had the required Flash Player installed to run the PebblePad software. When they found that they couldn't log back on, they blamed their own lack of IT skills and often gave up trying to use the software at this point.

This barrier delayed appraisals if the e-portfolio was going to be used. Staff who attended workshops could not try out the software as soon as they returned to their own workstation.

→ We adapted the PLS log-on page to show users how to identify whether Flash Player was installed, and what to do if it wasn't. And we asked ICT services to ensure all staff PCs automatically had Flash Player installed.
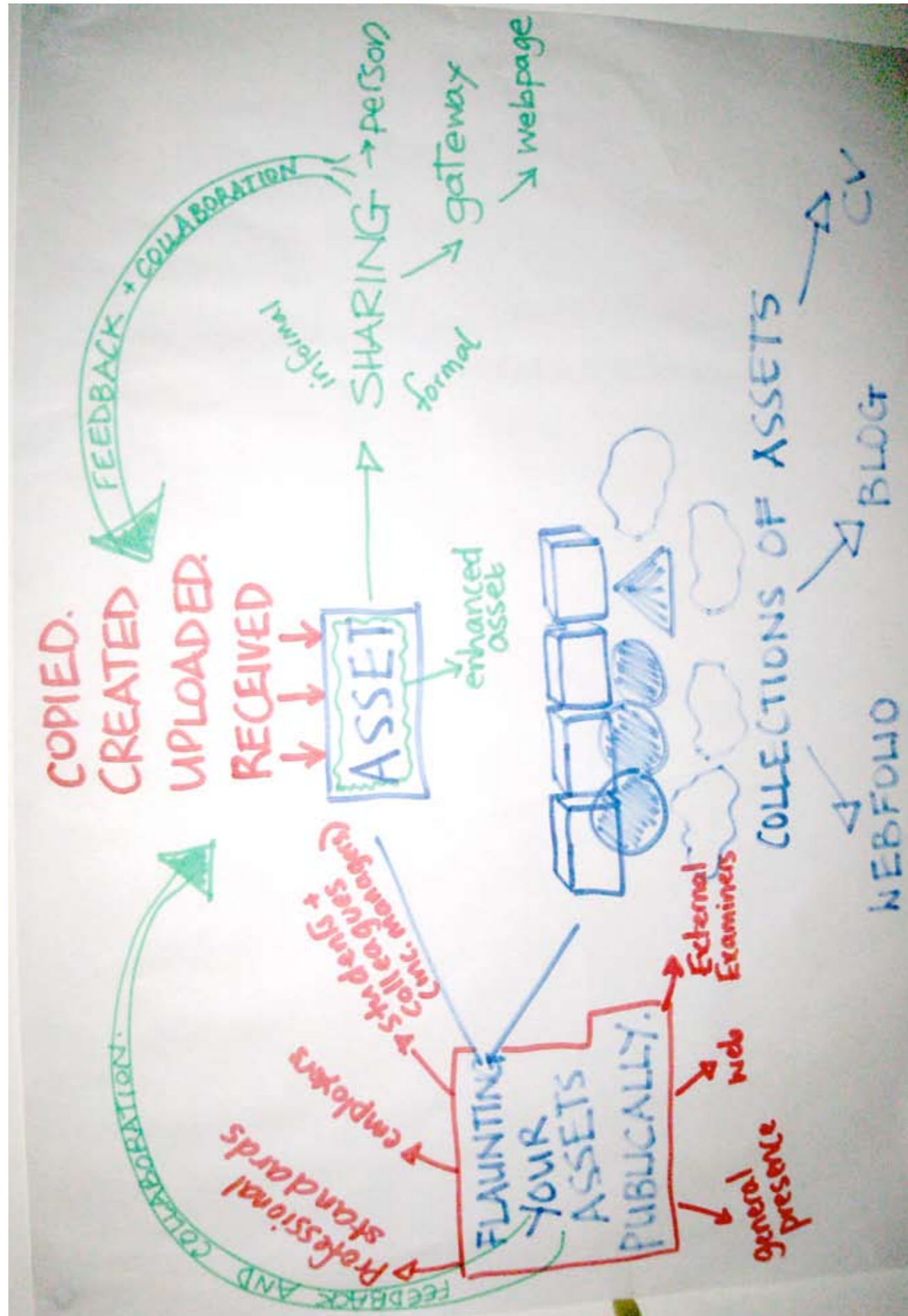
Using personal learning systems for annual appraisal

My work has another use

"My project has been based around me managing and monitoring my performance in relation to my new role. This occupies about 20% of my workload and will form an equally large part of my appraisal. The fact that all the work that has gone into this project will have another use is just fantastic!"

