



The University of
Nottingham

ePortfolios



Centre for **Integrative** Learning

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Research Question

The context of this research is a module run in 2008-09 as a contribution to an institutional student award scheme in a UK university. The module encouraged undergraduates to develop understanding of their own extra-curricular learning and its importance for their employability, using eportfolios and with the support of volunteer coaches recruited from amongst the university's employees.

The research set out to explore the role of an eportfolio in supporting students' understanding of the value of their informal learning for employers. It focussed on the following research questions.

- What is the role of an eportfolio in supporting reflection in this context?
- What roles did staff volunteer coaches adopt and how did they develop an understanding of what constitutes an adequate input?
- How important a part did the eportfolio tool play in learners' processes to capture value from their informal learning?

Context

The last ten years in UK universities have seen the rise of student awards, official endorsements of student achievements beyond the bounds of the formal curriculum. Many of these awards have the explicit aim of enhancing student employability and encourage skills development through extra-curricular and co-curricular activities. In most cases, staff support for this learning is relatively light. Occasionally eportfolios feature, mainly in relation to assessment.

For the module offered by the Centre for Integrative Learning (CIL) as part of the University of Nottingham Advantage Award, however, the formative use of eportfolios was made central, as significant emphasis was placed on each student's ongoing reflection on an episode of informal learning sustained over time and supported by interactions with a volunteer staff coach.

The module's aim was to foster the students' awareness and analytical skills and give them practice in understanding, interpreting and presenting their informal learning experiences, so that they would make some progress towards:

- Being able to do justice to themselves in job applications and interviews
- Operating autonomously – the process of following the module's programme of activities should increase their confidence, so that they would feel more able to analyse and articulate their own learning and skills independently in future.

The eportfolio tool chosen was PebblePad: <http://www.pebblelearning.co.uk/>

The module had three phases and these are shown in Figure 1

| Phase | Activities | Description |
|---------------|--|---|
| 1 Nov-Dec | Formal training and goal setting, alongside extra-curricular informal learning | Sequence of four twilight workshop sessions for students, where module tutors led training on teamwork, using the eportfolio, goal setting, reflective writing and responding to feedback; leading to the setting of goals around each participant's choice of three employability skills. |
| 2 Jan-May | Ongoing extra-curricular activity. Student-coach dialogues | Each student gathered evidence of achievement, learning and reflection in an eportfolio and share it with their coach for feedback |
| 3 May-June | Preparation for final assessment and eportfolio presentation | Coaches' took part in a moderation meeting with module tutors, discussing the coach role and feedback given, setting the scene for summative assessment by the coach of the student's satisfactory completion of the programme of module activities, including a presentation developed from eportfolio evidence, for sharing with an employer, f2f or online, on which the employer would give feedback. |

Figure 1: The three module phases

Comparing features of the CIL module with those of other UK HE student awards suggests the existence of two recognition models (Figure 2). A common model recognises informal and experiential learning retrospectively, in response to a summative piece of reflection on past activities. The CIL model, by contrast, emphasises supported ongoing reflection on activities while they are being carried out, plus a retrospective view and a different approach to assessment.

| <i>Common UK HE student award model : Retrospective recognition</i> | <i>The CIL HE student award model Recognition of current activities</i> |
|---|---|
| Awards at many other universities operate through summative assessment and retrospective validation /recognition | The CIL module requires formative inputs <u>during</u> the course of the informal learning activities, where reflection and learning run in parallel |
| Learners are left to pursue individual activities and then apply for their award | CIL provides initial training, in common with some other HEIs' systems which may also provide some level of ongoing staff support, often optional and usually from careers staff, sometimes from tutors. CIL organises coaching support and requires learner to interact with coach on at least three occasions. |
| Retrospective-reflective written application for the award is submitted at the end of the process, plus interview. Explicit comparisons with process of applying for a job. Employer involvement provides validation. | Formative feedback is provided by coach on initial plan, on midpoint reflection and progress review and on draft summative presentation. Success requires completion of all required stages and coach validation of presentation. Students may opt out but those completing with coach guidance should pass. Meeting the employer and receiving their feedback on the presentation is a reward, not part of assessment. |

Figure 2: The CIL recognition model compared with a more common model

The CIL team had run a shorter, small-scale pilot of the award module in the previous year, involving student committee members in a Hall of Residence and Hall tutors as coaches. The PebblePad eportfolio had been used and, in spite of its provision of structured templates for reflection, students had struggled with reflective writing. However, overall, the pilot had indicated the potential strength of the module, the

centrality of the eportfolio as a vehicle for capturing evidence of informal learning and especially the value of providing coaches. Student feedback on the role fulfilled by the coaches was extremely favourable.

