

Moving paper based reflective practice to a sustainable future

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Chosen theme(s)

Unit level implementation

The context

La Trobe University's five year 'Future Ready' strategic plan has 'bold ambitions' for the university to be 'known for its excellence and innovation in relation to the big issues of our time' (La Trobe University, 2013). Graduates will be 'work ready', 'world ready' and 'future ready'. A core ingredient of the La Trobe Framework is the Radical Learning Project which reimagines teaching and learning 'by drawing on rich educational technologies [with an] increased use of technology-enabled online learning, drawing on the rich resource of online educational resources relevant to student learning' (La Trobe University, 2013). As part of the Future Ready strategic plan, La Trobe has identified three vital areas of learning known as 'Essentials'. Global Citizenship, Innovation and Entrepreneurship, and Sustainable Thinking essentials will foster the skills and knowledge of all undergraduate students to become future ready (La Trobe University, 2013).

The four year Bachelor of Education is delivered at two regional campuses in Victoria. The Mildura instance of the degree is delivered to approximately 125 preservice teachers across the four years who are from regional and rural locations. Each year preservice teachers are required to participate in practicum experience in local and regional schools. Practicum is an assessable component of the course and is attached to a single subject each semester; in the first instance, the Introduction to Teaching Practice (EDU1ITP) subject supports the practicum. These placements may occur across three states and involve vast distances, due to our unique location. Preservice teachers are required to become reflective practitioners with the practicum being a large aspect of this reflective process. Preservice teachers need to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding via practicum documentation.



More than half of our current student cohort may be considered digital natives. Technology is an integral part of their lives as well as a fundamental component of their degree. All preservice teachers are expected to become competent users of a range of technological tools that will enable them to become skilled educators of 21st Century learners.

The Victorian Institute of Teaching's Professional Standards for Teachers state what constitutes teacher quality. The Standards 'define the work of teachers and make explicit the elements of high-quality, effective teaching in 21st-century schools, which result in improved educational outcomes for students' (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2012). For Graduate Teachers, the skills in Information Communication Technologies (ICT) are essential to quality teaching and learning experiences, and graduating teachers must be able to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding of ICT to meet these standards.

Not only does LaTrobe's Future Ready strategic plan push us to move to a more sustainable approach to teaching, learning and assessment, the environmental impact of continued paper based approaches challenges one's conscience.

How it was ...

Preservice teachers within the Bachelor of Education are required to demonstrate reflective practice throughout their degree. This is especially evident during their practicum when they are required to connect theory and practice. Until the beginning of 2013 all students were required to complete their practicum reflections via a paper based folder which was to be submitted and assessed typically twice a year.

Students were required to purchase the practicum folder when commencing their degree. Each year new documents were added relevant to the corresponding year in the degree resulting in a substantial amount of photocopying. Often, students chose to word process their reflective responses and include these within the folders, replacing the papers provided by the relevant academic staff. Often this folder became cumbersome with students soon housing their reflections, resources and planning in multiple folders.

Whilst the folder was considered a professional document, not all students cared for their documentation in this way. Organisation of the documentation and care for the presentation of the folder was inconsistent. Students taking pride in the presentation of their documentation may have lost sight of the importance of quality reflections on their learning experiences.

The paper based documentation required feedback and assessment. Feedback could only be provided to students when the documentation was physically sighted by supervising lecturers, typically after the practicum had been completed for final assessment and occasionally during the practicum. Feedback could not be considered timely and intervention to support struggling students was difficult. The monitoring of students' responses was also difficult.



Students on distant placements may have had little opportunity to receive formative feedback. Assessment for the smaller cohort in Mildura seemed to be a realistic task until the practicum folders were presented for assessment. The large submission may have resulted in a small avalanche!

The approach

PebblePad has been integrated into teaching and learning experiences across the Bachelor of Education at the Mildura campus since 2008. Students have been introduced to the program within the first semester of their first year and have continued to use the program until the completion of their degree. In 2012 the Mildura first year cohort piloted the Beta version of PebblePad3. In 2013 all preservice teachers across the four years were required to use and submit assessment tasks via the new version of PebblePad.

The first year Bachelor of Education preservice teachers are placed on a paired practicum very early in their course (week 3) and are expected to reflect on their teaching and learning experiences as part of this placement. During 2012 the Faculty of Education staff on the Mildura campus recognised the cost, both financial and environmental, of the paper based practicum journal and moved to replace it with a digital version.

PebblePad3 provides users with the new tool of workbooks. This resource allows the owner (the lecturer) to construct a template which users can access and own. The unique opportunity for the creator to be able to continually add to this template made it an appropriate selection for the purpose of replacing the paper based version of practicum journal. The new workbook practicum journal allowed students to focus on the content of their reflection, rather than the construction and presentation of the document. Weekly requirements could be added during the semester, resulting in a refined document that responded to the needs of the cohort.

The ICT for Education (EDU1ICT) subject introduces first year preservice teachers to the technology requirements of their degree. An aspect of this up skilling of students is to introduce, familiarise and develop approaches in utilising PebblePad. Students have tasks throughout the majority of their course that require them to build, collaborate and submit via PebblePad.

