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Freeing the hoop jumpers: Eportfolio assessment to raise learner engagement on PgCert HE programmes

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Introduction

The idea of professional development has gradually become an accepted and established part of teaching in higher education (Dearing, 1997; DfES, 2003; Browne, 2010). It is now the norm for new university teaching staff in the UK to complete a postgraduate certificate in Higher Education Practice, Learning and Teaching in HE, or Academic Practice as recommended or even mandatory initial professional development (Laycock & Shrives, 2009). While these certificate programmes (henceforth, PgCert) are now well-established in the sector and are valued for raising the profile of university teaching and educational scholarship (Shrives, 2012), it is not uncommon for learners to view them as a hoop-jumping exercise, and therefore adopt strategic approaches to get through the programme, resulting in disappointing learning gains.

We present an analysis of the barriers to engagement that can cause PgCert learners to take such a hoop jumping approach to their programme, drawing from policy, literature, and participant views. We then propose a teaching and assessment model to address these barriers using an eportfolio approach. While eportfolio use is not new in PgCert programmes and staff development, for example being used notably at York St. John University where learners create a portfolio to evidence how they meet the UK Professional Standards Framework (UKPSF) and use it as an 'aide memoire' in a summatively assessed dialogue (Asghar, 2014), the challenges to engagement for our learners that the current study found lead us to propose a different portfolio approach. There is of course no single right way to design deep learning into a PgCert programme, but we hope that the research-informed eportfolio model presented here may be useful to other practitioners who seek, like us, to remove the hoops from reflective teaching practice.

Challenges to PgCert learner engagement

While raising learner engagement is central to the educational design of any programme, PgCert learner engagement can be particularly problematic because of the combined issues of academic identity, individual learning approach, cohort variance, and stakeholder needs. These four main areas, presented below, emerged from analysis of the literature and where relevant were further explored in a focus group conducted with learners from two different modules of our PgCert provision.

1. Academic identity

Learners on our PgCert are themselves university lecturers and therefore have a complex identity: they are subject specialists (usually qualified at doctorate level), they may be researchers, increasingly they may be experienced professional practitioners, and this potential dichotomy of the role as subject expert and teacher (Davies & Maguire, 2013) can be challenging for the academic, their manager and the department they work in. Whilst there is evidence that the PgCert can have a very positive impact (Stone, 2011), there is a danger that it becomes a compliance-driven institutional imposition, and that there can be resistance among some academics to what might be seen as a top-down over-regulatory requirement (Gosling, 2010).

In addition, department heads may be reluctant to release staff, partly because of workloads and limited staff resources, and partly because the culture of many university departments values research above pedagogy. The latter may mean that before staff have even started the course there can be an element of scepticism about its value, while the former may well impinge even once the staff member is released. Though it is normal for a certain number of working hours to be set aside for completion of the programme (typically 200 hours), quite a small proportion of this is for timetabled face-to-face sessions, and the bulk of the workload is for reflective self-directed study. Time pressures for new staff pulled in many conflicting directions may mean that this notional study time is consumed in the daily demands of the busy academic.

In the main these engagement issues around academic identity and department culture, and accompanying issues of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (Gale, 2011) need to be addressed at the departmental and institutional level. However, at the level of PgCert design, we can ameliorate them by creating a clear learning path that scaffolds the sizeable self-directed study time into activities that are easy to engage with without negatively challenging a learner's academic identity. A scaffolded eportfolio model, as proposed below, would allow for this by giving learners short activities to engage with during the self-directed study time, providing quick ways to record and reflect that dovetail with their academic activities without adding undue time pressures, while also being open enough to avoid a top-down compliance-driven threat to academic identity.

2. Learner approach

Although the learners are academics, it is not unheard of for them to engage with the PgCert in the same manner in which their own decried, supposedly, overly 'exam-focused' students may engage. That is, there can be a tendency towards surface learning, responding merely to the summative deadlines, and to concentrating all activity around key summative tasks. Even more motivated students, such as the ones who gave extra time to participate in this study, found themselves defaulting to this approach under time constraints. As one participant put it, "I did leave it right till the last minute. I was doing it like a normal student you know, late at night... and I did all right." While these learners were engaging beyond just assessment motivation, as evidenced by their performance in the course and their reports of their own development in their teaching, they all wished they had been required – 'forced' according to some – to start gathering their evidence and ideas of development as they went along to ease what

even for these strong learners was highly time-pressured learning journey. Additionally both high-performing and low-performing learners indicated via module feedback reports that essentially they wished they had realised sooner what the module was about: that “until you do it you don’t realise the benefits of it” and for those who only engaged with summative assessment, this realisation came far too late for any real development, resulting in a largely frustrating hoop-jumping exercise.