However, the pilot had taken place late in the academic year, after most of the students' activities were over, and so the use of the eportfolio had been largely retrospective. Contemplating widening out and scaling up the activity for 2008-09 and being able to use the whole year and support students to develop their eportfolios alongside their ongoing engagement in extra-curricular roles, the CIL team faced a number of questions. How could students in other contexts be supported? Who would be the coaches in these new settings and what role(s) could/would they play? What would be the relative value of the coach and of the eportfolio in these contexts? What data would be available to enable us to research these questions?

Theory and research on which the project builds

This section considers how the research literature on eportfolio use informed the three-phase pedagogic design of the module and shaped the research questions.

Research indicates that successful eportfolio use is dependent on understanding the potential benefits of the eportfolio in the particular context and, as a result of this, ensuring the purpose is transparent to all users. In addition, thoughtful activity design, which integrates the eportfolio use as well as supporting the processes involved, is important (Joyes et al, 2010). It is the processes involved in developing eportfolios that have been found to be most valued by users (Hartnell-Young et al, 2007).. The module in this research includes the processes of planning, information capture and retrieval reflection, planning, reflection, feedback, collaboration and presentation. It is the approach to the collaborative element that sets the CIL award module's use of an eportfolio apart.

The tangible benefits of the use of eportfolios include the ability to share developing ideas and receive prompt feedback, to capture evidence in a wide range of settings, etc. (JISC, 2008). Tools such as PebblePad also provide support for skills analysis, action planning and the development of a web-based presentation that can be shared with and commented on by selected people. (This functionality has clear benefits over paper-based, email or blog solutions and importantly for the module's pedagogy it placed the learner at the centre with ownership and control over decisions about what to share and when)

The definition of a *presentational eportfolio* as 'a purposeful aggregation of digital items – ideas, evidence, reflections, feedback etc, which "presents" a selected audience with evidence of a person's learning and/or ability' (Sutherland & Powell, 2007) is useful to consider. Interestingly, rich eportfolio tools such as PebblePad, with well-structured templates for reflection and other processes, do not offer specific, pedagogic support for providing and receiving feedback or writing reflectively. That eportfolios do support reflection is widely reported in the literature but what is less clear is *how* they do it, an issue that was central to the module design, as participants were required to reflect upon their extra-curricular learning experiences and indicate how this reflective activity supported skills development of use to an employer. But difficult questions arise from this. Is the nature of reflections and feedback which are recorded in an eportfolio likely to be the same as the nature of those that are shared? There are issues here about what a researcher can legitimately access and what we can therefore know about the actual value of eportfolios for reflection – a factor we were conscious of in framing our methodology (see below).

Reflective writing is noted in the literature to be problematic (JISC, 2008). The prime importance of discourse with others to support learning through eportfolio use, highlighted by Smith (1997) and Murray (2007), has emerged clearly from JISC-funded projects (JISC, 2008). However this discourse need not necessarily be written and a reflective dialogue, either an internal one or shared with others, is likely to be beneficially triggered by the collection of evidence to develop a learning narrative within the eportfolio. There is evidence that sharing reflections as part of a spoken dialogue is less threatening than sharing them digitally, because talk is ephemeral whereas a digital exchange leaves a permanent record of personal admissions, failings and weaknesses (even opens the participant up to litigation in some contexts such as Medicine; Hartnell-Young, 2007).

What is the nature of reflection in the context of the CIL award module? The participants select some employability skills, such as working with others, time management etc, that they wish to develop, then set themselves goals to achieve in their extra-curricular activity and then reflect upon what they have

learnt in terms of useful employability skills. In formalising the reflection, the description of the skills and the context in which they were developed are important evidence, but this descriptive activity 'may also become a "sticking point" ... in that there are many reports of students who do not seem able, without help, to deepen their reflection beyond the descriptive account' (Moon, 2005). Other forms of reflection that could be important include the 'dialogic', i.e. considering other possibilities and interpretations, and the 'metacognitive' (Fogarty, 1994), i.e. understanding how they are learning and considering how their perceptions of what employability skills are have changed, as well as the 'new' qualities they have acquired on the journey. Evidence of not only retrospective reflection (reflection on action; Schon, 1983) but prospective reflection (reflection for action; Eraut, 1995) is something that one would expect to see, with the participants developing new understandings and setting new goals within their extra-curricular contexts.

