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## Unlocking the Potential of the ePortfolio for Work-based Learning

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### Background

Trevithick (2005, p.3) describes social work as an 'interrelated system of values, theory and practice'. Students are assessed for their academic abilities in university, but the integration of this learning – together with their practice-based skills – mainly takes place whilst on placement. Students work with a practice educator and gather evidence so that their competence can be judged against National Occupational Standards (NOS). The evidence is traditionally presented in a paper-based portfolio, which is assessed at a Practice Assessment Panel (PAP) composed of practice educators and academic tutors.

The authors identified problems with these portfolios:

- Students usually waited to the end of the placement to complete them, thereby giving little opportunity for formative feedback.
- All portfolios followed the same format and there was no opportunity for personalisation. There was little sense that students owned the portfolio;

rather they saw it as just another 'hoop to jump through'.

- Students were encouraged to keep a log of their experiences and to reflect on their learning whilst on placement, though they were not required to submit this in the portfolio. Thus, the account was not monitored in any systematic way. Many students did not keep a log, lessening their opportunities to learn by reflecting on their practice.
- Students were supposed to share their portfolios from their first placement with their practice educators in their second placement and to build on their previous learning. In practice this rarely happened.
- Extensive administrative effort was spent collecting portfolios, checking contents, storing then distributing them to assessors.

### Case study

In response to these problems the authors developed a PebblePad practice ePortfolio, referred to as a 'webfolio', based on the traditional paper-based portfolio. A pilot

group of students and practice educators was recruited to trial the development. It was considered important to mirror as closely as possible the traditional portfolio so as not to disadvantage the pilot group of students and also to ensure the practice educators and PAP were not presented with too different an assessment format. A 'blog tool', to enable students to record and reflect upon their placement experiences, was introduced into the webfolio. Practice educators and tutors were given access to their student's webfolio. From their earlier studies, students were already familiar with recording information electronically in PebblePad.

The pilot project, using nine students and four practice educators, was designed to identify possible problems with the webfolio and the organisational systems prior to implementing the webfolio for the whole student group. Practice educators were recruited and all their allocated students were asked to participate. Only one student refused. The authors ran training sessions for the students and practice educators, monitored the use of the webfolio, and 'problem solved' as the placement evolved.

## Evaluation

Students' and practice educators' views were monitored throughout the placement and a student focus group was held at the end of placement. At PAP, practice educators were asked for their overall evaluation, and the views of

external assessors who had read the webfolios were also elicited.

Students:

- welcomed the opportunity to personalise their webfolios;
- generally found the 'blog tool' useful in recording and reflecting on their practice experiences;
- liked the multimedia capability and ability to hyperlink their blog to the NOS;
- found their material easier to organise compared with paper-based portfolios;
- found that building their webfolio became a continuous process rather than a final product;
- were better able to share their experiences with practice educators and felt better supported overall;
- with additional learning needs (e.g. dyslexia) indicated that they found it easier to organise and to write;
- reported that the use of the webfolio facilitated their learning and professional development.

Practice educators:

- found webfolios less arduous to complete than paper-based portfolios;
- felt better informed about the students' daily activities and better able to monitor student performance;

- felt that the students took more responsibility for their personal learning on placement;
- found it easier to locate the evidence needed to meet the assessment requirements.

PAP members:

- found the quality of webfolio superior to paper-based formats;
- indicated that they found it easier to demonstrate the process of learning and development and to identify the extent to which students had met the NOS practice requirements;
- indicated that they felt students had put much more effort into developing their webfolios than the paper-based examples scrutinised at PAP;
- suggested that in future all students should be offered this option.

## The future

It is clear from the feedback provided by students, practice educators and a number of Practice Assessment Panel assessors that the use of the webfolio has considerable advantages over the current format involving paper-based submissions. The task of assessing students' performance on placement is a complex one – not least because it is difficult for students and practice educators to identify, monitor and assess their learning and professional development in ways that can be demonstrated in an accessible

format that is easy to navigate. The findings of this pilot project indicate that it was possible for students to record better quality evidence and to focus their attention on learning rather than the time-consuming task of gathering paper-based evidence. These benefits have profound implications not only for student learning but also for their ongoing Continuing Professional Development (CPD).

## References

TREVITHICK, P. (2005) *Social Work Skills: a practice handbook*, 2nd edition, Maidenhead: Open University Press.

## About the authors

**Alan Howe** has a first degree in psychology and a masters degree in community care. He started his social work career in children's homes then moved into generic social work. It was whilst working as a qualified social worker that Alan developed his interest in practice teaching, which eventually led to him into social work education.

Alan has been eager to embrace technology to facilitate student learning and was an early adopter of Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs). He has pioneered the use of PebblePad e-portfolios in the University of Gloucestershire Social Work degree programme. He has spoken at several national and international conferences and workshops on the use of e-portfolios.

**Andrea Collins** is a qualified and registered social worker with first degree in sociology and a masters qualification in social work. She started her career working with adults with learning difficulties, then moved into children's services with the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC). In 2001, she became a child care manager in a busy London borough. She has extensive practical and managerial experience of working in child protection. Prior to joining the university in 2007, she was working as a child protection trainer and consultant.

Having completed an e-portfolio herself as part of her teaching qualification, she recognises their value in enabling learners to reflect upon and record their learning journeys.