This explicit call from high-performing learners to ‘force’ activities, which would also benefit low-performing learners, makes a compelling case for more structure to the self-directed study time of the PgCert, as already suggested above to mitigate challenges to academic identity. Our proposed eportfolio design therefore requires learners to engage with the process as they go along through structured templates, rather than the more freeform collection approach traditionally associated with eportfolios (Lorenzo & Ittelson, 2005). This go-along engagement replaces summative tasks, scaffolding better time use and engagement, in essence taking the hoop-jumpers’ hoops and melting them into stepping stones. In this way, the students who take a surface approach to the learning will be required to engage in very similar way to those students who take a deeper approach to the learning experience and naturally engage with the reflective activities (Biggs & Tang, 2011). The move from summative end-point assessment spreads out the learners’ workload, promoting a “little and often” approach where learners make frequent reflections on their teaching activity so that by the end, everything is in place and all that is required is an overarching narrative to bring this all together.

3. *Cohort variance*

While the above identified barriers to PgCert engagement can be addressed through a scaffolded eportfolio path, the issue of cohort variance can be addressed through this and through assessment design. All programmes of course have different students and must design for inclusivity (HEA, 2011), but the PgCert in particular has a wide range of learners who may come from any academic discipline represented at the university, and who may successfully develop as teachers while remaining situated within their own disciplinary way of thought. Where this disciplinary variation (and of course, individual variation) makes learners less comfortable or adept at personal reflection, challenges can arise. Getting students to reflect on their developing teaching practice is a key way to get them to actually develop as teachers (Bell, 2001), and while those working in fields such as health studies, social sciences and some areas of management and the life sciences may take easily to this reflective approach, those engaged in research and teaching in other areas such as engineering, computing, science and technology may benefit from more structure and guidance.

At the same time this structure must be open enough to support learners along multiple paths of appropriate development. Participants on the course are not “trained” in the practicalities of “how to be a good teacher” and then assessed against pre-determined “good practice” as such a design would be theoretically indefensible, and impossible in practice. Instead, developing practitioners are required to engage with course content over a period of time, constantly reflecting on this in the light of their current practice, and developing as a teacher along the way. We therefore propose an ipsative

assessment design, detailed below, where learners are assessed on their development compared to their starting point rather than achieving a particular standard of performance. In contrast to similar practice in other fields (e.g. health studies), we are not simply trying to set a minimum benchmark of “fitness to practice”, but are offering a more flexible model where teachers can start the programme with differing levels of experience and competence, and all be provided with opportunities to develop.

4. Coherent design to meet all stakeholder needs

A final challenge in raising PgCert learner engagement is the need to meet all stakeholder requirements: not only the learners but the university, the Higher Education Academy (HEA) as the accrediting professional body for the Fellowship component, and those involved in teaching the course. While the needs of the learners have already been established as wide-ranging, so too are the combined needs of the other stakeholders, and the issue of coherence is crucial.

Within our own university context, there is the need to design for the intended learning outcomes of the masters level module, but also to take a programme-focused approach to assessment, as developed through the University of Bradford-led PASS project (<http://www.pass.brad.ac.uk/>), to achieve the following on our programme:

- ensure the assessment of the espoused programme outcomes
- avoid the atomisation of assessment focused at the micro-level
- integrate and assess complex, higher-order learning
- aim for the sum of parts making the intended whole
- enable students and staff to see the links and coherence of the programme
- provide feedback on slowly learnt literacies and enable complex learning
- avoid a ‘tick-box’ mentality which engenders a surface approach to learning
- reduce summative assessment to enable staff and students to “see the wood for the trees” (Rust, 2007)

To satisfy the requirements of the UK Professional Standards framework (UKPSF) in terms of areas of activity, knowledge and values evidenced, our proposed assessment design incorporates teaching observation, engagement with theory and the literature, an emerging personal teaching philosophy, lesson plans and on-going planning of personal development.

