Building a professional growth mindset

Nottingham Trent University (March 2019)

Summary

The school of animal, rural and environmental sciences (ARES) at Nottingham Trent University (NTU) combines reflective tasks in PebblePad with work placements and taught classes to create a “work-integrated” curriculum for its horticulture students.

The school sees a clear role for e-portfolios within its foundation and BSc (Hons) degrees in horticulture – and not just to record achievement of competencies. The employability framework developed for these courses in 2018-2019 places activities in PebblePad at the centre of strands of learning which run across all three years of the course, driving the development of a professional growth mindset in students.

The framework for work-integrated learning was developed in response to NTU’s overarching strategy for employability released in 2015.

Challenge

Evidence points to a clear role for e-portfolios in promoting deeper learning and, more recently, in bringing employability skills to the forefront of educational agendas. What has been more difficult to achieve, however, is the active participation of all students in the processes that underpin the production of e-portfolios, although in the workplace the skills derived from these processes have never been more needed.

It is not only students who need to “see” the value of e-portfolios. Course teams and workplace mentors also have to grasp the value of e-portfolios when it comes to preparing students for the workplace.

Making sure e-portfolios were firmly at the heart of his courses was the challenge taken up by ARES senior lecturer, David Jukes. Having secured funding from the Trent Institute for Learning and Teaching for a two-year, part-time sabbatical, he set out to demonstrate that an e-portfolio-based framework in PebblePad could instil employability throughout a three-year course.

The journey is still unfolding but is kept on track by the school’s employability delivery plan, an annually reviewed game plan for work-integrated learning developed in response to the university’s overarching strategy for employability released in 2015.

Solution

David Jukes began his work by mapping out the employability framework for the FdSc. and BSc.(Hons) degrees in horticulture in a series of PebblePad workbooks. (A PebblePad workbook enables tutor-designed content to surface in all learners’ portfolios; learners can also save this content in their own personal spaces.)
The workbook model created for these courses has since proved transferable to the BSc. (Hons.) degree in food science and technology and, with adaptations, to a higher level apprenticeship in food science. Plans are now underway to apply the framework to T-level courses, due to come on stream in 2020.

**How it works**

The workbooks in PebblePad for the FdSc. in horticulture take students through a scaffolded three-year programme of activities based around three strands or pillars of activity designed to drive the development of a professional growth mindset.

For example, in the first year, strands of work-integrated learning (WIL), continuing professional development (CPD) activities, and digital identity management on Twitter and Instagram introduce students to the fundamentals of employability.

**NTU employability framework for horticulture FdSc. and BSc. (Hons) degrees**

Course modules running alongside the employability framework have undergone what NTU calls a “curriculum refresh” to ensure students have sufficient opportunities in the design of formal learning to develop and demonstrate both their employability potential and their digital literacy skills. And alongside these are work placements – horticulture students, for example, may take up placements at Chatsworth House and food science and technology students at major food processing plants.

Signposting from individual modules and tutorial workshops ensures use of the workbooks is integral to the course, backed up by assessment, both formative and summative, of key activities. These ploys ensure both students and staff see use of the PebblePad workbooks as “core” rather than peripheral to the course.

Finally, whether working on a module, going out on placement or as a result of CPD opportunities arising elsewhere in their lives, students record and evaluate the learning derived from their experiences in learning journals. The advent of Pebble Pocket, an app powered by PebblePad that allows users create assets on the go, has made it easier to capture both the evidence and students’ reflection on it.

“We want students to reflect in action, not on an activity.”

David Jukes, senior lecturer, school of animal, rural and environmental sciences, Nottingham Trent University
Progressive development
A key phrase in the NTU employability framework is “progressive development”. This means the focus over a three-year course shifts in line with the level of understanding students are expected to derive from their e-portfolio tasks.

At the outset, the focus is purely on skills of reflective writing, CPD recording and digital identity management. In year 2, students progress to more demanding evaluative tasks in an employability module before curating their experiences and assets in their final year in a synoptic presentation of who they are and what they have achieved.

David Jukes describes this final stage assessment as a “3D CV”. To produce the CV, students draw on their reflective writing, activity logs and other achievements recorded in PebblePad to pitch for a real or imaginary job in their chosen industry. By this stage, the student has progressed in mindset as well as physical achievements. “Here I am” is as much a real-world statement of professional competence and work readiness as it is an end-of-course assignment.

Dave Jukes describes the process here in a presentation at our April 2019 student experience experts group meeting.

Benefits
Time-consuming in the early stages – particularly when working with course teams to determine their requirements – the framework and its supporting “Show me how” resources, in the main, Camtasia videos, are possible to repurpose for other contexts. Hence the investment in a part-time sabbatical is bearing fruit for the school, at a time when provision is widening to encompass degree apprenticeships and T-levels.

Other emerging benefits are:

- Workbooks now provide guidance for workplace mentors as well as students, enabling them to share a common understanding
- There is greater clarity for students, mentors and tutors about what e-portfolios are, and what can be achieved with them
- With the employability framework in place, it has proved easy to incorporate relevant new developments such as Open Badges
- As PebblePad users have lifetime access to their accounts, content curated during the course can be used in other contexts, and the process of e-portfolio building need not cease once a course is completed
- Through e-portfolio building, students develop a professional mindset (see model below) that enables them to contribute fully to society as graduates and professionals

**Tips**

To get all students on board with e-portfolios, PebblePad-based activities have to be designed into the curriculum and scaffolded appropriately, with guidance written into all assignment briefs. But to get e-portfolio activities launched successfully, you should also consider the following:

**For students**
- Start by making your e-portfolio account the location for those important things you will need later – for example, work experience agreement forms, logs of work placement hours and health and safety training certificates
- Tagging ensures these items and other essential items can be “pulled” from the system as required
- Third-year students can be good sources of guidance for those new to e-portfolios
- Incremental skills development in face-to-face sessions works better than providing information all at once, but mechanisms still need to be built in to enable you to access tutorial, technical and peer support when needed.

**For course designers**
- Models and visual representations help make concepts more comprehensible
- e-Portfolios are about process as much as product so learning objectives and assessments should signal the value of skills development. It is the assessment framework, after all, that drives student engagement
- Terminology can be customised in PebblePad so should at all times be friendly and jargon-free
- Consider ensuring students have their own Yammer group for peer-to-peer support.

**For managers**
- Appoint an e-portfolio lead. This person will undergo additional training and take on some coordination and student support tasks while also working closely with the employability lead
- Nothing stays the same so an allowance of time is needed for the e-portfolio lead to monitor feedback and make any necessary changes
- Effective integration of employability skills won’t happen on its own, even when a sophisticated e-portfolio tool like PebblePad is available. Having a departmental employability delivery plan linked to key performance indicators will focus minds on the importance of employability and enable you to monitor progress
- The whole process of engagement needs to be driven.

**Find out more**

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