PebblePad

Practicums, philosophies and learning design

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Chosen theme(s)

Unit level implementation

The context

This is a core second year subject in the Bachelor of Teaching. The subject is called Elements of Education. The main aim of the subject is to begin to develop students' understanding of their own philosophical and pedagogical position. As part of this subject students undertake practical placement for three weeks in a school.

There are approximately 300 students in this subject, most of whom are in the age bracket (20 – 24). The students are training to be teachers but in many ways they still behave as adolescent students. Our plan in the curriculum redesign was to try to give them the necessary scaffolding so that they could make sense of their practical placement and also their pre-existing notions of education. We also wanted to create a number of assets which could be reused again later in their course as they come closer to graduation and step out into the world as teachers.

How it was …

This subject had only been delivered once before. One of the key problems that was identified was that the experiences students had in their practical placement were often considered to be separate and unconnected from their learning back at university. This subject has a heavy theoretical basis and students struggle to see connections between this theory and practical experience.

Another issue was the timing of the practical placement, which was at the beginning of the subject, and as a result the learning students later undertook in the subject could not be focused on the placement. This issue of placement timing was set to become even more critical as it emerged that significant numbers of students did not have placements within a block at the beginning of the subject after all, and in fact would be taking their placements at various times in the semester.

The academic team and the Faculty educational designer decided to re-structure the learning and the assessment tasks to integrate the learning the students gained from their practical placements with that of workshops and lectures throughout the semester. PebblePad was a critical tool in doing this.

The approach

The plan was to use PebblePad throughout all the assessment tasks and also to revisit various activities in an iterative way throughout this semester so that students would reflect on the growth throughout the subject. There were a number of components to the design:

- Task one – at the beginning of the subject the students went on a 3 week practical placement. They were required to complete a blog posting at the end of each week based on teacher questioning strategies, classroom dynamics, and the sociocultural context. Each posting used 4Rs reflective process which scaffolded and guided the reflections.
- Week one of the teaching semester – students were asked to print out their reflections from the PebblePad blog and bring these into the face-to-face interactive workshops. A number of activities were held in which students shared their insights and learning from the blog.
- Survey - After the workshops and lectures in week one, which highlighted the need for teachers to develop a personal pedagogy and philosophy of education, the students were asked to access a survey. The link was provided in the LMS. This survey was created in a template in PebblePad and published to the web. The students were asked to respond to a variety of statements about their current views on pedagogy and philosophy of education. The idea was to get them to interrogate their existing beliefs even if they didn't realise that they already had an unspoken philosophy. When the students saved this survey it went into the asset store in PebblePad to be used later in another assessment task.
- Task two – students copied a PebblePad webfolio template from the ATLAS resource area. They used this to develop their own educational philosophy statement. They were asked to provide a link to the survey which they had completed at the beginning of semester. They were also asked to reflect on this survey and how their stance had either been changed or validated. Also included in the webfolio were two journal reviews based on activities undertaken during the workshops. Again we were trying to link and scaffold the task with the activities carried out in the workshops. Both responses to the journal articles followed the 4Rs process with specific scaffolds and prompts related to the readings.

How it is now ....

Overwhelmingly the students were able to be guided through a fairly difficult theoretical subject by the activities and assessment tasks which were supported and scaffolded both in the templates provided in PebblePad and also the workshop activities. At the time of writing the teaching team is in the process of marking all the work, so final analysis and evaluation is yet to come. Certainly some of the problems we had with the disjunction between practical placement and theoretical knowledge have been addressed and there is a greater awareness from students about this theory informing practice.

The benefits

This subject needed curriculum design change as the practical placement had been completely separated from the formal learning. As a result of the changes we were able to bring into the formal learning situation the lessons learnt in the practicum. In addition the students captured their current understanding at the beginning of the semester and were able to review this again as they compiled the final webfolio. From this perspective, the curriculum change which integrated PebblePad was instrumental in more effective student learning.

Unexpectedly our choices around the use of PebblePad were fortuitous, as the practical placement arrangements we had expected (i.e. all students to complete the practical placement before the commencement of formal classes), did not eventuate. Instead, due to the difficulty of placing 300 students, a significant number needed to take the practical placement at alternative times. What this meant for the teaching team was that deadlines for the submission of Task 1 – The blog, had to be adjusted for many students. Fortunately the ability to give extensions on a case-by-case basis in ATLAS meant that we were able to keep track of those students who had not yet created their blogs.

Lessons learnt

The placement of the practicum at the beginning of the subject was always seen as undesirable but in 2013 we were unable to change it for a variety of reasons. The redesign of the curriculum and the assessment tasks allowed us to still maintain integrity in curriculum design and to increase student learning. However we have now negotiated for this subject to change its placement within the degree and to also include a practicum towards the end of the semester. This will require another curriculum redesign, particularly in relation to the reflective blog, as students will not be able to use this at the beginning of semester like they did this year.

One of the ongoing issues we experienced with PebblePad is the misunderstanding students often have about submitted assets in ATLAS. Although we encourage them to submit their webfolios early in the semester so that there is no panic on the final due date, many do not follow this advice. Despite reiterating this to them on many occasions, many students do not

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understand this and blame PebblePad when they seem to be unable to submit on the due date. Much debate has taken place in our faculty about how to train students to understand the submission process in PebblePad and to know how to check for themselves that their asset in fact in the ATLAS workspace. We are planning for mandatory self paced modules and quizzes early in the academic year to ensure that students become more adept at using the tools.

In brief – personalising the curriculum

- Drawing on students' personal experiences whilst on placement through a scaffolded reflective blog
- Ability to reuse assets on a number of occasions to allow students to reflect on their learning over time
- Students were able to create a webfolio outlining their own personal educational philosophy. The webfolio tool allowed them to do this in a creative and multimodal way.