	Cohort IV Final Report April 2010 **Inter/National Coalition for Electronic Portfolio Research** **London Met Group:** Peter Chalk, Debbie Holley, Helen Pokorny (now Westminster), Sarah Wilson-Medhurst (now Coventry) & David Andrew (now Queen Mary, London)

Statement of the research question

Can e-portfolios provide value in increased engagement with learning?
  e-portfolios: capturing digital imprints and engaging staff and students with personal and professional developments

Context of the research

The research team taking part in the Inter/ National Coalition for E-portfolio Research originally comprised of a London Metropolitan University cross-disciplinary team, drawn from Computing (Chalk and Wilson-Medhurst) the Centre for Academic and Professional Development (Andrew and Pokorny) and the Business School (Holley). Facilitated by the early cohort meetings, the team decided to explore the ideal features students (and/ or staff) would find significant in capturing their digital imprints for personal/ professional development. This met with institutional requirements, as several e-portfolio projects were being undertaken across the University, and there was a consultation exercise around what, if any, electronic system of e-portfolio would be used as an institutional standard.

Previous research indicated that using any commercial e-portfolio students were unlikely to engage unless it was assessed and that there were a number of negative responses from staff and students related to the lack of rewards for the effort and time involved (Chalk, 2008a). Our interest was in exploring how designers construe the process to which the portfolio tools are put in order to identify key features of different portfolios. The aim is to identify the possible parameters for designing e-portfolios, and a number of internal workshops and more formal academic work has resulted (see below for academic outcomes). Our work explores the personal constructs of students and staff, to find out priorities/pre requisites and possible barriers to creating an 'ideal' e-portfolio.

Existing theory and research on which the project builds

Personal Construct Psychology, derived from the work of George Kelly (1955), is a theory rooted in understanding how a person constructs their unique view of the world. It emphasises the importance of understanding individual subjectivities as it these that motivate actions and engagement. From an e-portfolio design perspective this is an interesting idea as Kelly would

argue the 'the world can only be known through our constructions of it and therefore our behaviour bridges the gap between our constructions/mapping of the world, and… the world itself' (Kenny 1984, p 3). This approach would suggest that rather than evaluating the features of existing e-portfolio platforms we should first be interested in how users and designers are construing the purposes to which e-portfolios might be put. However asking questions directly of users about the perceived benefits and applications of e-portfolios is likely to be of limited value as Kelly emphasised that this process of construing involves the whole person rather than being a largely cognitive or affective process. As such he suggests that many constructs exist at a pre-verbal or tacit level of awareness and in trying to articulate these we may be seen to be 'struggling to make sense out of some experience that lies just beyond the reach of… semantic language' (*ibid*, p 4).

Kelly also asserts that we should seek out the 'uniqueness in… the [individual's] constructions of reality' (*ibid* p 6) and not assume they are the same as ours. Our task as researchers then is to 'make sense of the way in which [users] make sense of the world.' This is perhaps particularly the case in a fast changing technological world wherein technological advances happen at a speed and complexity beyond the understanding of the majority of users. Sense making is unlikely to be expressed in technological design terms.

Another key aspect of Kelly's theory is that 'human thinking is essentially dichotomous, anything which can be said has an implied contrast which may be obvious or difficult to articulate.' (*ibid* p 10). He suggests that the individual's construction of the world can often be articulated by exploring these hidden contrasts. He called this the ''Dichotomy Corollary'', 'as soon as we note an aspect of two events which we consider similar to one another we are at the same time choosing what counts as a contrast' (*ibid* p 10). Although Kelly's theory is firmly based in understanding the individual, Kelly also states that people may behave in a similar manner to one another in so far as they construe events in a similar manner, notwithstanding that the events themselves may not be identical.

