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‘That’s not an essay!’: Designing & implementing ‘bendy assessment’ that puts the personal in the professional

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Abstract:

As we move ever-closer to the National Children’s Services Workforce Study’s prediction of a shortfall of 7,320 staff by 2013 (Community Services Ministers’ Advisory Council, 2006), there remains an urgent need to recruit large numbers of suitably qualified early childhood teachers to the sector. While it is clear that Early Childhood teacher-education programmes will play an important role in addressing this shortfall, we know little about what sort of training will best prepare our graduates for their continued employment in the children’s services sector. Using the work of Manning-Morton (2006, p. 42), this paper explores the notion that Early Childhood pre-service teachers must develop ‘... a professional approach that combines personal awareness with theoretical knowledge’ to best meet the needs of young children in their care. Building upon a recent action research inquiry, this case study explores how constructive alignment between a teacher-education subject’s learning outcomes, content and assessment could best achieve this end using a process-oriented approach. The subject coordinator’s experiences with PebblePad, an e-portfolio platform, is detailed to explain how our pre-service teachers were able to follow their own lines of inquiry, to build upon the understandings they brought and the interests they had in this subject to reposition them as co-constructors of knowledge. By bringing the personal into the professional, the ‘bendy assessment’ enabled our pre-service teachers to document the learning processes they had engaged in rather than write ‘sausage factory’ essays that reproduced key subject knowledge. Implications for quality learning in both the Early Childhood and teacher-educator sectors are duly considered.

Introduction

The Early Childhood sector continues to find that the ground under them is shifting. Mounting evidence from well-respected disciplines like neuroscience and economics are said to have led the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) to introduce reforms to early childhood education and care. Amongst some significant changes to legislative requirements which came into effect on 1st January 2012, were changes to the minimum qualifications of the educators who work in the children’s services sector. In particular, the *National Partnership Agreement on Early Childhood Education* and the *National Quality Framework* respectively seek to provide universal access to preschool for children in the 12-months prior to schooling, and ensure that there is at least one early childhood teacher working at a service for a minimum of 15 hours-per-week. These requirements will impose a significant and immediate demand for qualified early childhood teachers, placing increased pressure on teacher training (Productivity Commission, 2011).

In this paper we are not professing that the presented research is a case which is ‘innovative’ or a possible ‘technological solution’ to the facilitation of learning for an increasing number of early childhood pre-service teachers. Rather, we explore what level of involvement, type of activities and conditions lead to high quality learning and outcomes for our Early Childhood students (Radloff, 2010), especially when there seems to be very little discussion about what sort of training will best prepare our graduates for continuing employment in the children’s services sector. Thus, this paper argues that this is a much larger, more pressing task to-hand. *We must support graduating early childhood teachers to traverse the ever-changing landscape of the children’s services sector, offering more than the reproducing of current knowledge and practices.* As Manning-Morton

(2006) argues, affective teaching starts with early childhood teachers who are able to apply their personal awareness to their theoretical knowledge. This self-knowledge, as well as knowledge about children and early childhood pedagogy, starts within a training context ‘... that is process as well as content focused, a model of relationship-based learning’ which reflects positive early years practice (p. 50). To explain how we put the personal into the professional, this paper begins by explaining how the design of *Literacy and Numeracy Birth-to-Four*, a new early childhood teacher-education subject at Flinders University, sought to find a constructive alignment between the subject’s assessment and outcomes in light of current higher education discourse. The use of an e-portfolio or personal learning space is then explored, showcasing how tools from the PebblePad platform enabled students to reflect on their learning, and present evidence of their thinking-in-progress. Finally, reflections and implications from this research are presented to consider how principles at the heart of quality teaching and learning are universal, seeking to support the construction of new knowledge and transformation of existing understandings and experiences instead of simply replicating and reproducing our current knowledge and ideas.