However there seems to be a more important attribute that the participants are learning through the CIL award module. They are being supported in developing a perspective on their informal learning derived from the World of Work (WoW) and an understanding of the nature of the skills and qualities that are of value in it. This is requiring them to reflect upon their experience and think ahead to future experiences as a prospective member of the WoW community in their chosen career field. Current members of this community were going to be important in providing authentic feedback to the participants as they developed this understanding. For this reason feedback on the sense-making journey itself was needed as well as feedback at the end from an employer.

This pedagogic approach has its basis in situated learning theory (Lave and Wenger, 1991) where learning takes place in an authentic activity and where 'cognitive apprenticeship supports learning in a domain by enabling students to acquire, develop and use cognitive tools in authentic domain activity. Learning ... advances through collaborative social interaction and the social construction of knowledge' (Brown, Collins & Duguid, 1989). The CIL module engaged the use of volunteer coaches from across the University to support this cognitive apprenticeship during the module as well as employers to provide feedback on the student presentation at the end. Key research questions were related to the ways reflection was supported in this context and the roles of the coach and the eportfolio. Coaches were to be volunteers with no experience of supporting students in this type of context or of using the eportfolio. Hence the research questions:

- What is the value of an eportfolio tool in supporting reflection in this context?
- What roles did staff volunteers coaches adopt and how did they develop an understanding of what constitutes an adequate input?
- How important a part did the eportfolio tool play in learners' processes to capture value from their informal learning?

Methodology

As far as possible the research data collected needed to be naturally occurring (Bryman & Burgess, 1994), so as to avoid overloading either students or coaches. The students had to fit in the module events alongside their extra-curricular activities and in addition to their academic courses. For the volunteer coaches - busy members of staff taking on extra duties - we wished to avoid making the task seem any kind of burden. We did not want any extra demands, such as interviews at mid-point or after the year end, to affect retention, which we knew from the pilot could be an issue.

The need to use naturally occurring data and also the lack of access to learners' developmental eportfolios while being able to access only some of the presentational eportfolios, for ethical reasons, makes the context of the CIL award module, though a valuable one to research, quite problematic. Figure 3 outlines the naturally-occurring data and its accessibility for research purposes. It summarises the data we had available, to develop an understanding of the roles the eportfolio and coaches played in supporting reflection. Voluntary informed consent for anonymised use of the accessible data from students, coaches and employers was gained following the Bera ethical guidelines for educational research (Bera, 2004)

| <i>Course activities – in sequence</i> | <i>Naturally occurring data</i> | <i>Accessible to researcher</i> |
|--|---|---------------------------------|
| Course information | Module Handbook including course structure, | Yes |

| | | |
|---|--|--|
| | timeline, checklist of actions, and material on supporting reflection; Website; blog for FAQs plus emails | |
| Student information on sign up. | Gender, year, volunteering activity etc | Yes |
| Coach information on sign up. | Gender, institutional role etc, | Yes |
| Student baseline skills audit | Questionnaire completed within the CIL training | Yes |
| Student – coach interaction | Email and/or face- to –face meetings | Not directly, but some information was gained through discussion at the coaches' moderation meeting. |
| Coach-module staff interaction | Emails from coaches raising queries, answered by CIL team members and posted on a blog for the coaches' community to share | Yes |
| Coach moderation meeting | Artefact from interaction with the student, report of progress, their role and issues. | Yes. Permissions were sought to audio-record these meetings. Artefacts related to their feedback in the student eportfolios were shared. |
| Coach evaluation | Questionnaire with feedback on the value of the course information and support they had received, no of meetings with student, use of eportfolio etc. | Yes |
| Student module evaluation | Questionnaire completed at the end of the course to judge the value of the training, the eportfolio etc | Yes. |
| Student presentation | Presentational eportfolio using evidence from the eportfolio and elsewhere. Those who presented this F2F had a slimmer presentation than those who could not attend the meeting with the employer. | Only with the permission of the student, sought as part of the module evaluation to ensure informed. Consent. |
| Student eportfolio | This was a personal and private space to be used freely by students after training. | No (the eportfolio was introduced as a personal and private space and, ethically, permissions could not be sought) |
| Coach sign off for student module activities. | Checklist for satisfactory module completion. Includes comments on student performance suitable for viewing by student. | Yes |
| Employer feedback on presentation | Written feedback on proforma provided | Yes |

Figure 3: The naturally occurring data showing availability for research use

However, additional and accessible data were available, as both the CIL module leader and the trainer had contact with students, coaches and employers at different points in the module via email, during training events and at the presentation award. An audio-recorded discussion was facilitated by the researcher to capture the CIL staff's reflections after the module was completed. In addition documents providing information about the background to the award, the nature of the pilot and its outcomes were constructed by the CIL module leader and trainer and discussions were held to resolve any ambiguities and make explicit key aspects of the module, for example, the reasons for the award, the module student centred pedagogy, the choice of coaches, the role of coaches etc. Data analysis to explore the research questions relied upon all these different data sources to develop an understanding of how the student and coach were interacting and of eportfolio use.

