Chapter 19

Shared Spaces and ‘Secret Gardens’: The Troublesome Journey from Undergraduate Students to Undergraduate Scholars Via PebblePad

Marina Orsini-Jones
Coventry University, UK

ABSTRACT

This chapter illustrates a curricular intervention carried out at Coventry University (UK) with undergraduate students reading English. It explores how the students maximised their use of the tools available within the ePortfolio software PebblePad. It discusses how the software tools were used to enhance and personalise the students’ learning experience and engage in the discourse of ‘becoming researchers’ in the second year module Dissertation Methods and Approaches. It proposes that the use of some ePortfolio tools helped many students to become critical and to actively engage in their ontological journey of transition to becoming independent thinkers. However it also reports that some problematic issues surfaced following the implementation of the curricular action: some students find active learning and active engagement in the scholarship of research ‘troublesome’. Finally this chapter gives consideration to how to integrate the lessons learned from this experience into the curriculum for the next cohort of students.

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter I initially provide an overview of the inquiry-based nature of the curriculum design of the undergraduate BA English Degree course that started in academic year 2006-2007 at Coventry University (UK). I then focus on a second-year mandatory module (Dissertation Methods and Approaches) that is aimed at equipping students with the ‘armoury’ of research skills necessary to complete their final year dissertation independently. I discuss in particular how the ePortfolio software PebblePad supported the students’ learning journey on this module with particular reference to the creation of an assessed task: their dissertation plan.

In my roles of principal investigator for this study and module leader, I evaluated the learning experience of the 2007-2008 cohort of students on
the above-mentioned second year module, 42 in total (32 female and 10 male, between 19 and 45 years of age). I had carried out previous cycles of curricular action-research interventions that had demonstrated that sharing knowledge construction with the dedicated ePortfolio PebblePad tools such as the webfolio and the action plans had helped students with understanding difficult grammar concepts (Orsini-Jones & Jones, 2007; Orsini-Jones & Sinclair, 2008). For this curricular intervention I hypothesised that the ePortfolio tools could be utilised to support second year students in their individual ‘research journey’ that is required for the design of their assessed dissertation plan for module Dissertation Methods and Approaches. I believed that the e-tools would provide students with the opportunity to personalise their research journey while also giving them a platform for sharing their ‘research artefacts’ with the tutors and peers if they wanted to. So the ePortfolio could be compared both to a ‘secret learning garden’ for the students’ personal use only (hence the reference to the famous novel by Burnett, 1909), while also offering them the opportunity to be their public research ‘arena’ (i.e. the shared gateway where they could display the webfolio of their dissertation plan).

I made the assumption, based upon evidence collected for other modules in previous academic years, that embedding ePortfolio tools aimed at developing reflective skills in the syllabus of the research module would impact positively on the students’ research learning journey. I hypothesised that by using such e-tools for the creation of their dissertation plan, students could be encouraged to become critical. I was hoping that via a carefully structured e-supported task I would help students to actively engage in their ontological journey of transition from being at the ‘receiving end’ of their learning experience, to becoming independent thinkers. This would also include the active participation in a scholarly critique of each other’s work, both face-to-face and online.

Engaging students in active learning and preparing them for, in Barnett’s words, a disturbed and disturbing ‘age of supercomplexity’ (Barnett, 2000, p.155), proved to be challenging in some cases. The data I collected highlighted that some students find active learning and active engagement in the scholarship of research overwhelming. It emerged that some students were finding the assessed individual webfolio task ‘troublesome’ for both epistemological reasons (e.g. alien subject-related terminology and concepts) and ontological ones (e.g. fear of the solitary aspects of the research journey paired with unease about the assessed task format that took them out of their ‘comfort zone’ and undermined their confidence).

What had started as an evaluation of the use of PebblePad on the module became therefore a wider investigation into ‘troublesome knowledge’ repositioning my study in the relatively new field of transactional curriculum inquiry (Cousin, 2009, pp. 201-212) known as ‘threshold concepts’ and developed by Erik Meyer and Ray Land (Meyer & Land, 2003; 2005; Meyer, Land & Smith, 2008). A threshold concept is:

- troublesome: the learners will find it problematic;
- transformative: once understood, its potential effect on student learning and behaviour is to occasion a significant shift in the perception of a subject;
- integrative: it exposes the previously hidden interrelatedness of concepts that were not previously seen as linked;
- irreversible: the change of perspective occasioned by acquisition of a threshold concept is unlikely to be forgotten; and
- bounded: any conceptual space will have frontiers, bordering with thresholds into new conceptual areas (Meyer and Land, 2003, p. 412).

Thus the analysis of the data brought about an unexpected outcome: the attempt to identify which
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