

Case study

Thanet College

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Towards the end of 2007, Thanet College gave each of its teachers a personal learning space, or e-portfolio, to support their reflective practice and help create a portfolio community. The project, which started out as an exploratory pilot for 15 teachers, was inspired by a dissertation on personalised learning spaces. Its author, Geoff Rebbeck, who is the college's elearning coordinator, explains how the project has been implemented and what has been achieved so far.

There has been much discussion in the further education community about professional development, in light of the Leitch review, personalisation agenda and the introduction of new regulations for teachers in the sector.

In developing a portfolio community, we wanted to go beyond IfL's basic requirement for members to record and present evidence of their continuing professional development (CPD). Our choice of e-portfolio was driven by a desire to raise the level of professional effectiveness amongst teachers, to improve the learner experience by broadening the use and application of portfolios, and to replace a number of college procedures. The future student experience will be around individual learning spaces, and we wanted our chosen system to reflect that.

Learning spaces and e-portfolios

An e-portfolio provides a private and customisable online space to upload and manage electronic evidence of personal, educational or professional development. It is important to distinguish between the distinct types and hybrids available before choosing which kind meets your brief.

We wanted a portfolio that would allow the owner autonomy, flexibility and maximum opportunity for content inclusion. We chose PebblePad. IfL's REfLECT, introduced a few months later, is based on PebblePad and, as a major and timely contribution to supporting CPD, should be warmly welcomed.

The reflective e-portfolio

In contrast to a virtual learning environment (VLE), which is communal and belongs to the organisation, an e-portfolio is a private space that belongs to the individual. Its content may be shared only by publishing out of it, not by providing access into it.

The private nature of the portfolio encourages a level of honesty in developing the content. We were careful to acknowledge that:

- The author owns the portfolio and controls its content and development
- Content is based largely on the recording of incidents that happen to the author rather than instruction from the college
- Reflective writing content is nearly always improved when selectively shared with another who can add objective criticism
- The owner is responsible to themselves first and foremost for the veracity of content in charting development
- The owner makes their own case where required, drawing on the content to demonstrate development and professionalism.

Implementation

The project started in September 2007 with e-portfolio accounts for all tutors. The idea was that they could pilot the scheme, with a view to extending it to at least 1,000 students by 2010. We saw a rapid take-up of the opportunity, from 15 teaching staff at the outset, to all 150 lecturers. Within six months, many of the curriculum managers were using e-portfolios too, and we anticipate that they will be rolled out to all the support staff in the near future.



“My advice to any college adopting a similar programme is that you should be bold – go for it, and include all teachers in the first wave.”

We expected that none of the teachers would have difficulty finding things to reflect on, but thought they might not be willing to share. The response has, however, been really positive.

I believe that we adopted the project too tentatively though, with 15 ‘glitterati’. In hindsight, we should have involved more people at the outset.

Outcomes

Tutors say that they feel a better sense of identity, are treated as professional people by the processes of e-portfolio sharing, and that this has made a major contribution to the sense of a physical community of teachers.

Staff were very keen to personalise the look of the portfolio and to make it their own, demonstrating the diversity of approaches to reflection. Apart from recording conventional CPD, tutors have found that reflection can be added to any critical incident recorded to create CPD. This would previously have been lost. Gathering 30 hours in 12 months will not prove difficult.

A major benefit for the college is that this decentralised form of recording CPD avoids the sense of compliance and passive behaviour from those required to follow a procedure. The use of portfolios has been accepted well, because it is seen as encouraging professional autonomy and responsibility.

There have been some unexpected outcomes. When a trainee teacher doing the CETTLs transferred two years’ work into her portfolio, it gave her tutor quite a surprise, and mentoring sessions are now shared via blogs. Also, a member of staff applied for a new job using a webfolio of evidence that could be shared with personnel.

And finally, the e-portfolio models the personalisation of learning in its purest form, which will benefit learners in the future.

Lessons learned

Training people how to use the technology does not offer them value, meaning or insights. We found that the best way to teach people how to own a portfolio is through the use of narrative. We use a document citing 15 occurrences that may arise during the teacher’s working day and examine how the properties of the portfolio can be used to capture, reflect and support learning based on them.

This approach has the advantage of leading into portfolio use from situations that teachers understand, and has proved to be more effective.

Because of the personal nature of portfolios, tutors use them in ways we had not necessarily considered. It shows that with true personalised learning, no two journeys are the same and any attempt to limit or classify activity runs the risk of excluding good reflection. It is unlikely that the process can be improved by imposing central rules.

The greatest resource any teacher has is the collective wisdom of other colleagues. We hoped that tutors would share with professional colleagues across the college, but it seems that this is happening mainly where there is a pre-existing friendship or a more formal relationship, such as mentoring. Work destined for assessment, such as a trainee teacher completing CETLLS, has been shared with a respected colleague first before being shown to tutors. This highlights the differences between the roles of mentor and tutor, in some cases.