Findings with evidence

The following data about the student participants and the coaches define the scope of the implementation which provided the evidence discussed below.

32 students began and finished Phase 1 of the module (an introduction to the skills and the contexts within which the module aims could be met) and 11 made the necessary commitment to the module aims

by entering Phase 2 and carrying on through Phase 3 to completion. In addition to traditional extra-curricular roles on university committees and in sports teams, the activities chosen by this group of students included literacy volunteering in schools (at home and abroad), work with the Red Cross, and British-Chinese cultural exchange. The module attracted 42 volunteer coaches of which 11 (mainly administrative staff and postgraduate hall tutors) were used. The following discussion addresses each of the research questions in turn.

What is the value of an eportfolio tool in supporting reflection in this context?

Within the complex module pedagogy the eportfolio was to provide structure and a repository for evidence and reflections in relation to goals. Additionally it was to be the vehicle for dialogues with the coach as well as the employer – members of the WoW community. At the coach moderation meeting, concerns were expressed over the limited nature of the reflection the students were engaged with. There was a recognition that writing reflectively was a difficult skill and that the f2f discussion with the student often generated more significant dialogic reflection, in one case instead of, rather than as a precursor to, the reflective writing in the eportfolio. It was possible to express and address this at an early stage in the module because the eportfolio was being used regularly by all students in Phase 2, alongside or after an activity and in preparation for the coach meeting. This prompted the coach to provide feedback at an early stage to enhance the nature of reflection.

Illustration: Student X Student X was on a mentoring placement in a secondary school where she met with final year pupils (15 and 16 year olds) and supported them with their life choices including application to further education. Part way through the placement she stated in her eportfolio that the mentoring placement had encouraged her to research possible careers related to helping individuals with personal problems. As a result she sought advice from the school counsellor and pursued further volunteering experience with Childline. The question is whether it was purely the volunteering experience or the opportunity to engage in ongoing reflection on her work, her skills and her motivations with the support of the eportfolio tool and the coach that had an impact. It is difficult to unravel this, but there is evidence in X's eportfolio early on of her using examples of her sessions with the pupils to reflect upon the skills she targeted for development, that of interpersonal skills, ability to motivate the pupils and problem solving. However the reflection was about the event rather than what had been learnt from it and the coach encouraged her to think through her actions in an event and reflect on what skills she learnt from this. This reflection on action may well have supported this student's growing awareness that she did possess the necessary skills for future involvement with Childline.

Some coaches expressed concern about their lack of experience in supporting reflective writing but this does not seem to have affected the outcome, since all the students rated their coach's input highly and employer feedback to the students was overwhelmingly positive. This seems to point to a process generated within the module, whereby the coaches developed an understanding of their role experientially. Discussion of the following research question explores the roles played by the coaches and the ways in which these evolved.

What roles did staff volunteers coaches adopt and how did they develop an understanding of what constitutes an adequate input?

Given the importance of the coach role in encouraging deeper reflection and providing concrete advice, this section explores the staff volunteers' developing understanding of their role by addressing three sub-questions:

- What was the nature of the role expected of the coaches?
- Who were the coaches?
- What did the coaches do?

What was the nature of the role expected of the coaches?

The choice to build a coaching rather than a mentoring role into the module arose from a consideration of the literature. The coach role was a less onerous one and less likely to put off staff from volunteering. Figure 4 from Clutterbuck (2004), comparing these roles in the NHS, was included in the module

information and discussion at the coaches' introductory meeting supported the notion that the coach was the most appropriate role in this context.

| Coaching | Mentoring |
|--|---|
| Concerned with task | Concerned with implications beyond the task |
| Focuses on skills & performance | Focuses on capability & potential |
| Primarily a line management role | Works best off-line |
| Agenda set by or with the coach | Agenda set by the learner |
| Emphasises feedback to the learner | Emphasises feedback & reflection by the learner |
| Typically addresses a short-term need | Typically a longer-term relationship |
| Feedback & discussion primarily explicit | Feedback & discussion primarily about implicit, intuitive issues & behaviours |

Figure 4: Coaching and mentoring roles in the NHS (Clutterbuck, 2004)

The Clutterbuck coaching model required a little adaptation. The intended coach role involved no element of line management; it was that of an interlocutor, an aid to reflection, a critical friend giving feedback through the module. The module handbook made available to both coach and participant at the start of the module defined it as providing:

- guidance and formative feedback on the student's development of the content of their eportfolio, helping the student to draw out important ideas and reflect on how to make improvements to their action plan, ePortfolio and presentation
- support and motivation to help the student see the scheme through
- *sign-off of the completed schedule of activities for each student including the presentation before they show this to an employer.* (Module Handbook 2008-09)

Implicit in the text in italics was an assessment dimension to the role, which became fully explicit only through discussions in the coaches' moderation meetings, midway through the module, which set the scene for Phase 3. In other words, the coaches' growing understanding of their role was to some extent defined by their grasp of the roles of the other key actors in the module, i.e., the students, the module tutors, the employers, the support offered by the module information and training sessions as well as by the eportfolio. For example the handbook described the student role within the student-coach relationship, allocating responsibility for driving the process to the student, who was to:

- be proactive in arranging the two meetings
- do the appropriate preparation for each meeting, presenting appropriate material for discussion and feedback
- collect evidence to demonstrate ability to respond to feedback.

Who were the coaches?

An invitation email for volunteer coaches resulted in 42 staff attending a lunchtime training session. This provided an introduction, brief discussion of key concepts such as 'coaching' rather than 'mentoring' – and a guided tour of the handbook highlighting the basic requirements and the timeline. The importance of the coaches' moderation meeting was explained and the online information and online community with a blog for FAQs were introduced. The volunteers provided brief information about their employment roles and experience. Figure 5 shows the nature of staff who volunteered, by university role, sex and, for academic staff, by subject.

| <i>Staff who volunteered as coaches for the module , Autumn 2009</i> | Sex | | Subject areas | |
|--|-----------|-----------|---------------|-------------------|
| | F | M | Sci | Arts & Social Sci |
| Staff in Schools | | | | |
| Academic staff (non-professorial) | 8 (2) | -- | 3 (2) | 5 |
| Professors | -- | 2 | 1 | 1 |
| Hall tutors (postgrads) | 3 (1) | 5 (2) | 4 (2) | 4 (1) |
| Academic-related admin in Schools | 8 | 2 (2) | 4 (1) | 6 (1) |
| Staff from other parts of the University | | | | |
| Student Services | 1 | 1 | | |
| Information Services | 2 | 1 | | |
| University central admin (Finance – Graduate School - International office – Marketing, Registrar's) | 6 (3) | 2 (1) | | |
| Totals | 28 | 13 | | |

Figure 5: Distribution of volunteer staff across the institution – the 11 coaches for the participants who completed the module are shown in brackets

Over twice as many female staff volunteered as men and 23 non-academics volunteered compared to 17 academics (includes postgraduate hall tutors). This high level of volunteering of non academics may reflect that, for these staff, it was a unique opportunity to engage with students in a learning support role, as well as to make use of their (non-academic) experience of the world of work which ranged across project management, management and administration, public relations and communications, finance, working internationally, in NGOs and the public services. Two volunteer coaches had experience of volunteering themselves and so knew firsthand the value this was to an employer. The CIL team had collected information from the students about their career ideas and now matched this roughly to the information coaches provided about themselves.

The introductory meeting agreed that the module leader would make first contact with their student via email and invite them to express their preference for a face to face meeting or to start online, going straight into dialogue about targets and planning via the eportfolio. Examples of what to expect from the student's action plan and skills were sent to coaches after the Christmas break. It was suggested that there be two formative meetings between student and coach plus a summative assessment meeting in which the assessment checklist and the presentation to the employer were 'signed off'.

What did the coaches do?

In Phase 2, in practice, the coach roles varied widely. As well as the anticipated critical friend role, supporting reflection and goal setting, some other roles played were:

- coach as activity provider – where the coach provided an extra-curricular activity themselves to support student reflection
- coach as potential validator of the activity – where the coach felt they should visit the activity site, modelling the employment role they held at the University
- coach identifying with student's lack of interest in using the eportfolio
- coach as eportfolio-phobic – where the opportunity to support the student in reflective writing was regularly passed up in favour of a face to face discussion

Here the coaches are seen to be adjusting to the contexts by offering the support that they felt was appropriate, rather than purely 'coaching'. The initial guidance to hold two formative coach–student

meetings seems to have been disregarded. One coach-student pairing had just one face to face meeting and shared one fairly final eportfolio item, while several others had three or four meetings and, in one case, the coach created an activity for the student and shared in it – this is the coach as extra-curricular activity provider.