We also need to balance our own needs for formative and summative assessment opportunities, by designing in regular events where tutors and students can provide feedback, as well as making summative judgements as to whether the participants will pass the module and gain fellowship for the academy. The design challenge was to set up these scaffolding support structures in such a way that they cohere as a meaningful whole and that students can benefit from them to develop as teachers, rather than coming across as disparate requirements, hoops for the participants to jump through without seeing or benefitting from the intended developmental benefits. Looking at student performance over many years, it is clear that participants who engaged with the activities in a joined-up way were able to fare much better on the programme than those who took a more instrumental approach, jumping through the hoops in a piecemeal

manner. Whilst this will not be at all surprising, we hope the design proposed below will remove barriers to PgCert learner engagement, allowing them to study both more efficiently and more effectively.

Overcoming engagement barriers through eportfolio

To address the above four challenges to learner engagement, the proposed design makes use of a scaffolded learning path and joined-up assessment. Both are encompassed through an online eportfolio 'journey' which provides guidance while still being quite open and flexible. We propose a learning-oriented model of assessment design (Carless, 2015) where formative assessment is used in conjunction with student choice, requiring an engaged, reflective, personal investment from the participant. The assessment weighting makes 'little and often' engagement mandatory, as requested by the learners (Section 2), and also uses features of ipsative assessment (Hughes, 2014) noted in Sections 3 and 4 to concentrate as much on progress and reflective self-development as on achievement.

The platform

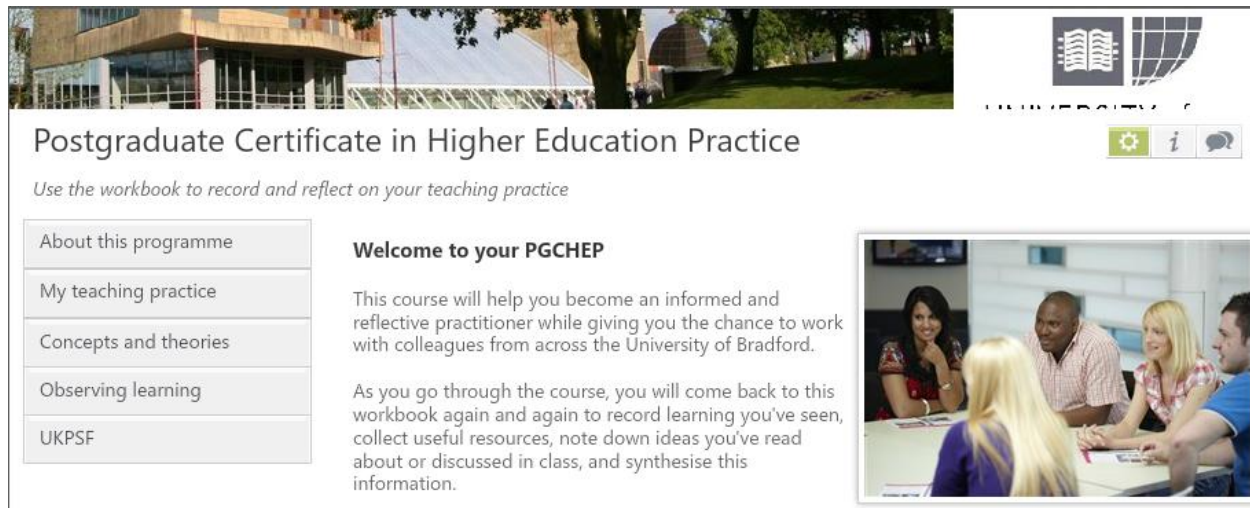
Before detailing the learning path and assessment design, it must be noted that this model has been created using our institutionally-chosen eportfolio system, PebblePad, and that some of its functionality, which may or may not be available through other eportfolio systems, is essential to our design. Specifically we relied on the ability to create 'workbooks' to structure the learning. A workbook is a teacher-structured portfolio that may include relatively closed elements where students access multimedia content and respond to it, much like a traditional paper-based workbook, as well as more open elements where students are scaffolded to add blog posts, reflections and whatever else they wish. Workbooks therefore allow the scaffolding identified as necessary in the above-discussed challenges, and focus group participants who use a workbook approach in their own eportfolio-based teaching strongly suggested them for the PgCert. Their suggestions align with Parker, Ndoye and Ritzhapt's (2012) findings that ease of use compared to the more open 'build your own portfolio' approach reduces some of the cognitive overload and time burdens that can occur when students are asked to engage with eportfolio technology.