As stated previously, practicum is attached to a single subject that supports the preservice teachers in all aspects of the placement including the reflective component of the documentation. To support the technology requirements of this task, a clear understanding of PebblePad needed to occur in parallel to learning about the practicum. To achieve this, collaboration between the two lecturers involved (EDU1ITP & EDU1ICT) needed to occur and a clear understanding of the requirements of the practicum journal was needed. As a result of this discussion, I (lecturer in EDU1ICT) was able to create a digital version of the practicum journal that mirrored the paper based version whilst meeting the assessment requirements of EDU1ITP.



In addition to providing the skills to navigate PebblePad we felt it was necessary to further support students by allocating in class time to provide technical support to students when they were completing their practicum reflections.

How it is now

The workbook version of the practicum journal allows academic staff to easily monitor student reflections. Formative feedback has become an ingrained process that continually supports students to improve their reflections. Various staff may contribute to student feedback (this may occur on different aspects of the workbook eg. Goal setting) rather than one person being the only one able to view the folder. As a result, assessment may now be considered more consistent, with all relevant academic staff able to view and moderate student submissions. Being able to review work and monitor student contributions allows teaching staff to better support students with their developing knowledge and skills.

The workbook template has allowed teaching staff to clearly demonstrate the requirements of the task, with supporting documents and videos linked directly from related pages. The template has students focussing on the quality of their content rather than the 'prettiness' of their folder; in turn, the documentation is professionally presented to all audiences. Evidence fields are also utilised to allow for the upload of evidence. If the cohort or staff indicate that further examples are needed or the structure of a page needs modifying, additions are easily included.

The opportunity for in class technical support also provided students with further scaffolding of their reflections. Facilitated discussions between practicum partners, school groups and the class were enabled, resulting in rich reflections that were able to be entered directly into the workbook, with formative feedback able to follow soon after each contribution.

As PebblePad3 was early in its development there were some minor issues with saving and formatting within the workbook. However, due to the close support of teaching staff, these issues were minimal and students were easily assisted.

The practicum journal is one component of the documentation requirements for preservice teachers. Preservice teachers are also required to collate appropriate resources in addition to their lesson planning. Whilst some of these documents will at this time remain paper based, there is great opportunity to explore the capabilities of PebblePad for compiling some of this documentation to again reduce the cumbersome folders used at present. This may include adding evidence fields to the forms within the template. There is also the unexplored possibility of providing supervising mentors with feedback templates to keep all records centralised.



The benefits

One of the greatest benefits of using workbooks to replace the paper based practicum journal is that students are no longer concerned about the construction of their professional documentation but now spend their energy on quality reflections. The opportunity for quick feedback from university mentors and peer collaboration are additional advantages that will continue to be explored with this more user friendly digital version of the practicum journal.

As PebblePad is a new program for the entire first year cohort an even playing field has been created with all students learning about the software together. The practicum pairs allow for peer collaboration and problem solving of the program.

La Trobe's Future Ready strategic plan identified three essentials; our students are actively working toward achieving these via their practicum journal. Reflective practices begin to address Global Citizenship whilst developing personal and technical skills; Innovation and Entrepreneurship ideas include the ability to collaborate and effectively communicate in addition to being taught how to thrive in a fast-changing world; and going digital clearly addresses the future impact of documentation as part of Sustainable Thinking, without environmentally compromising our future.

During 2013, Professor Brian Caldwell was commissioned to conduct a review of teacher education in the Faculty of Education at La Trobe University. When discussing the contributions of the Mildura iteration, Professor Caldwell stated that he had not seen any other university that was able to tap into student feedback like that of the practicum journals on PebblePad. He commented that the immediate retrieval of responses was invaluable. This feedback received from external personnel reiterated the value of the move from paper to digital documentation.

The ability to view student responses during their practicum also addresses the need to provide preservice teachers on distant placements with on-going formative feedback.

Lessons learnt

In the first instance, keeping the workbook structure simple and allowing the students to take ownership over their contributions is important. It is necessary to problem solve issues early so that students do not get caught up concerning themselves with issues that may be easily solved by academic or technical staff, allowing them the opportunity to focus on their contributions.

The first year cohort received carefully structured in-class scaffolding for both their reflections and technical concerns. Having this support in place assisted in establishing competent and confident users of PebblePad³. Some students in other cohorts did find the move to a digital practicum journal a little challenging, quite possibly because they required further technical support due to the move to a new version of PebblePad. Throughout 2013 reactive measures



were implemented to ensure these preservice teachers had the technical support to be able to successfully complete their requirements. This issue may have been unique to 2013 as students familiarised themselves with the new look PebblePad and may not be an issue in the future.

It is essential that the owner of a workbook clearly understands the intricacies of editing the workbook once it has been shared with their student cohort. It is also imperative that clear processes for managing new cohorts and copying workbooks are adhered to so as not to compromise the 'live nature' of the existing workbooks. Knowing the structure of the task will aid in the construction of a suitable PebblePad asset; familiarising oneself with the tools of PebblePad, specifically those within a workbook will greatly aid the construction of a user friendly asset.

In brief – personalising the curriculum

- We are able to construct suitable assets for our local cohort under the guidance of relevant academic staff
- We have moved some of our cumbersome paper based documentation to more sustainable approaches; this will increase in the near future
- Teachers that are required to be 21st Century educators, including the ability to demonstrate knowledge and skills with ICT, are being up skilled in a structured, supported environment



References

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