

From potential to reality – the development and use of an e-portfolio in social work education. (0162)

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Abstract

Students studying for a degree in social work are required to undertake one hundred and seventy days of direct practice with service users in social care settings (TCSW, 2011). Traditionally students on practice placements have produced a hard copy portfolio which compiles evidence to meet a range of educational and professional requirements, as well as demonstrating key attributes such as critical thinking and reflection. Following a scoping exercise which demonstrated that there were significant advantages to using an electronic portfolio, the School of Health and Social Care at the University of Lincoln developed, piloted and introduced an e-portfolio on both its' undergraduate and Master's social work degree programmes. This paper provides a rationale and contextualisation for the introduction of this type of innovative digital technology and reviews the pedagogical and practical opportunities and limitations presented by the e-portfolio. This presentation will also provide an opportunity for participants to view the e-portfolio in operation.

Outline

Social work degree programmes are often seen as demanding as they require students to demonstrate the attainment of both high level academic skills and the demonstration of professional knowledge, skills and values relevant to professional practice in a demanding and contested context. (Dunk-West, 2013; Humphrey, 2011; Mathews et al, 2014) Social work education is comprised of a number of key component elements including the requirement that students must demonstrate their professional capability to work with service users in practice settings over extended periods of time, approximating to fifty percent of their overall course of study. (TCSW, 2011) As this practice element is a pivotal means of assessing professional capability, it demands the production of a considerable amount of work from the student. Typically, this will involve the production of critical analyses of practice, reflective summaries, reflections on directly observed practice, and the gathering of

feedback from service users. Traditionally, students on practice placements have produced a hard copy portfolio which collates this substantial body of evidence. Students have then been required to submit their portfolio to a central collation point where they are stored and managed, often at considerable inconvenience to administrative staff. Assessors have then been required to collect the portfolio, mark and return it to the same point, where it is then returned to the student.

There were a number of inherent disadvantages to this system;

1. It was cumbersome and inefficient;
2. Paper based portfolios were prone to being lost, damaged or mislaid; both by students and staff;
3. Educationally it was difficult to engage readily with students as feedback and dialogue was slowed by the necessity of having the portfolio to hand.

Consequently, it was decided to undertake a literature review and a scoping exercise to determine if developing an electronic version of the portfolio would be feasible and address these concerns.

Background

A literature review, which incorporated an analysis of a number of research projects, suggested that potentially there were a significant range of pedagogical, practical and professional advantages to the introduction of an e-portfolio. For example, the development of multimedia technology skills (Abrami & Barrett, 2005; Barrett, 2000; Heath, 2002, 2005; Wade et al., 2005; Wall et al, 2006). Traditionally social work courses, with their emphasis on the recruitment of students with well-developed people skills and with a recognised emphasis on widening participation, do not attract students from digitally competent backgrounds. Professional practice, however, demands a high level of digital skill as social workers are required to gather, process and use significant amounts of information in an electronic format (Rutter & Brown, 2012; Seymour & Seymour, 2011).

The literature also suggested that the use of e-portfolios assists students to develop communication and problem solving skills, both of which are essential to professional practice (Abrami & Barrett, 2005; Canada, 2002). Connected to this research highlighted the ease with which feedback could be provided through the use of digital spaces within an e-portfolio, and how teaching and learning could be enhanced through the provision of readily accessible multimedia tools. (Abrami & Barrett, 2005; Ahn, 2004; Lorenzo & Ittleson, 2005)

A further advantage was that e-portfolios can be easily and simultaneously accessed by a number of people. This was an important consideration as social work portfolios need to be accessed by a range of people and there is an expectation that a 'community of learning' will develop around the production of a portfolio as it is a shared responsibility between the student and a range of other stakeholders. (Ahn, 2004; Canada, 2002; Heath, 2005; Wade et al., 2005). Traditionally this has been problematical as by definition there was only one hard copy of the portfolio available which had to be passed around from person to person.

Another clear advantage for a professional course of study such as social work was that an e-portfolio could be used as a readily transportable record of personal and professional development which could be taken forward from one placement to the next, and beyond into qualified practice. (Abrami & Barrett, 2005; Strudler & Wetzel, 2005; Wade et al., 2005). Again this is of significance as there is a growing realisation in social work that professional learning and development is career long and that initial learning gained on a degree course provides little more than a sound platform on which to build (Keen et al 2013; Mathews et al 2014). Finally, it was identified that e-portfolios are easy to maintain, edit, store and update (Canada, 2002; Heath, 2002, 2005). This addressed one of our key concerns and potentially provided a significant improvement over the existing system.

Development and implementation

A purpose built e-portfolio based on a WordPress platform was developed, piloted and introduced over a two year period. It is now operational across both qualifying social work programmes and is used for teaching, learning, the provision of feedback and for the assessment and marking of work. Due to its success, it is also being

modified for use on other University of Lincoln degree programmes outside of the School of Health and Social Care.

Feedback has been sought and gained from students and from stakeholders involved in placement provision.

A number of practical advantages have been identified including

- accessibility;
- portability;
- ease of use;
- security;
- indestructability!

Pedagogical advantages include the ability to;

- give and receive instant feedback with the student engaging in a 'live' debate with their tutor or practice educator;
- develop a learning environment at a time which suits students, often outside of traditional 'classroom' hours;
- use multimedia tools within the structure of the e-portfolio which especially benefits students with more visual learning skills;
- tailor interactive teaching and learning to address specific student need.

There have however also been a number of limitations that have been identified.

These include;

- the amount of administrative time required to link students and stakeholders to individual e-portfolios;
- resistance from some practice educators and staff to embrace new technology.

The e-portfolio continues to evolve and remains a 'work in progress.' It has, however, made a substantial contribution to teaching and learning and is now an integral part of the digital University.

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