The shift from teaching to learning: changing discourse

The second half of the 1990s saw what could be described as a seismic shift in thinking about curriculum, teaching and learning in higher education. The nature of that shift is exemplified by the work of Barr and Tagg (1995), Biggs (1996, 1999) and Bowden and Marton (1998). Barr and Tagg (1995) identify a subtle but profound shift from a dominant paradigm of a college as an institution that exists to provide teaching to a paradigm of a college as an institution that exists to produce learning. They present this as a shift from a focus on means (teaching) to a focus on ends or purpose (learning). Similarly, Bowden and Marton (1998) argue for a new conceptualisation of the contemporary university as the “university of learning” where attention is moved from means to ends. The idea of the university of learning emphasises the need to re-create the university as a learning environment and the need to design assessment, closely integrated with teaching and learning that extends beyond testing and certifying competence to be a mechanism that itself promotes future learning. These broad shifts in perspective and practice need to be built around specific changes in curriculum design and teaching practice that “develop students’ capabilities for engaging in effective action in situations in the future. ... effective actions spring from effective ways of seeing” (Bowden & Marton, 1998, p. 159). We, following Manning-Morton (2006), argue that effective ways of seeing and acting require personal awareness of the self. Development of such personal awareness should be an integral part of the learning experiences of students.

Biggs (1996, 1999) lays out the principle of ‘constructive alignment’ as a basis for assisting academics to do things differently and focus on student learning. His work draws together thinking from constructivist learning theory and instructional design to propose a framework for decision making on learning outcomes, teaching and learning activities and assessment practices. He advocates careful thinking about the alignment of these elements to create a learning environment which supports and encourages students to construct meaning and achieve higher order learning outcomes. Biggs (1999, p. 64) describes an aligned system as “a fully criterion referenced system, where objectives define what we should be teaching; how we should be teaching it; and how we could know how well students have learned it.... There is maximum consistency throughout the system.” Biggs’ model places objectives/outcomes at the centre of the system and builds teaching and learning activities and assessment around them. His work points to the critical importance of carefully considered design by academics of the teaching and learning system as a precursor to engagement with students.

While Biggs emphasises that assessment and grading should identify and acknowledge the students’ levels of understanding, he does not provide an explicit framework of broad curriculum content areas to guide the development of learning outcomes and “moments in the student experience”

(Barnett, Parry and Coate, 2001, p. 438). Barnett, Parry and Coate (2001, p4. 38) address this gap by proposing a curriculum model built on “an understanding of modern curricula as an educational project forming [student] identities found in three domains: those of knowledge, action and self.” These domains in turn encompass discipline specific content and competences; competences acquired through doing (e.g., broader communication capabilities); and development of the student’s educational identity. They note that the balance and integration of domains needs to be carefully considered in each curriculum.

The models proposed by Biggs(1999) and Barnett, Parry and Coate (2001) can be seen as complementary, interacting layers of considerations framing curriculum design and implementation, and the students’ experiences of the curriculum as illustrated below.

Curriculum elements	Learning and teaching interactions	Content	Assessment	Outcomes
Elements interact with domains by	promoting learning about	balancing and integrating	promoting learning about	encompassing
Curriculum domains	Knowledge (in the discipline including disciplinary capabilities) Action (capacity to do) Self (awareness)	Knowledge Action Self	Knowledge Action Self	Knowledge Action Self

The following sections of this paper describe and reflect on a curriculum design project recasting one subject in one course to shift it more fully into the learning paradigm. The integration and balancing of the curriculum domain of ‘self’ within the knowledge domain was a key aim of the project. A second key aim was to reduce the conceptual and practical distance between learning and assessment – to align them as closely as possible in the student experience. The main mechanism to enable integration and alignment was the use of a personal learning space, PebblePad, as an integral part of the learning territory which was created for students to explore.

ePortfolios: PebblePad as a platform for showing & gauging personal learning

Sutherland and Powell (2007, para. 3) define an 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.” An ePortfolio allows its owner to select, share and present skills, qualities, achievements and reflections and to include validation and feedback from others. But an ePortfolio is much more than a repository for digital artefacts. The idea of an ePortfolio as both product and process (Barker, 2006) is an important concept, “it is the process by which these tools are used and combined that effectively defines the ePortfolio experience and captures its potential” (Hallam et al., 2008, p. 3). As process, the ePortfolio functions as a personal learning space (PLS). In an institutional learning space the teacher gives students access to subject information and learning tasks. In a PLS the student is the owner of the learning environment. In this case, the PLS is both within and independent of the institutional learning space with the linkage between the two created by an electronic gateway (see Figure 1).