Ben, Faculty of Education lecturer

The University of Cumbria human resources department were keen to encourage staff who voluntarily wanted to complete their annual appraisal using PebblePad. We transferred the existing, paper-based appraisal document to a template in the PLS.

In 2007 we encouraged 16 departmental staff in CDLT to use the PLS to complete their annual appraisal. Based on the feedback from Pilot 1 we adapted the process of using the PLS for appraisal. We included developments and improvements in the software completed between 2007 and 2008 to improve the process.

Outcomes

The reactions from staff to using the PLS for appraisal have been mixed. The e-portfolio appraisal was voluntary, so line managers often had to review two different types of appraisal, the e-portfolio and the paper version. This adds to the administrative burden for the line manager.

The largest of the five faculties in the university, the Faculty of Education, encouraged staff to use PebblePad to support the annual appraisal. Faculty staff received this well; many already use the PLS for their reflections. Users could see the benefits of using the PLS for multiple purposes.

Staff who used the PLS for their appraisal said it is becoming easier to administer their appraisal and share evidence of their development with their line manager.

Staff are reluctant to use the PLS for appraisal if they think their line manager isn't going to support them. This support is essential. Some staff invested a lot of time in creating their e-portfolio appraisal and needed positive feedback from their appraiser.

Postgraduate Certificate in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education (PgCinLTHE)

It's all in one place

"I definitely found it an easier process with it all being in one place…
And where the student had used the technology to its full capacity or at
least near its full capacity by hyperlinking evidence, it did just become
a richer document. It takes away that need to flick to the back and find
the appendices, because you can even just hover over the hypertext and
it will show you what that document is anyway."

Debbie, PgCinLTHE tutor

Using the PLS to support learning on this professional course allowed newly appointed academic staff to use an e-portfolio in their own studies. They experienced the PLS first hand in an authentic context. In the first cohort of participants, reactions to using PebblePad for assessment were mixed.

Enthusiastic or resistant?
Some people:
• enjoyed the experience
• saw immediate benefits and conveniences
• liked being able to hyperlink to other information
• liked having all their work in one place.

Others:
• saw the process of creating their assignment in the PLS as 'labour intensive'
• felt the time spent learning to use the software was 'wasted'.

Based on feedback from this first group, we increased activities and resources in stages throughout the project, so the PLS became a central part of the student experience. The permanent course team was positive about the convenience of having the assignments easily accessible from any PC with an internet connection.

Engaging associate tutors has been challenging – some of them were at a distance from the University and didn't attend training.

Associates who embraced the use of the e-portfolio and used it to give regular feedback to students had used PebblePad before for non-PgCinLTHE activities and the 2007 e-learning retreat.

E-learning retreats away from the usual work setting help people to explore the PLS in a low-risk, informal setting where they receive intensive specialist support.

Outcomes
The course team now understand how to use a PLS effectively to support learning and improve assessment processes. They moved from using PebblePad to enhance one assessment activity to an integrated approach that is now a true PLS. We expect that participants will still use the PLS to support their CPD once they finish their studies.

All participants have now used the PLS to support their learning, regardless of their level of IT confidence. The course team has ensured that

people are familiar with new technologies and the benefits they offer and can use innovative ways to support their students.

Using PebblePad to collect assessments has dramatically reduced the workload for the administrative staff. Staff save time when they do not have to collect paper portfolios and photocopy these for second markers and external examiners.