Methodology

Repertory Grid Analysis (RGA) is a Personal Construct Psychology tool, which is used to support the process of gaining insights into an individual's personal constructs and also a way of recording these for later analysis. It is this analysis of patterns, linkages, contrasts, similarities and differences that may provide useful insights into the how an individual or groups of individuals are making sense of the events which are the subject of analysis.
Repertory Grids contain three essential features:
- Elements which are the objects being examined (including the 'ideal'),
- Constructs which are the dimensions with which these objects are being examined, and a
- Linking mechanism which shows how each element is described in terms of each construct.

The RGA method consists of choosing sets of 3 elements in turn, at random. The three elements are then divided according to the question "What one thing is common to two of them, but distinguishes these two from the third?" This question lies at the heart of how RGA

implements personal construct theory (Kelly, 1955). It enables respondents to begin to describe those qualities (constructs) they identify in the elements that are important to them – either because they unite two elements or because they distinguish them from another. Through ongoing discussion, respondents can then explain their reasoning (itself a useful qualitative research approach) and rate, in the range 1 to 5, how close each element, including the missing and ideal elements, is to either extreme. This rating process was our linking mechanism.

Appendix 1 shows an example of such a grid, this taken from the research done with Computing students. The grid can be analysed both quantitatively, looking at correlations between the 'ideal' and each element in turn, or qualitatively, by analyzing the transcripts of the discussion that took place as respondents identified elements, constructs, their dichotomous choices with their reasoning and their grading of each element accordingly.

Findings with evidence

The team conducted several researches using the RGA technique, some of which are written up, others constituting work in progress. The example in Appendix 1, from Chalk, Holley *et al* (2009) – in a study of first year Computing students at London met - seems to reflect a common set of important constructs which have a high correlation with the 'ideal' e-portfolio: ownership (me), about (me), profile (professional not social), access (private), views (personal, not shared), creating knowledge. A deeper analysis is possible, based on students' choice of constructs and the relationship with their other characteristics as students – aspects of which can be read from the extracts from their blogs (*ibid*, p 110). Broadly, outcomes of the repertory grid process can be themed by the individual, the role of the tool (personal via professional) and around creating knowledge with others. The individual aspects are very much around ownership of the portfolio, personalisation and reflecting the student in differing personas, thus for social networks a distinction seemed to be made around personal life i.e. socialising and staying in touch with friends; whereas any professional aspects of a portfolio would be far more about 'my skills and my experience', i.e. work related.

Privacy, and the selection of who is going to view what, seems a very important construct, and students drew a distinction about personal and private very clearly. Professional use was clearly demarked from social use, thus a portfolio combining social and personal tools was not seen as useful. It may be the case that students already use *Facebook*, *Hi Five*, *MySpace etc* and see little point in duplicating a well-used social networking site. It remains to be seen if these would be imported into any e-portfolio system by choice of additional tools by students.
Creating knowledge was a key area highlighted by those with more experience of working life. Comments made by these students during the process indicated that students were very comfortable with going to online discussion groups and forums, and contributing to the conversation, as well as using these sites to find out how to 'mix' programming errors.

Involving the student group in repertory grid construction was an interesting way of collecting student attitudes than the more usual research method of the questionnaire. Students engaged with the workshop, and were genuinely interested in the process. The constructs arising feed

into the larger research context of University and Governmental policies about how students can evidence their personal development planning, and lessons learned are clearly that any electronic developments has to be negotiated with, not imposed on an individual student.

Flexibility in the storage of materials and selection of viewing audiences (private/ professional) in different spaces is essential, and thus the student needs to take ownership of their own material. For this group of students, social aspects of web 2 technologies were not a desired construct of any personal development planning process. What was most significant was the 'me' in the constructs, indicating the strong sense of personal association. Engaging students with the process in partnership with the tutor as one of the possible audiences takes the debate further forward in a significant yet under-theorised researched area.

As a result, the team decided to present a symposium on participatory research methods, together with other teams from Cohort IV, at the Second International Residential Seminar 'Researching and Evaluating Personal Development Planning and e-Portfolio' (Chalk, Holley *et al* 2010).

