eCDF ePortfolio Implementation Case Study
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Introduction

Rather than an evaluation of the ePortfolio system Mahara, the eCDF ePortfolio project case study reports are designed to provide other organisations a guide to the lessons learnt and challenges faced during the implementation of a typical ePortfolio system.

It should also be noted that during the pilot period, case study partners were working on a pre v1.0 release of Mahara where development and refinements to functionality was continuing.

In order to ensure relevance to other ePortfolio systems and ongoing accuracy of the case studies, where possible references to functionality or technical issues specific to the ePortfolio system Mahara and the pilot site (MyPortfolio) have been removed. Development suggestions made within the case study reports have however been captured by the eCDF project team and documented within the Mahara Development Roadmap (http://www.mahara.org/roadmap)

This report evaluates the experience of hosting the pilot case study on implementing the Mahara ePortfolio programme at the Graduate School of Nursing, Midwifery and Health (GSNMH), Faculty of Human and Social Sciences (FHSS), Victoria University of Wellington (VUW).

1 Case Study Overview

1.1 Organisational Details
The Graduate School of Nursing, Midwifery and Health is a relative small school within the Faculty of Human and Social Sciences at Victoria University of Wellington. It provides postgraduate courses at a certificate, diploma, masterate and PhD level for nurses, midwives and other health professionals e.g. social workers and occupational therapists, from all over New Zealand. The estimated FTE estimate of students for the school in 2007 is 212. Implementation of Mahara was in a one year programme known as the Postgraduate Certificate in Clinical Nursing (Mental Health).

1.2 Programme Description
Advancing the practice knowledge of clinicians in mental health nursing is the main purpose of the Postgraduate Certificate in Clinical Nursing (Mental Health). The school implemented Mahara in one course: Mental Health Nursing in Complex Contexts Nurs 512/534. The course is at level eight in the NZQA level of study. In 2007, as in previous years, it runs through semesters one, two and three of the academic year.

Students aim to:
- orientate their practice to the Postgraduate Certificate and/or Masters programme of study using a folder/portfolio process
- consider specific personal and professional strengths associated with present practice and through personal appraisal, identify those areas which can be improved
- engage in professional supervision and explore the development of roles, relationships and responsibilities of the advanced nursing practitioner working in groups.
- articulate nursing practice through these processes.

Mahara was used for some mandatory formative components of the major assignment of the course which were to culminate in a full nurse/nursing portfolio. The assignment is worth 50% of the final course grade. Mahara became the vehicle in which to send the components of the assignments, which in previous years were sent in hard copy.

The course runs as distance a learning course with schools held three times a year: February, May, and September.

1.3 Participants
The course commenced with 14 students attending the February school and was down to 12 students in the May school. The Clinical Training Agency (CTA) funds the students in this course. This agency funds post entry clinical based education and training for staff in a variety of health disciplines. These students come from various

locations throughout New Zealand. They are mature students who undertake part-time study alongside full time work and family responsibilities. Most students study part time. They are distance learners required to come to Wellington for the schools.

One main lecturer taught the programme with some assistance from another lecturer.

2   Implementation

2.1   Implementation Issues
Ethical approval from the VUW Human Ethic Committee was required prior to implementation. Although there is movement towards Massey University and VUW to accept the ethical approval given by one institution when the other is involved in a joint research project, this had not occurred at the time of implementing Mahara. The VUW Human Ethics Committee required tabling of the documentation from the Massey Ethics Committee approval, a form outlining the project and its implementation and any additions made to the course outline because of the pilot.

Five main overlapping issues were encountered:

Both the lecturers and the students commented on difficulties they experienced in using the programme. This included student participants who rated themselves as having reasonable computer skills and who have mostly taught themselves to use other programmes. For example, they had hoped to have prompts to tell them what to do when they could not proceed, or find an easy solution to their problem when looking up the user guide. Therefore, they did not achieve what they wanted to and often put off further attempts as there were other priorities for their time.

