Chapter 21
Using ePortfolios to Evidence Practice Learning for Social Work Students

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ABSTRACT

The University of Kent is piloting the use of ePortfolios in a number of departments; the School of Social Policy, Sociology and Social Research took the opportunity to pilot ePortfolios to investigate whether ePortfolios could improve communication and collaboration between student, placement supervisor and academic tutors whilst Social Work students are out on work-based placement. Social Work students are required to complete two reflective practice documents during each of their two placements during Years 2 and 3 of their degree to assess their competence against a set of National Standards. The chapter will discuss the adoption of a Personalised Learning Environment for recording assessed practice and how the tools provided can enhance the different categories of users’ experiences both in terms of reflective practice and personal development. The chapter gives a background to the pilot and describes the different profiles of each user group which are students, academic staff, practitioners, and other stakeholders. It will also examine to what extent the pilot is in line with government initiatives such as the Leitch Review and Burgess Report and research into the use of ePortfolios for reflection; the issues surrounding the introduction of new technology to non-traditional students and outside organizations; how technology has changed student and practitioner’s perceptions and expectations in the production of a collaborative body of evidence; and the future pedagogical implications of using technology with Social Work students and practitioners.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-60566-884-0.ch021
INTRODUCTION

Over the past 12 years, initiatives by government have increasingly emphasised the development of Higher Education students’ skills and employability. The National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (Dearing 1997) recommended that students be encouraged to record, reflect upon and plan their progress in Higher Education. The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) accepted these recommendations and set a lead time of five years for institutions commencing in 2005 which was designed to give universities time to devise their own plans for developing Personal Development Planning. The Leitch report (2006) reviewed the nation’s long term skills needs and recommended partnership between employers, government and individuals. In 2007, The Burgess Report recommended that the Higher Education Achievement Report (HEAR) should become the main vehicle for measuring and recording a student’s achievement. The report proposed that the HEAR, a supporting document which gives a wider indication of the student’s performance against certain criteria, be developed and tested over a four year period alongside the existing degree classification which currently encapsulates student achievement in a single number. ePortfolios are being developed to support students’ Personal Development Planning which the Burgess Report encourages the use of to further strengthen the evidence found in the HEAR.

The University of Kent’s Unit for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching has been carrying out a number of pilot projects to encourage students to reflect on their personal development and record their progress using an ePortfolio. The University’s Social Work degree programme seemed to be a perfect match for the use of ePortfolios because it encourages reflection as part of learning and students are expected to record evidence of practice in order to demonstrate that they have met Social Work standards. Since students are all required to produce reflective writing as part of their assessment for work-based placements, it seemed an ideal opportunity to introduce ePortfolios to assist them with completing the required documentary evidence of competence.

The process of introducing ePortfolios has not been without its difficulties; many of the assumptions about students being ‘digital natives’ because of their easy acceptance of mobile phones, MP3 players, online chat and social networking sites have been dispelled. The profile of the students enrolled on the Social Work course is mainly mature with many originating from overseas and a considerable number being from low socio-economic groups.

Using ePortfolios can add educational value to the learning experience of students, Practice Assessors (Social Work practitioners who assess practice placements) and teaching staff; however, some of the issues that have been encountered have raised questions as to whether ePortfolios are being used simply to adapt to government life-long learning initiatives such as progress files and the widening participation agenda proposed by Dearing (1997) and those developed since.

The piloting of the ePortfolio by the Social Work degree programme at Kent was a leap of faith as the question whether the use of ePortfolios would truly benefit students needed to be tested in practice. This chapter will trace the roots of what has proved to be a difficult journey of translating a paper portfolio to a collaborative ePortfolio and will share the valuable lessons, both pedagogical and technological, which have been learnt and continue to be evaluated and incorporated into the teaching of the degree programme.

BACKGROUND

The National Student Survey in 2005 showed that the student experience of Personal Development Planning (PDP) at the University of Kent was not equitable across different departments. As a result, the University undertook a campus-wide review
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