Implications for practice and future research

In this section, each of the five members will describe their 'journey' through the three years of the project. This is particularly appropriate as three members of the five-strong team found jobs elsewhere during this period. In addition, they all had different roles which entailed both researching, and using, e-portfolios in different contexts. What they had in common was their membership of the Cohort 4 community and their common development of the Personal Construct Theory (Kelly 1955) approach, which provided a unifying theme throughout.

London Metropolitan Business School (Debbie Holley)

The Inter/ National Coalition for E-portfolio Research into had two experts from Australia as guest speakers at one of the earlier meetings. Their report on complete embedding of their e-portfolio across disciplines and years as well as merging the student academic as well as personal material relevant to employers made a huge difference to graduate employment for students at their universities. Our students need more than a 'good degree' as many come from widening participation backgrounds, and employers are asking for evidence of added value – such as voluntary activities or internships. I was interested to see if we could capture some of the student experience early on, and encourage students to acknowledge their existing experience, as well as moving forward in their own development.

Thus, in terms of impact of this project, in the Business School the e-portfolio work has fed into the redesign of a core 'Higher Education Orientation' module; taken by all first year students. Previously students had completed a sequence of online 'portfolio' tasks, which were designed to be exported into an e-portfolio, but with the institution choosing to wait for the VLE supplier to upgrade their offering, the final stage of information 'transfer' was not possible.

An alternative was sought, based on the results of the rep-grid analysis work with both staff and students. Students wanted the informality of web 2 and social networking sites they were used to working with; the possibility of 'customising' the layout to be aesthetically pleasing to the individual; inclusion of multi-media for example you tube clips; and the possibility of privacy settings (for sharing work with the tutor only until confident to open to peers or possibly employers). The course team wanted to be able to provide feedback to the students easily; have the site set out to encourage student reflection; and ideally to start to get a diverse student body to develop some ideas of critical thinking around their discipline.

The free wetpaint wiki (www.wetpaint.com) was used to encourage students to develop their thoughts and written progress through their initial first semester. The commercial aspect of the site (wetpaint is free to use but is funded by commercial advertising) was seen as a beneficial aspect, as this pilot was rolled out to students studying marketing, fashion, public relations, advertising and communications, as they would be exposed to targeted media and, indeed, this was part of the in class discussions.

Extracts from student reflective logs:

Extract One: "This module has vastly improved my knowledge of social networking and content sharing online, as in reflection, my understanding of such was limited, only knowing about the really commercial mediums. Learning about web 2.0 has increased the possibility of using these sites in future…"

Extract Two: "As well as encountering many positive experiences through the module, I was also confronted with some personal weaknesses. As part of our exercise and introduction to blogging, we were asked to observe stories and trends within our field of study, and comment on it in a personal blog space online. I thought this was a great learning experience… although I never wrote anything on my wall out of pure insecurity!... I have since become an active reader of *PR Week* and other field-related online resources."

Extract Three: "Having already studied marketing at university in XXXXX, I have built upon and learned a lot more by having a different cultural experience… Another difference I have found is that the teaching and learning methods are not limited to a very theoretical basis. It is very inspiring to be taught with different method which inspires different ways of learning. Having benefited from this modern style of education, I feel I have been able to complete work to a higher standard [than usual]."

The example below illustrates how a fashion marketing student is starting to critically comment on her discipline, by drawing on *YouTube* and the ability to embed this into a wiki shared by her and her module tutor only.

================== Extract from student wiki===============

"The video below shows highlights from Chanel's spring/summer 2010 fashion show. Undoubtedly one of my favourite shows of the season, Karl Lagerfeld said he aimed to go 'back to nature' and used Marie Antoinette in her 'shepherdess phase', and a love of the countryside as key references.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wvY9VuerKbA&feature=player_embedded#

Key pieces included classic chanel suits, tweed jackets, patchwork skirts, short lace dresses, broderie anglaise jackets, taffeta dresses and acid wash jeans. Heeled cloggs also featured in almost all of the looks and are predicted to become a must-have next spring. Despite the use of a soft, limited colour palette and pretty fabrics, the collection was given 'edge' through the use of metallic beading, frayed fabrics and large slits in many of the skirts. Some of the models also had tattooed thighs: a nice touch that gave the show a 'rock star' dimension. The tattoos also sat in stark contrast to the mini crowns and stalks of wheat in their tousled hair.