Some of the 'unfriendliness' related to the programme's evolving nature. When the lecturers or students encountered problems that they expected the programme to accommodate, there was a tendency to think 'they were the problem' in not having interpreted aspects in the 'right way'. This led to more frustration and time wasting and consequently not persevering or contacting help to sort out the issue.

All participants were required to have basic computer skills for entry to the course and these were required in their work places. While acknowledging they had some skill and experience, only approximately 50% rated themselves as feeling confident in computer use. This, coupled with the fact that the students were also required to learn a second elearning tool (Blackboard) put pressure on the time they had available to spend troubleshooting. Not being on campus where the students could seek help readily compounded this difficulty. Therefore, student participation in the programme was low. Further complicating this issue was that the students were not compelled, although expected, to commence using Mahara immediately after the introduction and the cyber laboratory experience they participated in at the February school. Consequently, when asked by the lecturer to report back to her via a blog message sent to them some weeks later, they found navigating the system difficult after this time gap.

The course chosen for implementing Mahara was because the course content included development of a portfolio and the students would gain skills in using a tool that would be a long term asset in their careers. Neither the lecturers nor the students

voluntarily offered to host the pilot. The main lecturer agreed to implement it because she believed it would have long term benefits for the students, and herself. She believed that regulatory body of nursing, which already requires all practitioners to keep a practice portfolio, would likely be needing these presented in electronic form in the future. Nevertheless, making the time to learn the programme increased the pressure of the main lecturer's already busy workload.

The busy workload the main lecturer in the course was a factor in not becoming as fully cognisant with Mahara as she would have preferred. Although she was offered extra help when this became apparent, bringing another lecturer into the course, who was not already familiar with Mahara, was thought to be too great an increase in workload for the short time of the research period that remained.

The interim advocate's limited advanced computer skills and no experience with elearning management tools compounded the problem of the lecturer's busy workload. More time for the interim advocate and main lecturer to really the grasp the programme and its potential before it went live with the students could have assisted in reducing this problem.

Further, greater 'buy in' from the students may have occurred if both key staff had volunteered their participation for the implementation and been able to be highly enthusiastic about its potential. In retrospect, although the potential of the programme to nursing is evident, the size of the school, the timing of the research and the courses available for its appropriate implementation were all factors in not finding staff who would have volunteered to undertake the research.

No specific school policies for implementing the programme were considered necessary during the research period or on reflection after the period was completed

2.2   Documentation

The implementation guidelines worked well in grasping how to work with the programme. Being part of the steering committee where these were developed and discussed enabled a good understanding of their intent by the interim advocate.

The student user guides were helpful to an extent. Some users created hard copies of them to have beside them as they worked while others used them online. However, when participants could not find a resolution to a problem encountered they tended to dismiss them as having limited value.

The main gap pertained to having a step by step guide for all areas of use. For example, the lecturers used the blog function to contact the students and requested that they reply through the feedback function available. A very small number achieved this without prompts. A step by step process to achieve this was then written and sent to them via Mahara and by email which aided more to accomplish this task. A second recommendation for the guidelines is to add a section on the frequently asked questions.

3 Technical

3.1 Technical support
The Information Technological Service (ITS) was informed via a discussion with several of their personnel about the GSNHM participating in this case study. One of their personnel attended the demonstration of Mahara given by the administrator in January. However, because of the small number of students, and the accessing of Mahara via a website outside of the university, it was decided that the main lecturer in the course would be the first contact for technical support and queries which she could not answer would be sent on to the administrator. Only a few queries came through to the lecturer. Although the feedback from students given in the May school indicated difficulties in accessing and working with Mahara, the students appeared reluctant to seek help.

3.2 Reporting
The only reporting tool used to date was the blog function. It appeared to have potential for informal reporting to and from students but some students did not complete the built in feedback loop.

