



The Personal Learning Space – Technology enabling engaging pedagogy

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The Personal Learning Space, conceptually positioned between the Institutional and Personal Learning Environments, can be thought of as an ‘eportfolio PLUS’. It is institutionally provided but personally controlled, providing a unique balance between direction and independence that encourages student engagement. Action research demonstrates that the scaffolding and templates, sharing and collaboration, formative and summative feedback, reflective structure, and privacy and security all enable engaging pedagogy in a manner previously not available to tertiary educators. This paper includes two examples from practice at La Trobe University that illustrate the opportunities the PLS is providing for both teachers and students.

Keywords: personal learning space, engaging pedagogy, reflective practice, eportfolios

Introduction

Ramsden (2011) argues that ‘independence, control, and engagement’ are key to effective teaching in higher education. In particular, the right balance of student control and teacher direction is essential.

Get students engaged with content in a way that enables them to reach understanding. Give them enough space to learn at their own pace and in their own sequence. They need to feel in control over what they’re doing, as well as feeling that you’re directing them – the right balance is important, both for learning well and for enjoying it. (Ramsden, 2011)

This paper argues that the Personal Learning Space can provide a mechanism for achieving this balance in a way that has not previously been available to tertiary educators and students.

What is the Personal Learning Space?

Most tertiary institutions provide a range of technologies to support learning, principal amongst these is the Learning Management System (LMS). These tools, which might collectively be called the ‘Institutional Learning Environment (ILE)’, are controlled by the institution and populated with institutional content, and are typically withdrawn from the student at the end of each semester or the course. They have the primary aim of

facilitating institutional teaching and learning and administration processes including provision of course material, management of course delivery and assessment, collection and presentation of data, and enabling communication in the online environment. Teacher direction is high and student control minimal, conditions unlikely to maximise student engagement in learning.

Many students and staff are now also coming to the tertiary environment with their own, idiosyncratically selected suite of tools which have become defined as Personal Learning Environments (PLE). This eclectic range of tools is personally chosen and provided, populated with personal content, and managed and controlled by the individual. This environment is highly engaging and user independence is absolute, but there is little capacity for teachers to provide direction to learners or to enter into a dialogue with the students. The tools of a PLE are not designed to support or scaffold learning and provide limited and time-consuming mechanisms to support institutional processes. The whole notion of individual choice as the core principle of the PLE is compromised as soon as students are required to complete institutional tasks in this environment (Sutherland, Brotchie & Chesney, 2011).

A third space for facilitating teaching and learning appears to be emerging. Though not designed as a new genre of software an analysis of 30 case studies (Poot, 2010) and 38 learning designs (Sutherland et al, 2011) suggests certain consistent characteristics of this 'space'. The Personal Learning Space (PLS) can conceptually be described as 'the space in the middle':

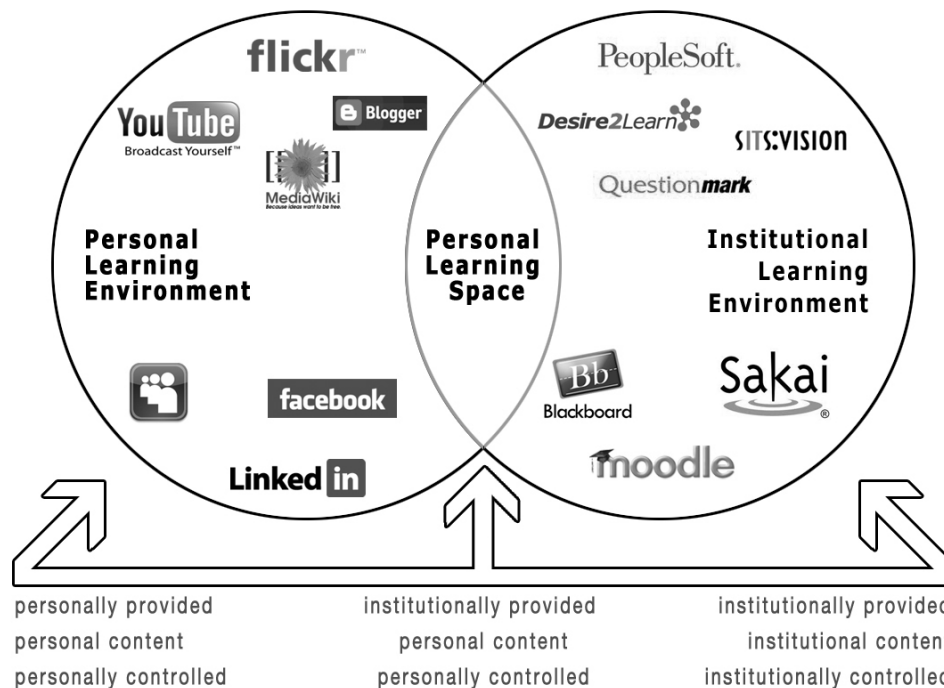


Figure 1: The Personal Learning Space situated between the Personal Learning Environment and the Institutional Learning Environment (Sutherland, et al, 2011)