Another unique detail of the show was that models used their Blackberries as they walked around the central hay barn, in an attempt to prove that the clothes are relevant in today's society.

A clever stunt by Chanel, that got their show heavily reported by international media, was the performance of Lily Allen half way through proceedings. Wearing Chanel spring/summer 2010, she appeared with a band in a hut that rose from the floor, and sang her single 'Not Fair'. It could be argued that, however original and spectacular, this act took all attention away from the rest of the clothes." (cited with permission)

To summarise, the impact of the project has been professional in terms of my own development – gaining expertise in rep-grid analysis, working in a cross disciplinary team, and latterly with a team geographically spaced (three colleagues moved institution during the project). We tried to ameliorate the distance by using airset, a secured shared cloud computer that enabled us to collaborate and hold documents and files (www.airset.com). I also explored trying to create my own e-portfolio to showcase some of my work, and this can be seen at http://drdebbieholley.com.

For my students, they have been introduced to some of the ideas around e-portfolios and notions of capturing their digital journeys for their future use; perhaps as their 'added value' evidence for employers. However, this could equally be a space for them to utilize for their own

creative journey through their University life; and their engagement and deeper understanding of both themselves and their disciplines.

APEL developments (Helen Pokorny)

As a university with a commitment to widening participation, London Metropolitan University has a significant proportion of students who come to university with extensive skills and knowledge developed in the workplace and community. The University encourages such students to apply for credit from their studies via an Assessment of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL) process. The APEL assessment is via a portfolio and there are clear synergies with the pdp process. There are many different views as to what constitutes an appropriate portfolio but most portfolio development guides describe a document which has a narrative that maps evidence of the student's skills and knowledge to a set of learning outcomes to which credit is attached. One of the key stumbling blocks for students and staff negotiating APEL is to find a shared frame of reference for the narrative element and this is the issue I wanted to explore within the e-portfolio project at London Met. Throughout the project lifetime we have successfully developed on-line learning tools to support portfolio development, they are aimed at promoting APEL and demystifying the process. These are available at http://apel.londonmet.ac.uk/. The tools are the product of research into student and staff perceptions of the portfolio building and assessment process. It addresses issues such as:

- Making the process welcoming for students
- Explaining the benefits
- The role of the tutor
- Identifying learning
- Portfolio building
- Evidencing learning

One of the key questions for me was to ask:

- How does the APEL portfolio as an assessment tool facilitate the process of representing knowledge derived from experience?

I analysed four case studies of students and tutors who had negotiated successful APEL claims. All four were working with the APEL portfolio as a specific form of genre however it became clear that what was at stake was different understandings of the narrative writing process between staff and students at the level of epistemology. Two of the students experienced an approach in which they were required to transform their experience into something traditionally academic The knowledge that was valued was that derived from conventional academic frameworks and although they were successful in gaining their credits one of the students said, '*I felt like I was cheating when I looked at books… yeah there's still something there that I don't understand of the process didn't quite work for me, although I am very experienced…'its affected me and my management skills and I think its more about the process not working for me rather than me and my skills and my theory as such.'* The on-line tools enabled me to model the process of identifying learning from experience and to move the focus away from one in which students were asked re-package prior learning to fit the contours and reference points

of the traditional HE and to demonstrate how experienced APEL tutors were able to focus on the student's learning.