Additionally the proposed model uses PebblePad's auto-submission feature to make any work done in the workbook instantly live, turning the learning path into a space for formative, dialogic engagement between learner and teacher. This both makes the feedback process very easy for teachers and was also identified as a motivator by focus group participants who felt that having someone looking at their work in this way "makes it worth something", adding the sense of purpose.

Scaffolded learning path

The scaffolded learning path is delivered through a workbook which has five sections covering how the learner will engage in the entire self-directed study portion of the course. The sections give templates for learners to use and also provide open placeholders for them to create work in, helping them understand how to use the self-directed part of the course to record and develop their learning as they go along. This structure also maps to the assessment points, described in the next section, to 'force' learners, as per the previously discussed challenges, to engage little and often throughout the course. Figure 1 shows the five sections as they appear to learners any time they visit the workbook:

Figure 1. Opening page of the eportfolio workbook



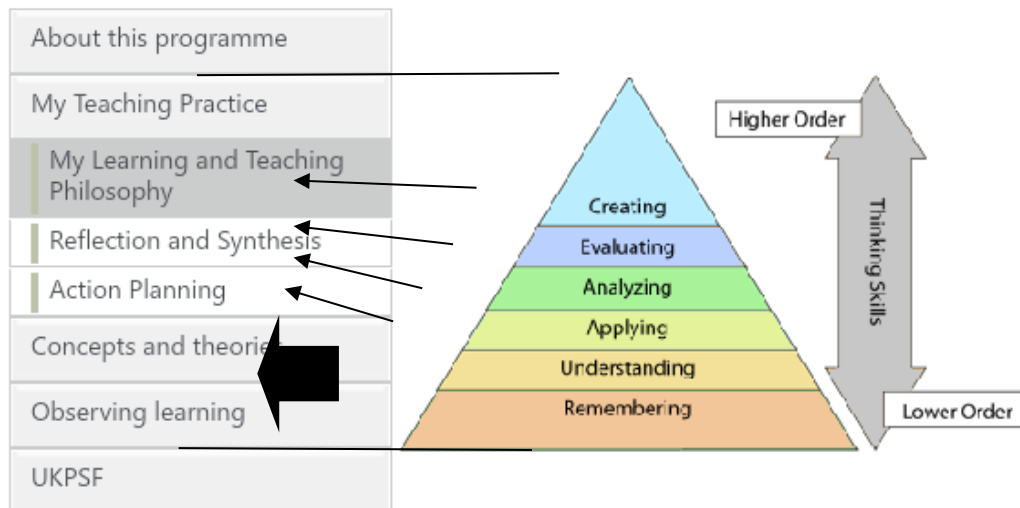
We propose these five areas as a way to effectively move learners from hoop-jumping to deep learning. Leaving aside the introductory 'About this programme' page and the final page (a UKPSF mapping document not discussed here as it responds to the separate assessment needs of HEA accreditation), the engagement areas scaffold three types of activity: observations of learning (both the practitioner's observations and peer/teacher observations of them), reading and thinking about pedagogic concepts and theories, and reflecting on how these ideas combine and relate to the practitioner's own teaching. We suggest that pulling these three basic activities of teacher development together into a clear, interlinked portfolio path with ongoing assessment both makes clear the step-by-step process that time-strapped academics can easily engage in and also effectively pushes, indeed requires, real learning to happen.