3.3 Site Configuration
No site reconfigurations took place.

4 Tutor Feedback

4.1 Teaching with ePortfolio
The lecturer found the programme difficult and consequently time consuming to learn related to its perceived lack of user friendliness and gaps in the functions relating to its evolving nature. By May, she was unable to identify any benefits of it in her teaching. Any potential benefits appeared to be lost in the difficulties and disadvantages identified above under section 2. The need to teach two eLearning programmes presented added pressures in an already full course. The main lecturer's preference for this particular distance learning course would be to have one eLearning programme that incorporates the ePortfolio and a facility for eTutorials. It appears to the main lecturer that students having to learn two new electronic programmes, as well as master all the new content in the course, culminated in the students experiencing a negative attitude to Mahara and reduced motivation in persevering in this endeavour. These sentiments, according to the main lecturer, appear to have inhibited their understanding of its long term worth.

4.2 Student learning experience
The lecturer and GSNMH interim advocate held a discussion with the students at the May school. Although a small number indicated they were willing to persevere in becoming competent in the use of Mahara the majority found that it was difficult and only expressed negative statements about it. 'Frustrating' was the main descriptor used to describe their experience.

Another descriptor included was 'concrete' i.e. it was perceived to have its own particular internal logic and they failed to be able to generalise learning from other computer programmes they were familiar with.

All expressed concern about the time involved in learning the programme, which they believed was counter productive to mastering the course content. Mastering the content was their rationale for enrolment in the course. One went as far as to say he was not prepared to put any more time into it and would risk failing the course.

Their reluctance to seek help, often influenced by the time of night they were using their computers and the extra time it was going to take them, meant giving up on further endeavours to work with it.

The group believed Mahara would be better trialled in undergraduate courses where the students were on campus, were required to use it daily or at least weekly and could obtain ready access to help.

5 Continued use of Mahara

5.1 System quality
Rating for system quality   Satisfactory
Taking account of Mahara as a programme in evolution the system was satisfactory.

5.2 Intention of Continued Use
The school has decided not to continue with Mahara as the mandatory vehicle for submitting the formative assessment components and summative assessment envisaged. This is because of all the difficulties encountered in piloting Mahara within the particular course chosen and the nature of the students taking the course

The official advocate, Rose McEldowney, does not rule out the possibility that Mahara may be used again in the future, taking account of what this school has learned from the pilot and positioning it in a more appropriate course. The fact remains that nurses will, most likely be required sometime in the future, to submit ePortfolios to the nursing regulatory body to prove ongoing competency to practice.

6 Success of Pilot

6.1 Staff Response
Staff response rating - neither positive or negative.

Although a decision to discontinue the programme was made mainly because of the student feedback, the staff believe the piloting of Mahara was beneficial. The short time frame of the pilot in relation to the nature of the course meant that staff were becoming increasingly familiar with Mahara and could have become more positive as time went on.

Overall success rating
   Satisfactory

The school felt satisfied with the pilot case study of Mahara in the sense that there were no major technical obstacles in its implementation and much was learned from the implementation. The nature of the pilot as a programme in evolution had not been fully appreciated. Therefore, the time needed to implement it exceeded prior expectations.

7   Additional Comments

The GSNMH are pleased to have had the experience of hosting a pilot of the Mahara ePortfolio system. As ePortfolios are likely to feature more in the future of nursing it gave us an entrée into how these work and material to consider in any attempt to position them in a nursing, midwifery or health course offered by the school in the future.

Multiple factors culminated in the decision not to continue using Mahara in the located course. Important among these factors were the distance learning nature of the course; the nature of the students (many only having limited computer confidence and having to learn two new eLearning tools); and experiencing many competing demands on the use of their time.

The staff, although frustrated at times, in the amount of time taken to become familiar with it and offering encouragement and support to students, did come to see its potential value and are pleased to have mastered another teaching eLearning tool.

Margaret Connor, Interim ePortfolio Advocate.
Thelma Puckey, Lecturer in course of pilot case study.
Rose McEldowney, Official ePortfolio Advocate.

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