In each of the case studies the students associated their workplace identity with the selection of work-based material resources and saw these as the key to conveying meaning, depth and breadth to their claim, and not simply as evidence to substantiate their written claim. It is common with a traditional paper-based portfolio to ask for this evidence to be appended as it is seen as distracting to embed it within the narrative. However there were examples where students had embedded images into the written text in an attempt to make the links between the narrative and the evidence clearer. A typical comment made by one of the students shows how the evidence appendices are valued as integral to her claim, *'I could say I can do anything but I had to give hard core evidence'… 'so if I mentioned anything I thought it would be good for them to see what I do in my professional life… so what I tried to do was balance it with actual pieces of information that I had in the office and stuff that I actually know about.'* The University does not have an e-portfolio platform but based on the results of the rep-grid analysis work with both staff and students it is clear using web 2 tools such as a blog would allow students to embed images and documents easily within their narrative and to make these links as a part of a dialogue with the tutor. This would be a natural progression of the on-line APEL resources and a means of facilitate the process of representing knowledge derived from experience.

Educational and Staff Development (David Andrew)

I have been involved in this project since the initial proposal. At the time I was a member of the Project Management Board for the VLE implementation at London Metropolitan University and e-portfolios was seen as a key aspect of that development at the time. Being involved in the project enabled me to explore the concepts behind the use of e-portfolio tools and learn about their use in other institutions.
I was one of the team members who moved to another institution during the project and that reduced my direct involvement, although I remained in contact. In my new institution (Queen Mary, University of London) I have continued my interest in the use of web 2 tools for academic and professional development and those aspects of e-portfolio type developments,
in particular looking at how academics collect and store information about their activities for the purposes of promotion, claiming awards etc. This may be the basis of further research, but due to the pressures of taking up the new post I have been unable to plan that yet.
I have learnt a lot from being part of the team the opportunity to work with them on a long-term project, and by being part of the cohort.

E-Portfolio developments at London Met (Peter Chalk)

The period of Cohort IV (2007-2010) coincided with a period of e-portfolio pilots at London Met, one set being described in described in Chalk (2008a). Although most of the pilots used a particular, commercial e-portfolio system, others have since used approaches based on web 2 tools, such as blogs and wikis (see Holley's description above).
Most staff and students were critical of the *WebCT-BlackBoard* system used in the first pilot: as one member of staff said, a more intuitive, fun-to-use, *Facebook*-like e-portfolio will prove

popular. The students and staff who looked at the *Pebble Pad* (www.pebblepad.uk) alternative seemed to agree with this. But even this requires a managed learning approach if the London Met goals of reflection, action planning, showcasing, CV development etc are to be achieved for all students. Most staff agreed that they needed to include e-portfolio-related assessment tasks in their module.

One early pilot that showed great promise was carried out with Community Sport Coaching students on a Foundation Degree (Chalk and Blundell 2009). Although entering with low formal qualifications they seemed both very able to use a technically difficult e-portfolio environment and to desire to use it to showcase their prior (mostly sporting) achievements and document their first semester's academic work. Our research lends support to a view of e-portfolios that they aid the transition into higher education of 'non-traditional', often mature, students who have frequently had success in one area of life and can use the pdp process as a way of transferring that confidence and achievement into their academic world. The particular e-portfolio tool, therefore, did not seem to be the most important factor in assisting this process, which led to and supports the RGA research results reported above.

Pdp and E-Portfolio developments at London Met and Coventry (Sarah Wilson-Medhurst)

I initiated London Metropolitan University's application to join Cohort IV in the Spring of 2007. In doing so I drew on the expertise and interests of a number of colleagues at London Metropolitan University from my own Computing, Communications Technology and Maths department (Pete Chalk), from the Business School (Debbie Holley) and from the Centre for Academic and Professional Development (Helen Pokorny and David Andrew). I remained a member of the London Metropolitan Group after I left London Met in September 2007 to join Coventry University as Teaching Development Fellow in the (then) Centre for the Study of Higher Education working with the Faculty of Engineering and Computing.

In retrospect it was the mutual interest in personal development planning and E-portfolio supported processes, together with our different perspectives and expertise that sustained the group even though subsequently 2 further members of team (David Andrew and Helen Pokorny) moved to positions in other universities. Specifically I think it was our mutual interest and focus on learner centred development and in participant-led research that motivated us and kept us working together effectively as a team.