The entry-point activity for learners would be the activities, started in a face-to-face setting, that require lower order cognitive processes (Bloom, 1956) such as remembering or recording learning events and ordering or understanding the assigned reading. This is not to imply that the learners need assistance with these skills, but that as noted in the analysis of challenges, time pressures and disciplinary differences in approach to knowledge mean that a scaffolded path will produce better learning gains

even for the strong students rather than assuming they can translate their disciplinary knowledge and role priorities into the unique context of a PgCert. By ensuring they have the two key building blocks of reflective practice, observation and theoretical knowledge, in place and built up over time, we can ensure they have something concrete to reflect on. These two areas then feed into the actual reflective practice – the ‘My teaching practice’ section – which requires the higher order cognitive domains of Bloom’s taxonomy. This section scaffolds learners to apply what they’ve observed or learned via an action planning template, to then move up a level and analyse the results of their actions and of any other learning via a blog (we call this section Reflection and Synthesis to emphasise what learners should write about), and finally to pull all these elements together into their own learning and teaching philosophy which is revisited three times over the course of the programme. Learners therefore are scaffolded to build from the simple to the complex, as shown in Figure 2.

The areas of the learning path will not always neatly align with the suggested taxonomic thinking level, but breaking it down in this way helps less reflective practitioners mimic what more reflective practitioners naturally do, and helps all practitioners have a record of evidence to draw on and inform their reflection.

Figure 2. Structure to scaffold learners from lower to higher order thinking, shown with Anderson and Krathwohl’s (2001) updated taxonomy



Engagement through assessment

The observing and conceptual knowledge parts of the learning path are formatively assessed via in-class group discussion and teacher feedback particularly at the beginning stages of the course, following Carless’s (2015, p. 240) proposal of how to make feedback more effective. Since these two parts of the eportfolio are not summatively assessed they could be ignored by extrinsically-motivated learners, but as noted above, both these sections feed directly into the top-level ‘My Teaching Practice’ area, which is assessed and the successful completion of which requires the ‘little and often’ engagement supported by the lower levels. Teacher feedback, carrying no marks,

will be given at set points throughout this top-level part of the learning path to motivate and guide learners, providing the engagement our focus group members asked for by having it be a live space where their work is looked at and therefore matters.

The move to more formative feedback necessarily means less summative feedback to avoid doubling the PgCert teachers' workload. This again follows the aforementioned Carless model and should not be a problem as the greater amount of formative assessment means learners will have a good idea of how they're doing, with the summative assessment acting more to confirm their progress or recognise significant growth. The summative assessment applies only to the 'My Teaching Practice' part of the eportfolio where learners synthesise their observations and reading into action plans, reflective writing, and an evolving summation of their approach to teaching.

To successfully pass, the learner's 'Action Planning' activity log must evidence some sort of informed growth in their teaching practice. Whether this is a series of short action plans inspired by micro ideas from class, observations and the literature, or a more longitudinal process will depend on the learner's situation. The Reflection and Synthesis blog must have at least eight entries but for assessment the learner will pick three that they feel best shows their development and link to them in a final blog post explaining why they chose them. This element of purposeful selection, a key feature of portfolio practice to develop writing skills (e.g. Hyland, 2003), is often neglected in subject-situated eportfolio practice, despite its benefits for learner development, and for the teacher who will have less to summatively assess. Finally, as the culminating tip of all the thinking about practice, the student's Learning and Teaching Philosophy is ipsatively assessed. We ask students to write a brief Philosophy statement at the very start of the course, one in the middle noting any changes from the start, and a third one at the end. This holistic view of their teaching practice should, ideally, change and grow as they move through the scaffolded learning path, building their eportfolio. The developmental nature of the assessment scheme is laid out in Figure 3 (overleaf).

Figure 3. Formative and summative assessment of the eportfolio



This assessment design interweaves with the non-linear learning path proposed earlier, motivating learners to engage with scaffolded activities in a way that will both enhance their learning and make it easier, while also allowing for cohort variance and encompassing the stakeholder needs of the teaching staff, university, and HEA.

Conclusion

Before engaging reluctant learners, it is necessary to understand as fully as possible the barriers to their engagement. We have analysed those barriers for PgCert participants and further extrapolated from those to propose an eportfolio solution which, while somewhat dependent on the affordances of our specific eportfolio platform, we hope could be transferable to any HE setting. The main tenets of our proposal are to create a scaffolded learning path to help all PgCert learners engage, and also to alter assessment practice, removing the traditional summative 'hoops' to change engagement patterns and enhance learner outcomes. Data collection on the impact of this approach will commence with the start of our next PgCert cohort.

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