These variations in practice were dependent on a variety of factors, the coaches' notions of what elements of their expertise and experience could be of value to specific students, the willingness of student and/or coach to share and write online, the easy frequency of informal meetings for those in Halls together or within the same department. A common response from many coaches, when asked in the questionnaire about their use of the guidance materials, was that they made little use of them. One of the coaches adds an insight into this. 'I rather followed my own experience, rather than fully engaging in the e-element of the programme. I didn't use the booklet much until I attended the session with the other coaches and I think this was partly because I was off on my own agenda. And we [the student and coach] have discussed a wider range of developmental issues rather than keeping to the task. The other coaches seemed to have been much more focussed on the task.' This signals the importance of the coach moderation meeting in gaining a shared understanding of norms and standards across very disparate practice, in preparation for the summative assessment activities in Phase 3.

Illustration: Student Y It is important to understand the background to the roles that the coaches were playing in order to understand their contributions. In the case of the coach as extra-curricular activity provider, participant Y was one of a small group involved in British–Chinese culture exchange, through visits and sharing experiences. Their target employability skills included organising and managing tasks, developing intercultural understanding etc. As part of this, Y kept a diary with observations and reflections on her engagement with British culture. Her coach felt that these reflections were purely descriptions and showed a lack of analysis of what she was observing. All the participants needed some level of guidance on reflective writing; however in this instance writing in a second language was an added difficulty. Although the group had had a Chinese meal together and worked on a comparison of English and Chinese foods and patterns of eating, the coach offered an additional day in her own home to share some Chinese and English cooking. She felt that this resulted in Y being more reflective about other cultures and that this extra activity supported her writing. The ability to be more reflective in discussion with the coach than in the eportfolio was mentioned by other coaches. However this coach did not just ask critical questions to guide the student in setting goals and support reflection but became part of the experience by which the student achieved the goals and was able to reflect upon them. A trained coach would probably have dealt with this situation differently, but the 'mentoring' role adopted by this coach seemed 'fit for purpose,' as this student's stated focus was on gaining the award rather than pitching for feedback from an employer.

It seems in Phase 2 of the module that the purposes, contexts and personalities involved generated coaching behaviours that were 'essentially idiosyncratic' (Hawkey, 1997:332), due to the complex interplay of cognitive, affective, interpersonal and situational factors. In marked contrast, in Phase 3, the styles of support and assessment with which they approached the module completion requirements and eportfolio presentations were more convergent, and the employer feedback was uniformly positive. For all coaches the moderation meeting, signalling the beginning of Phase 3, acted to define a more strongly standardised role in which they had to ensure that the student's evidence and presentation met agreed criteria. In this final assessment phase it seems that the critical friend stance seemed more familiar to them and more readily achievable.

How important a part did the eportfolio tool play in learners' processes to capture value from their informal learning?

The fact that all 11 participants who embarked on Phase 2 successfully completed the module indicates that its aim was achieved by all. There is evidence that the array of sources of support provided by the module all helped shape, over time, the students' chances of reaping richer benefits from their extra-curricular activities, and their capacity to do so.

Illustration: Student W Student W, a first year Social Sciences student, was strongly motivated to succeed on the module, but evidence from the coach at the moderation meeting indicated he had not addressed the need to use his eportfolio to reflect effectively on his activities. However his presentation at the end of the module reveals a story of significant personal growth through an eventful year. His

University sports team were relegated at the end of the winter season and, as a result, he was elected captain, ahead of an international player and in spite of his being a fresher. His presentational eportfolio outlines his leadership in a varsity video, showing him organising youth hockey tournaments and a closed-season squash ladder for his team. There is strong evidence that the team's relegation provided W with an opportunity and that the module's coinciding with this event enhanced it. He was provided with skills training and space to reflect on the opportunities his hockey-playing offered in the eportfolio, something he and his coach learnt to engage with after each key activity. He wrote in the final questionnaire, 'I no longer think of my involvement in hockey as simply team work. I have been able to analyse the development of a wide range of skills including leadership, time management, negotiation and interpersonal skills.' The value of using the eportfolio seems to have emerged for W later on in the module and appears to coincide with the coaches' moderation meeting, which highlighted the importance of the coach's role in ensuring the final presentation met the module aim. It appears that W's story reflects the importance of the specifics of the extra-curricular context as well as the contributions made by both the coach and an effective use of the eportfolio.

The CIL module differed from other student award modules in that it focussed on current extra-curricular activities and so could support prospection, i.e., reflections could shape the goals set and opportunities taken during the activity, as the students became more aware of the nature and value of the employability skills they were developing. We have presented evidence that the module does develop student understanding of their own extra-curricular learning and its importance for their employability.