For my own part my earlier work (Wilson-Medhurst, 2005a, 2005b) inspired an interest in personal development planning processes and the role of e-Portfolio in supporting those processes. While at London Metropolitan University I worked with a cohort of students on a Business Information Technology (BIT) course where I used a (then) 'none-E' portfolio supported personal development planning process to facilitate student transitions in the first, second and third years/levels of their studies (see case study presented in HE Academy publication 'learning and Employability' series 2 available online: http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/York/documents/ourwork/employability/ESECT_PDP.pdf). In this BIT course by the final year the portfolio building process was used by students to

support and reflect upon their final year group projects, drawing on the self-reflective analysis undertaken in undergraduate levels 1 and 2.

I have taken this work forward in my undergraduate teaching on the Coventry Add+vantage scheme, including as the Coventry lead in the NTFS National Action Research Network (NARN) project on researching and evaluating personal development planning and e-Portfolio practice (http://www.bolton.ac.uk/APDU/HEANTFSNARNProject/Home.aspx), as well as in my postgraduate teaching on the PG Certificate in Higher Education Professional Practice.

In participating in Cohort IV I have learnt enormously from colleagues within my own group as well as from those in other Cohort IV teams. A 'capstone' for me was the 'symposium on participatory methods in E-portfolio research' at the Second International Residential Seminar 'Researching and Evaluating Personal Development Planning and e-Portfolio' (listed in reference section of this report) which was a joint workshop facilitated by representatives from 3 members of the Cohort IV: University of Cumbria, University of Manchester Medical School and the London Met group. For me this highlighted the Cohort IV group synergy that had developed and how our work was contributing to an understanding of how to facilitate learner centred development using participatory methods. In this case, this was contributing to the development of future doctors, computing specialists and HE teachers as reflective practitioners.

Summary of implications and future research

The personal construct psychology methodology and results derived from both it, and the practice examples cited above, have led the team to value the importance of an open-minded, participative approach to e-portfolios. Students and staff need to understand and identify the value added to student learning and then to choose the appropriate context, environment and specific tools. Future research may reveal a preference for using web 2/ 'cloud' computing, possibly a mobile/ 'augmented' learning environment, perhaps supported by reusable learning objects – by students and by staff themselves in their CPD. The five members of this team will continue to be involved in actively researching, and using, innovative e-portfolio tools.

Recommendations

a) Embedding of e-portfolios as part of the curriculum – not an 'add-on';
b) 'One size does NOT fit all' thus institutions need to be flexible about their provision – it seems unlikely that any single commercial supplier will be able to provide a single solution;
c) Staff and students both need to be convinced about the benefits of e-portfolios – if staff are not modeling a commitment to electronic personal developments plans etc students are unlikely to follow on;
d) As with most institutional policies, any work on rolling out needs to be evidence-based;
e) Ownership must lie with the individual; however the balance of encouraging engagement and offering students the best possible range of tools (commercial and free) is where the creativity of staff designing their curricula will be most valued.

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Appendix 1   Example RGA grid

The following grid is taken from Chalk, Holley *et al* (2009).

Student No.	Elements (sort 3 from...) Explicit Constructs (2 alike) – level 1	e1 forum	e2 website	e3 email	e4 google video	e5 my experience	e6 my skills	e7 social networking	Ideal	Implicit constructs (1 different) – level 5
One	public (website and my skills)	1	1	5	1	4	2	1	4	private (email)
	all about people (forum & google video)	1	1	5	1	4	5	2	3	1-2-1 (email)
	my professional profile (my skills & my experience)	1	1	2	1	1	1	5	2	my social profile (social networking)
Two	general to my life (social network & website)	4	1	1	5	1	1	1	2	Specific one off (google video)
	happened in my life (my skills & my experience)	4	4	3	2	1	1	4	3	selected bits of my life (website)
	Its about me (website & social networking)	5	2	2	3	2	1	1	1	its what I think (forum)
Three	across to people (networking & my skills)	1	4	5	1	5	5	3	4	private to me (email)
	about me (my experience & website)	5	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	other people (forum)