People have started to ask us how they can use an e-portfolio with their students. A small number have started to use the PLS to improve their own practice, using it to communicate with external colleagues. Now the Faculty of Education have announced that staff can use the PLS to support their appraisal, some participants are going to link their appraisal to the work they have done in the PgCinLTHE. This will help them show their line managers how they have met the previous year's performance objectives.

Introducing the PLS into the PgCinLTHE has provoked a review of the purpose of the VLE. The distinction between the two learning systems is made explicit to both the course participants and the tutors, so we have changed some activities, for example, peer observation.

I saved time

"I have saved stacks of time. I have had to send nothing in the post to the external examiner and have had nothing to physically photocopy. We have saved on postage and copying costs, not to mention the hours of work that is normally needed to prepare samples, marksheets, etc."

Zoe, PgCinLTHE course administrator

Why embed the e-portfolio into the PgCinLTHE?

• Students received a signal that PgCinLTHE tutors were committed to the use of an e-portfolio so they were more confident when using it

• Students asked that its use was more integral to the course through the course consultative committee

• Students could use the e-portfolio to support their application for accreditation with bodies such as the HEA and the NMC

• The course team saw opportunities for efficiencies.
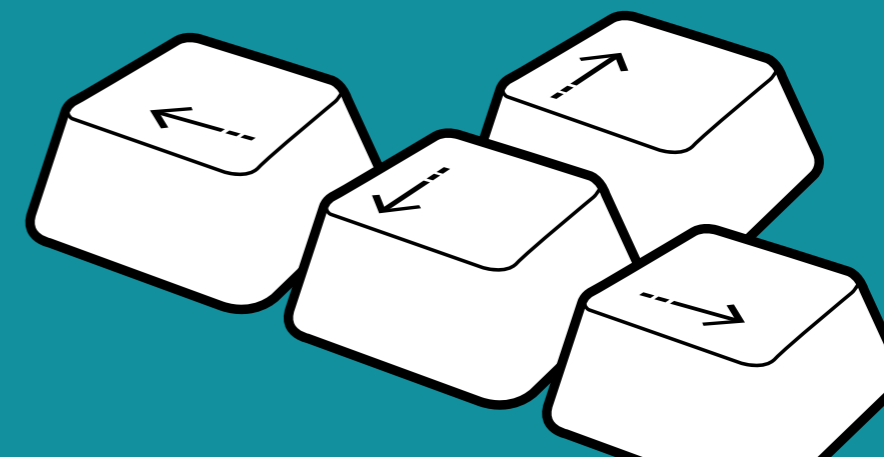
Professional accreditation

University of Cumbria teaching and learning portfolio

The teaching and learning portfolio project in 2008 was part of the university's wider strategy of developing the quality of teaching and learning. It aimed to support the professional development of staff with more than three years' experience in higher education.

The university's professional standards now align with the UK Professional Standards Framework. The Higher Education Academy has accredited the process so successful staff now also gain national recognition and the status of Associate (Standard 1) or Fellow (Standard 2) with the Academy.

Applicants for this review used the PLS to submit their application to a PebblePad gateway, where reviewers could assess the work and make comments. The University of Cumbria will now use the PLS to accept all applications for the professional standards.

Outcomes

Some staff introduced to the PLS through this activity still use the PLS for team building and other activities. Staff who were successful in their application were proud of their e-portfolio. Three of them were happy for us to use their application as an example, and show other practitioners what an e-portfolio looks like.

Which professional bodies currently accept e-portfolio submissions?

Professional body	E-portfolio submission allowed?	Restrictions	Comments
Royal Pharmaceutical Society of Great Britain (RPSGB)	Yes	Only RPSGB tool permitted	Applicants working in an HE institution with an e-portfolio not approved have to upkeep two e-portfolios
Chartered Society of Physiotherapy	Yes	None	Use of recommended e-portfolio system not compulsory
Nursing & Midwifery Council	Yes	None	Verbal reassurances given that any e-portfolio would be accepted.
Certified Member of the Association of Learning Technologists (ALT)	Yes	None	Variety of methods encouraged. Four applications from the wider Flourish team have been submitted to ALT and CMALT status conferred
Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP)	Piloting e-portfolio submission		CILIP has shown an interest in the Flourish findings
Higher Education Academy (individual route)	No		Applicants download a document from HEA website and fill it in.
Staff and Educational Development Association (SEDA)	Yes	None	E-portfolio submission allowed for all aspects of SEDA's professional accreditation suite.