The research adds further evidence of the suitability of an eportfolio in this context. However, the fact that additional pedagogic resources had to be developed to support reflection indicates that there is a need for a more comprehensive set of pedagogic tools to be situated within the eportfolio itself, if it is to be truly self-sufficient. We have some evidence that the SWOT analysis and target-setting tools in PebblePad were used effectively by the students. Yet, in spite of some training in reflective writing in Phase 1 of the CIL module, students still found it difficult and we conclude that, in addition to some generic pedagogic support materials, students need feedback from a member of the WoW community – this domain-specific pedagogic support appears critical. It appears that the value of the eportfolio in this context is to enable a narrative to be developed around evidence collected that 'triggers' reflection and potential future action.

The coach role is one of supporting the level of reflection at this early stage and this research suggests that, in spite of other roles the coaches may take, this one is critical in supporting the students and is clearly seen by them as authentic and useful feedback. Our view of the idiosyncratic nature of the roles taken by the coaches in Phase 2 of the module is that this represents a period of adjustment to the contexts and the needs of the students and also the coaches' own personal needs to work with students (part of the motivation for their involvement). This interpretation is supported by the coaches' disregard for the formal guidelines and support materials in this phase. It is interesting that some of the coaches, at the moderation meeting and in the questionnaires, said that models of coaching would have been helpful to them, but, given the fact that information already provided did not pre-empt the emergence of idiosyncratic behaviours, it appears that this experiential phase was important for them to go through. Their relative success in adopting the Phase 3 role could be partly due to the more straightforward nature of the task of supporting and assessing the presentation and also because they had dealt with initial student 'difficulties' in Phase 2.

What this research reveals is a complex interplay between the student use of an eportfolio tool to support reflection and the pedagogic support provided through introductory training and 1-1 coaching. It indicates the importance of the collaborative process in supporting reflection and the need for the learner to perceive the person providing feedback as possessing an authentic voice.

Implications for practice and future research

The research outlines the potential need for generic pedagogic tools to support reflective writing, i.e. retrospection, prospection and metacognitive reflection. However it also indicates the need for coaching by authentic others – in this case members of the WoW – this domain-specific pedagogic support is not something that can be offered by the tools. This human element allows for face to face meetings and non-written reflection which is less risky than disclosing something in writing to a relative stranger. It may in fact not be the case that some of these students did not engage with deeper levels of reflection at an early stage, but that they were not willing to share this, except in a face-to-face situation. A chance to

develop a relationship and the temporary nature of talk make this a more likely context in which 'disclosure' can occur. Some interesting research could be done around the differences between personal and shared written reflections and whether reflective conversations help or hinder written reflection.

Further questions arise around the nature of coach training that needs to be provided and whether the idiosyncratic nature of the role could be or should be contained by more effective training. The fact that these staff volunteers, the authentic others, bring with them a non-academic culture and the desire to engage with students makes it unlikely that the different interpretation of the coach role would change. Their skill in analysing the context they were working in and in developing a professional role within it during Phase 2 not only proved useful to the students but also kept them engaged in the module – we note that retention was high in this phase – potentially the most problematic (the students were engaged in the extra-curricular activity, they were beginning to use the eportfolio and being challenged by feedback). What is clear is that the moderation meetings gave the coaches an important opportunity to share practice and focus on the shift in role in Phase 2 – a chance to share the successes and challenges of Phase 2 was essential to signal effective practice and how this related to assessment in Phase 3.

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Appendices

1. Assessment form
2. Coach's questionnaire
3. Student questionnaire

University of Nottingham CETL for Integrative Learning Sign-off Form (Coach)

| | | | |
|--|--|---|---|
| Nottingham Advantage Award Module Title: | | <i>Developing Personal Skills through Extra-Curricular Activities</i> | |
| Coach name: | | Student name: | |
| <i>Please read each statement, tick to confirm that the student completed the task and provide dates where requested. Thank You!</i> | | | ✓ |
| The student engaged in an initial introduction meeting or exchange with me as coach, either face-to-face or online. | | Date: | |
| The student shared a plan of their activity and identified some appropriate skills and I was happy with these outlines. | | | |
| The student took part in a midpoint meeting. | | Date: | |
| The student shared further evidence of what they had been doing since the initial meeting and included reflection on their progress. | | | |
| The student addressed some, if not all, of the feedback I provided, either by responding positively or indicating reasons for not acting on it. | | | |
| The student arranged and prepared a presentation for the final meeting with me. | | Date: | |
| The presentation contains a demonstration of their learning and development gained from extra-curricular activities during the year | | | |
| Allowing for minor improvements identified during discussion, the presentation was reasonably engaging and professional – suitable for review by an employer friend of the University. | | | |
| <i>Any summary comment on the student's performance, suitable for giving to the student if requested.</i> | | | |
| Signed: | | Date: | |

CETL for Integrative Learning Skills Certificate Module for the Nottingham Advantage Award

Questionnaire for Coaches April 2009

About you

Please give your name and your role in the University

Some baseline information

What motivated you in the first place to volunteer to be a coach for this activity?