My advice to any college adopting a similar programme is that you should be bold – go for it, and include all teachers in the first wave.

Mark Hinton, head of innovations and improvements, led the decision to move to a decentralised way of working on staff development.

“We have used e-portfolios to move from one centralised system of CPD activity to 150 personalised systems, based on the individual teacher, who now has responsibility for choosing how to make a case to show good CPD. In some cases, this will include college priorities.

“We have expanded on IfL’s requirements by taking on board other related activity to do with creating reflective practitioners. We see this as giving us greater coherence in meeting the needs of the college.

“We have developed a community of reflective practitioners. Reflection is based on their day-to-day experiences both inside the college and out. They are now responsible for capturing and presenting these.

“We see the introduction of the e-portfolio into college life as a pivotal moment in improving staff development activity and profiling. Most of all, we see this as improving the effectiveness of college staff, which will in turn have a positive impact on learning.”

Reflect

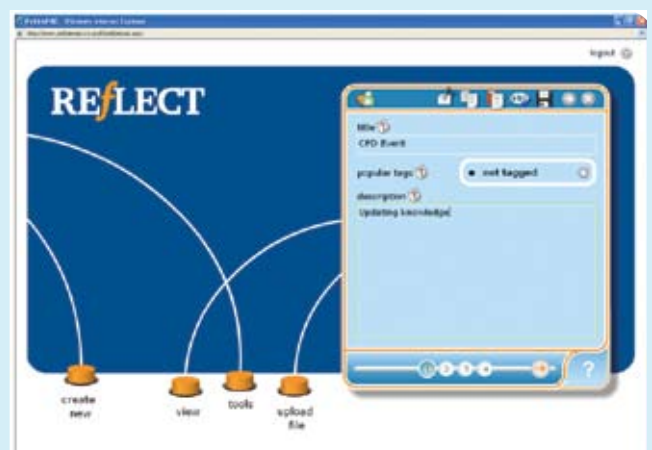
IfL members are given a free and flexible online tool, developed by teachers for teachers, to help them manage their CPD. The REfLECT system, developed by Pebble Learning, is a highly flexible learning tool already used in its PebblePad form by learners in a number of further and higher education institutions.

REfLECT provides a personalised learning space where members can reflect on their professional practice and record the many and varied CPD activities undertaken to enhance their teaching. Members can choose to keep all records private if they wish, or can selectively share them with peers, mentors and managers. CPD activity records can be linked quickly and easily to an annual CPD record for submission to IfL if desired.

When records or assets are shared, the user may give others permission to view, comment, copy or collaborate. Permission to share may be time-limited, or rescinded at any time. Comments may be added to shared assets in the form of a professional conversation.

REfLECT can be set up so that entries automatically populate the CPD record. As more entries are added throughout the year, the system will automatically recalculate the number of hours’ CPD completed.

REfLECT also gives IfL members a number of easy-to-use utilities that can be used to support teaching and learning, such as a simple blogging tool, web page builder and the facility to create multiple e-portfolios. It complements a provider’s virtual learning environment (VLE), and individual members may use REfLECT however they choose, at any time and from any computer with internet access.





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Investment in excellence

“The e-portfolio project has proved extremely successful, exceeding our expectations by a very long way. What started out as a pilot for 15 teaching staff just six months ago is now being used by all 150 lecturers, and adopted by curriculum managers too. With their active encouragement, all support staff will soon be using e-portfolios, and the medium-term aim is to introduce them to all learners.

“The idea of implementing e-portfolios arose from Geoff Rebbeck’s BSc dissertation at Greenwich University on personalised learning spaces. We were keen to let him progress with his ideas, and the outcomes so far have certainly substantiated our belief in his experience and research.

“I am particularly delighted about the way in which this approach to CPD encourages professional autonomy and responsibility, asking teachers to take control of their own development. We already have a strong reputation for the breadth of our curriculum and for good guidance and support for students, and I see this going from strength to strength as teachers share their vast accumulation of teaching knowledge, experience and skill.”

Sue Buss, Principal



Thanet College

Thanet College is based in Broadstairs, Kent, set in 12 acres by the sea. It takes pride in being the number one local provider of training and further education, and a Centre of Vocational Excellence in catering and hospitality.

With approximately 2,000 full-time and 6,000 part-time students, the college offers an extensive range of full-time, part-time, distance learning and community based courses. Its mission statement is: “We aim to be the college of choice for the local community and employers.”

It has a strong reputation for working with a wide range of local employer organisations of all sizes and across many sectors. As one of East Kent’s leading providers of work-based learning, the college is involved in apprenticeship schemes, tailored training courses, and the Train to Gain initiative.

Specialist subjects include business management training, catering and hospitality, health and social care, interactive media and interior design. The breadth of its curriculum was identified as a key strength in its last Ofsted inspection report.

The college employs more than 400 people, and has held an Investors in People Award since 1997. An IIP assessor recently reported that “staff are clearly dedicated to the delivery of an excellent service provision to their students”.

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