Other uses of Flourish

Enhancing cross-departmental relationships

We tried to persuade staff to create a good team atmosphere by:

- creating a regular departmental newsletter
- publishing researcher profiles on the web.

Staff thought these activities were worthwhile, but they didn't engage when it came to creating a newsletter or a profile. They were also reluctant to publish their profiles on the web because of the institutional permissions necessary to complete this.

Successful team-building activities centred on face-to-face workshops or the e-learning retreat. They included:

- workshops designed to teach teams how to use the software, while doing activities on PebblePad that encouraged team building (eg creating an online introduction and sharing it with a colleague)
- asking for team applications to the e-learning retreat
- using the 'gateway' in PebblePad to share resources used for team activities such as the 'Carpe Diem' style two day intensive course design events, then recording and reflecting on this engagement.

There are some signs that people are using the software to build teams inadvertently, it will take time for staff to realise that increased communication is a benefit of PLS.

Outcomes

Using a team approach to develop an understanding of a PLS has been a key strategy for getting people to use the software. We have made good use of existing teams to develop an understanding of a PLS.

University of Cumbria teaching fellowships

In 2008 staff could apply for University of Cumbria teaching fellowships using PebblePad. Advantages included:

- less paperwork
- less administration for support staff
- using various multimedia files as evidence.

We don't know if applying for a teaching fellowship with an e-portfolio discouraged some staff from applying. In 2008 there was a significant drop in applications (from 18 the previous year to just 9 in 2008). But this could have been due to demands made on staff while the new university was forming. Reviewers of the applications needed to be confident IT users in order to access the system and realise any efficiencies.

Institutional e-portfolios

In two cases, the PebblePad software was used to collect, collate and demonstrate institutional information. In 2007 human resources used PebblePad to collate all the HEFCE SAT information; we believe the University of Cumbria was the only HEI in the country to have done this.

Collating the SAT information involved 12 members of staff, most of whom were positive about using PebblePad because it saved them time. This way of using the software, as an institutional e-portfolio to collect evidence and then display it for formal approval, was an unintended outcome of the project.

HEA/JISC benchmarking activity

In the second case, when the University of Cumbria took part in the JISC/HEA benchmarking, PebblePad was used to collect data and responses and disseminate the information.

Genuine reflective practice

"The process provided an excellent opportunity for genuine reflective practice. I was surprised by the range of evidence which I could identify and to which I could link electronically, in order to demonstrate my commitment… this is a different kind of approach to that which is normally required for promotion or appointment, and I found myself exploring connections between my different roles, both past and present, which was a very positive and developmental experience."

Harriet, University of Cumbria learning co-ordinator

Impact of Flourish

You only show what you want to show

"It's instant and can be viewed and reviewed in a personal, passworded environment, so you only show what you want to show. It's not like somebody fishing in and finding what they want to find. The opportunity to print is there and the opportunity to share is there, and the person you're sharing with can see it where and when they want to, and they can print it if they want to.

It's secure and it will always be there, whereas a piece of paper can easily get lost, or data stored locally can easily get lost."

Angus, University of Cumbria learning technologist

Summary

Flourish showed us how to:

• use a PLS for CPD
• organise an e-learning retreat
• distribute small grants to motivate staff to change their existing habits of recording their CPD
• liaise with senior personnel from a variety of services and faculties
• run regular drop-in workshops for all
• run collaborative events to introduce whole teams to a PLS.
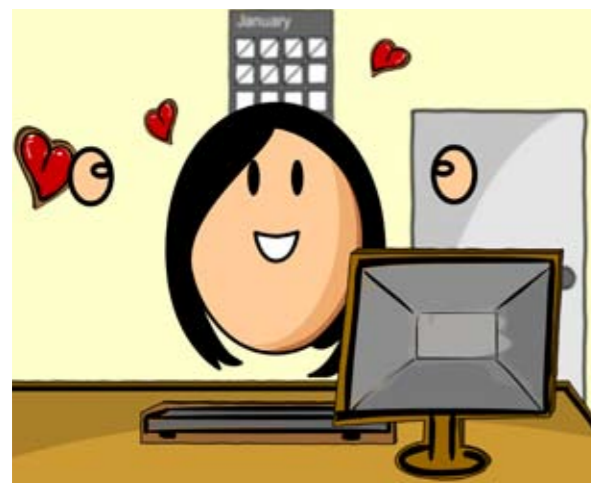
After Flourish: everything in one place

Benefits

Most staff found that learning to use the chosen PLS was straightforward, and they could see the potential benefits when used over a period of time for various activities.

Account holders

By May 2009, 600 out of 1,800 staff had a PebblePad account, with approximately 400 active users. To date around 200 accounts are inactive. When we asked account holders if they still needed the account, most replied that they intended to use PebblePad soon, and asked us not to delete their account.

Since Flourish, over 300 student accounts have been created, with some successful use by students in the Faculty of Education, to demonstrate competencies; the School of Business, to support work-based learning; and the School of Law, to support personal development planning.

Influential committees

Flourish has put the issue of e-portfolios for all students on the agenda of influential institutional committees such as the Learning, Teaching and Assessment Committee and key institutional events including a presentation at the University of Cumbria's heads' conference.

Senior managers are discussing the use of e-portfolios for both staff and students at faculty management meetings.

The experiences of those who used the e-portfolio for the PgCinLTHE—either as tutor or participant— will inform how e-portfolios are introduced and assessed with a wider student body. The Flourish

My saving grace

"PebblePad has been my saving grace. It's helped me redo my portfolio. I've used it for areas such as SWOT analysis… recording thoughts on what you can do, what you would like to do but haven't got time to do."

Sally, University of Cumbria lecturer

project may help the University of Cumbria to evaluate the support of students at a distance from the main campuses.

Procurement

Using the experiences of introducing PebblePad to staff, the Flourish Project staff were instrumental in designing procurement and deployment procedures to encourage and support innovation in e-learning.

Appraisals

The Faculty of Education, the largest in the university, has decided to use PebblePad to support appraisals. The lessons learned—and our recommendations—will inform the institutional review of the appraisal process that is taking place in 2010.

Requiring application for HEA Professional Standards through the university's own accreditation scheme introduced staff to the concept of using an e-portfolio to collect evidence of their achievements. We will use this method of application for forthcoming applications.

Flexible futures

As part of a University of Cumbria project, Flexible Futures, we are looking at what it means to be a flexible and distributed learning professional. This will require new ways of thinking that go beyond traditional staff-development workshops and CPD training activities, and will refer to the lessons learnt from Flourish.
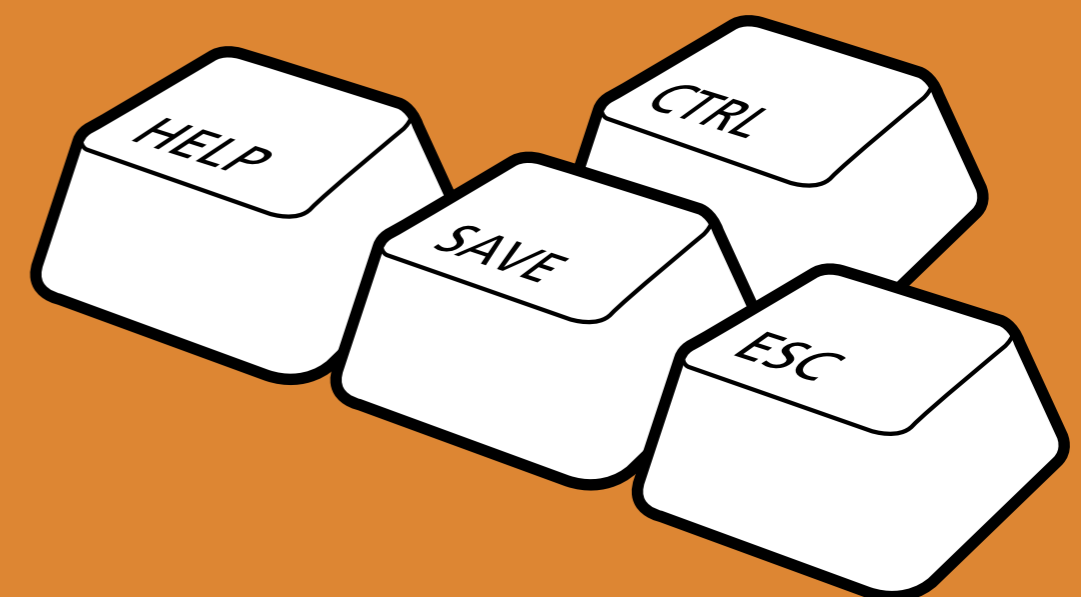
Recommendations