Please describe briefly any past or present experience of mentoring / coaching or any similar activity.

Would you say you were at all familiar with eportfolios before coaching on this module started? What was your experience of – or what were your assumptions about - what eportfolios might be useful for?

When you signed up, what did you expect to do as a coach?

Have you used the module handbook for coaches so far? If Yes, what aspects were helpful and what further content should we add?

Have you used the FAQs on the module e-community? If Yes, what did you find useful and in what ways (if any) do you think we could use this facility better? If No, why is that?

| |
|--|
| |
|--|

How is it going?

| |
|--|
| How many times so far has the student shared the epf for purposes of feedback? |
| |

| |
|---|
| How many face to face meetings have you had and roughly how long did they last? |
| |

| |
|---|
| What is the balance between face to face and online dialogue you are having and do you notice any differences between the two formats in terms of what it is possible to do / what emerges from the dialogue? |
| |

| |
|---|
| Do you feel your student is meeting the minimum requirements for the content of the eportfolio? |
| |

| |
|--|
| If you feel they are probably doing more than the minimum, what are the 'extra' things they are doing? |
| |

| |
|--|
| What do you think the student sees as the benefit (if any) of working on the eportfolio? |
| |

| |
|--|
| Has the student revised their perceptions of their activities, their plans or themselves at all during the process to date? Please explain |
| |

| |
|---|
| What lessons (if any) has the student learnt through the process of building an eportfolio? |
| |

| |
|--|
| |
|--|

| |
|---|
| What general benefits (if any) do you think there are in being a coach on this module? And is there anything more particular which you feel you are getting out of this activity? |
| |

How could we do things better?

| |
|--|
| What information/support NOT provided so far do you feel coaches need? |
| |

| |
|--|
| What questions about the module (if any) is your student asking, which you are unsure how to answer? |
| |

| |
|---|
| What else could be done to improve this module? |
| |

| |
|---|
| What question(s) should we be asking in this questionnaire that we haven't asked? |
| |

**Thank you very much for the time and thought you have given to complete this questionnaire.
The results will inform both our research and the practical arrangements for the module next year.**



**Centre for Excellence Skills Certificate –
Developing Personal Skills Outside the Curriculum**

Your name:

1. The introductory training gave me a broad introduction to the important concepts and requirements of the module.

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

2. The package of training sessions provided by the CETL and CCD staff gave the information and training I needed

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

3. My portfolio entries helped me to recognise areas of skills/learning that are important to me

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

4. How confident do you feel at this point about your skills in each of the following areas?

| | | | | | |
|--|----------------|-------|---------|----------|-------------------|
| Team working | Strongly Agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
| Learning from experience | Strongly Agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
| Reflecting on my learning outside the curriculum | Strongly Agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
| Creating and giving presentations | Strongly Agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |

5. I feel that my portfolio accurately represents my extra-curricular achievements and development through the year

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

6. How often did you add to your portfolio?

| | | | | |
|--------------------------|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|---|---|
| Less than three times | Three times just before meetings | Just before and after meetings | After I completed an activity throughout the year | As I was doing activities throughout the year |
|--------------------------|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|---|---|

7. My mentor's feedback and comments helped me get more from my portfolio/ experience than I would have done on my own

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

Please comment on what was and/or was not of value to you in the mentoring process.

8. The thing I liked best about using an eportfolio – and the thing I liked least.

Best:

Least:

9. In what ways (if any) has this module made an impact on how you see your extra-curricular activities in relation to your employability?

10. Looking back, what has been the value to you of doing this module (please tick all that are applicable)

Completing part of the requirements towards the Nottingham Advantage Award . ☐

Getting University credit for extra-curricular activities ☐

Preparing something about myself for an employer to see ☐

Other value – please state:

.....

11. Any other comments you would like to make?

Would you be willing to allow anonymised extracts from your eportfolio to be used by the Centre for Integrative Learning to illustrate the idea of the Skills Certificate for other members of the University and as examples in any written report or academic article about the project for circulation within and beyond the University?

YES

NO

If you are willing – thank you very much – and please sign and date this paragraph to register your agreement:

Signed Date