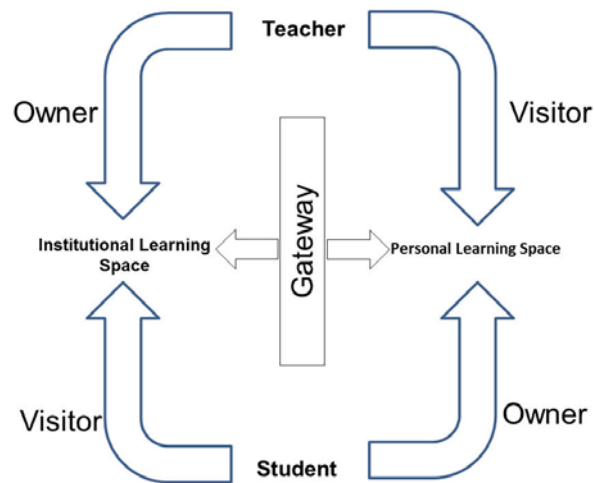


Figure 1: Relationship between the institutional & the personal learning space

Using the PLS to build an ePortfolio can facilitate ongoing reflection and reflective practise, support goal setting, validate informal learning opportunities, shift control from instructor to student, support instructor planning and also support learner organisation (Bratengeyer, 2008). In the subject, the PebblePad PLS offered a way for learners to direct and control their own learning, to effectively navigate their way through a much-closer nexus between the subject's content, outcomes and assessment.

Searching for true 'constructive alignment' between assessment and intended learning outcomes

Borrowing from emancipatory action research (Zuber-Skerritt, 1996) and McNiff's (2002) *Eight-step Model for Action Research*, the introduction of a PLS to the subject *Literacy and Numeracy Birth-to-Four* is explained in Table 1.


Table 1: Action research undertaken in the study



Emancipatory Action Research (Zuber-Skerritt, 1996)	Eight-step Model for Action Research (McNiff, 2002)	What was done in this study
Strategic plan	1. Review your current practice	As subject coordinator, I -Jessie- reflected on my teaching in previous subjects, my personal teaching philosophy and what I wanted to do differently to help my students best achieve success.
	2. Identify an aspect you wish to improve	
	3. Imagine a way forward in this	
Implementing the plan (action)	4. Try it out	I had a rough framework of subject content, offering opportunities for students to observe young children's learning and development before planning possible approaches to teaching from their interpretations of these. Readings were done post-workshop to enable students to follow their own lines of inquiry. Artefacts and reflections created as a result of these two processes were then presented for assessment twice across the teaching period.

Observation, evaluation and self-evaluation	5. Monitor & reflect on what happens	To give greater authenticity to the use of PebblePad for my students, I used this personal learning space (PLS) to reflect personally on how the subject's new approach was impacting on my teaching and learning in the subject. The assessment of the student's work in the mid-semester break also gave me vital information on what the students were interested in, and where their learning had taken them so far.
	6. Modify the plan in light of what has been found, what has happened, and continue	
Critical & self-critical reflection on the results	7. Evaluate the modified action	These reflections and the marking of the assessment enabled me to gauge where-to-next, shaping a direction and emphasis for the second-half of the subject accordingly. The marking of the final assessment task, the 'Outcomes Profile', and the Students' Evaluation of Teaching (SET) feedback on the subject also provided a critical lens through which to evaluate the success (or otherwise) of this new approach to early childhood teacher-education in the subject.
	8. Continue until you are satisfied with that aspect of your work, repeating the cycle if necessary	I have begun to disseminate these reflections and outcomes for peer-feedback for teaching preparations in 2012.

Following the subject's emergent approach to teaching and learning, students were asked to demonstrate their engagement in relation to the four subject outcomes (Wright, 1997); developing, reflecting upon, keeping track of and submitting their progress in PebblePad. As each user's PLS is private (like an introverted Facebook), a subject "Gateway" acted as a place where students could leave their work for their lecturer to view. Workshop experiences and discussions acted both as a springboard for such work, and as a site for its development and refinement over time. To help familiarise the students with the PebblePad tools which would enable them to reflect upon and engage with subject content according to their own interests, prior experience and abilities, students were encouraged to try out four asset types in the first four weeks of the subject (see Table 2).