Recommendations for senior HE managers

- Use the introduction to PLS as an opportunity to review and re-design processes and activities, so that people do not feel they are adding to existing activities such as annual appraisal
- Plan the introduction carefully so that all processes in the institution are aligned
- Include stakeholders (eg human resources, research office, ICTS and marketing) in decision making by making them aware of:
  - the benefits a PLS offers
  - how to access the relevant resources
- Evaluate user feedback
- Show users how their contributions improve the whole system
- Make sure you answer these questions:
  - Where is the e-portfolio hosted?
  - Who has access to the data?
  - How long it will be available for?
- Give staff friendly, easily accessible and flexible support with the new technology
- Master and use the PLS yourself
- Spread the word!

Recommendations for PgCinLTHE course teams

To engage students:

- Provide a good induction to—and a rationale for using—the e-portfolio software. If the induction is effective, this group can spread good publicity rapidly among their colleagues
- Give participants the confidence to use the PLS to its full advantage
- Integrate the PLS into assessment for each module
- Adopt a consistent approach to submitting assignments, this will avoid confusion and extra work for administrative and support staff
- Offer an array of support materials, including:
  - printed tip sheets
  - online help
  - drop-in sessions
  - one-to-one help.

Tutors should:

- Encourage constructive feedback amongst peers
- Differentiate between concerns or frustrations levelled at the PLS and anxieties about IT skills
- Reflect on practice, academic rigour and workload.

Ways to engage staff include:

- Face-to-face workshops
- Blog tools
- E-learning retreat

Conclusion

We wanted to see how an e-portfolio could ease the administrative burden facing academic and learning support staff.

Staff who understood the potential of a PLS to ease their workload and experienced the PLS first hand began to realise that items in their account could serve multiple purposes.

Creating a climate where staff could reach this understanding needs careful nurturing.

Encouraging habitual use has to be cultivated over time. Flourish was funded for two years and it was only in the final months that we felt our work had taken root and started to grow.

References

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Further information and useful resources

Website

The Flourish website at www.flourishproject.org has a range of resources that will be of use for staff considering using an e-portfolio or PLS for CPD, with links to:

• *Exemplar e-portfolios for professional accreditation:* The staff who created these samples were very proud of their work and keen to have it on public display.

• *Resources created at a one-day event, 'Putting the 'e' into educational development':* This event drew together a range of practitioners from across the UK to discuss various ways of embedding e-learning and encouraging staff to use it. More specifically, practitioners discussed the use of e-portfolios to support their continuing professional development.

• *Blossom videos:*Short videos of practitioners from across the HE sector, talking about how they intend to encourage e-portfolio use for staff CPD.

• *Flourish animations:* These animations give the audience a concise overview of what an e-portfolio is, and the benefits they bring to lecturers and senior managers. Available through www.youtube.com

In addition, the JISC have published *Effective practice with e-portfolios (2008)*, available at www.jisc.ac.uk/effectivepracticeeportfolios

And there is a JISC e-portfolio infokit published by JISC InfoNet at www.jiscinfonet.ac.uk/infokits/e-portfolios

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