Table 2: Asset types & foci in the subject

<p>Experience: Documenting something that you did that included a number of different activities.</p>  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Description • 1st, 2nd activity etc (list) • Add more detail option • Evidence / link to item, as evidence • Reflection • Hours 	<p>In the first week of the subject students were asked to consider the question: how literate and numerate are you? Following the workshop students documented all the literate and numerate activities they had engaged in over a 24-period, before reflecting on what they had consequently learnt about themselves.</p>
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 <p>Thought: Prompting deeper thinking on a single event or idea by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What? • So what? (why is this important?) • Now what? (what is the impact for you?) • Date • Hours 	<p>In the second week students completed a ‘what? so what? now what?’ reflection on a reading they had selected from a list of options. Students were asked to explain why they had selected the reading (what), what they now thought about the reading given their learning and discussions in the workshop (so what), and how it might alter their approach to teaching or their focus in the subject (now what).</p>
 <p>Action Plan: Planning how you will achieve something by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Current situation • Ideal situation • 1st, 2nd steps etc (list) • Add how and when option • Completion date • SWOT analysis (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) • Supporting resources (with categories) • Reflection • Hours 	<p>In the third week students were encouraged to consider what they would like to know more about. To complete it, students needed to consider what skills, abilities or experience they currently had related to a concept or approach they wanted to learn more about. They then needed to describe their ‘ideal situation’, the steps-to-success they would employ to achieve it and an analysis of any strengths, weakness, opportunities or threats they foresaw in doing so.</p>

Adopted from: (Sutherland, Brotchie & Chesney, 2011)

Once students had received feedback on their first four assets, they were required to keep track of their ongoing learning in the subject by completing an asset a week on their learning and thinking in the subject. A framework for presenting their assets, known as a ‘profile’, was made available. “Profiles are self-evaluative questionnaires that allow users to audit their current knowledge, skills and abilities” (Sutherland, Brotchie & Chesney, 2011, p. 14). In this case, the profile acted as a ‘wardrobe’ in which students could ‘hang’ records and evidence of their progress towards dimensions of the four subject outcomes. In their second assignment students were asked to attach their 12 or more assets (including their original four assets) to their profile, explaining how they acted as evidence to support their claim that they had met a dimension of one or more of the subject outcomes. This added personal dimension enabled our students to pursue their own professional learning interests related to the subject, and to present that learning-in-progress both for assessment purposes and for the lecturer to scaffold their teaching and learning to better suit individual students’ needs.

Reflections & implications: Principles at the heart of quality teaching & learning

The design of the assessment schema for the subject was intended to bring the personal into the professional and reduce the distance between learning and assessment in the learning territories through which the students’ passed. PebblePad provided the means for each student to map their individual journey through the territory.

Boud and Prosser (2002) propose a framework for the analysis of learning designs using new technologies which captures key principles from the broader literature on quality learning. Reflecting on our design against their framework leads to the following observations.

- i. *Engaging learners* – the assessment offered students opportunities to follow their own learning interests as they reflected on workshop tasks and set readings, and enabled the lecturer to individualise her teaching accordingly.
- ii. *Acknowledging context & involving practice* – student's prior and developing knowledge and experience was explored in light of the self and disciplinary practice.
- iii. *Challenging* – for the students and the lecturer the mix of product and process through the assessment prompted different ways of seeing and higher level, transformative thinking.

But perhaps most importantly, the design enabled the lecturer to emulate the emergent approach to teaching which typifies early childhood educational practice where the learners' needs and interests guide the shaping of the learning environment and content. This approach in teacher-education, using PLS, enabled us to practice what we preach to assist students in understanding the power of personalised, transformative learning which is based on the co-construction of knowledge with the teacher. This shift in the learner-teacher power and the experience of learning with a closer nexus between assessment, content, and outcomes better places our pre-service teachers to cope with the ever-changing children's service context, enabling them to transform or re-shape their early childhood teaching in context-specific, highly individualised ways.

The project described here was a bid to shift one subject in one course into the learning paradigm. Anecdotal responses from students suggest that the shift has worked. The project potentially has lessons for others attempting such a shift.

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