This space is institutionally provided but is under the control of the learner and is populated with personal content. In this space individuals can learn at their own pace using a range of powerful inbuilt scaffolding tools and templates. The PLS is underpinned by a reflective structure and users create enduring and iterative records of learning and experience. One common example of activity in the PLS is the creation of eportfolios. Users can invite others, including peers, mentors and tutors, to engage with their work and retain absolute control over the nature and timing of this engagement. Teachers can direct student learning through the provision of templates and broad instruction, but students have the freedom to adapt and interpret these in ways that are representative of their own personality and individuality. While the PLS includes tools to manage institutional processes such as feedback and assessment, all records of learning belong to the student and remain within their

control before, during and after these formal processes (Sutherland, et al, 2011).

The overall aim of the action research described in this paper was to improve practice in teacher education programs at La Trobe University through a reflective and recursive process. The university was undergoing wide sweeping curriculum reform and the Faculty of Education teaching and learning team identified significant synergy between the concepts and functions of the PLS and the evolving demands of the redesigned curriculum (Masters, Austin & Doolan, 2010). The team was aiming to develop a model whereby students could take responsibility for their learning and develop personal meaning whilst drawing connections between the sometimes disparate aspects of their courses and experiences. It was hypothesised that the combination of teacher direction and student independence and control afforded by the PLS would maximise engagement in the learning process.

Method

The Personal Learning Space, PebblePad, was introduced across the Faculty of Education at La Trobe University in a staged implementation process beginning in 2008. The initial phase involved the replacement of an existing digital eportfolio task in a single subject with a portfolio in the PLS. In the second semester 2008 two additional tasks in two subjects were replaced with PLS activities. From this beginning, use of the PLS in subjects and courses across the faculty continued to grow to the point where, in 2011, digital PLS tasks are mapped across all courses.

Throughout this implementation process an approach based on participatory action research was taken (O'Brien, 1998). Following each phase of the implementation student outputs and outcomes and teacher experiences were reviewed and findings used to inform the planning for the next phase. This process involved content analysis, informal interviews, and use of data from institutionally administered student evaluations of teaching and learning.

Results

The following two examples illustrate the type of learning activities now occurring across the Faculty of Education at La Trobe University.

Example 1

In Outdoor Education the PLS is used to engage students in planning and preparation for a final year activity called 'The Long Walk'. Students complete three pieces of work in the PLS – an action plan, a planning and preparation webfolio, and a research webfolio. Each uses an inbuilt template, together with some direction from the teacher about the key areas to be addressed. In the action plan the student is required to identify all the tasks they need to complete prior to the long walk, complete a SWOT analysis, and identify supporting resources. This is shared via live links with both the teacher and fellow students from the outset, enabling students to learn from each other, and the teacher to provide formative feedback throughout the development of the action plan. The planning and preparation webfolio, similar to a personal website with multiple pages, is used by the student to present evidence of their preparation. This is shared with the teacher so that progress can be monitored and formative feedback provided. While this is part of the assessment requirement it also has a very important safety element as the teacher needs to ensure that each student is adequately prepared and physically and emotionally ready to undertake the arduous 18 day walk in the Australian High Country. The research webfolio requires students to create an interactive research portal to engage others with their chosen topic that relates to an aspect of the walk. Students need to be creative in their use of in-text links, digital media, and presentation options to create a piece of work that has value well beyond the assessment process. The teacher provides multimodal formative and summative feedback on all work via the PLS, including screen capture, highlighting, and audio. This learning design illustrates the highly active and interactive nature of the PLS. As Biggs (2003)

states, 'learner activity and interacting with others' are key characteristics of engaging learning and teaching environments (p.79). Students reported significant benefits from the iterative nature of the planning and implementation with 64 out of 65 students accessing their feedback, 27 accessing feedback multiple times, and 87% reporting that the feedback was 'very useful' for improving their work (Munge, Doolan and Sutherland, 2011).

Example 2

A second example of engaging pedagogy with the PLS comes from a teacher education course. Academics and educational designers planned and designed a range of learning experiences in the PLS across the various subjects that students undertake. Each activity uses different inbuilt system templates and includes video presentations, audio, reflection, text and video blogging, and multi-media webfolio presentations. The activities aim to engage students and relate their learning experiences to one or more aspects of their growth as an emerging teacher. As the PLS is the students' personal space, all records of learning, experience and reflection from across all subjects are stored together, enabling students to start making links between the different activities, to re-use these artefacts for different purposes, and to show growth over time. The privacy of the space encourages students to reflect honestly upon their development, secure in the knowledge that others cannot see these reflections and growing understandings unless shared. The space becomes a place for self appraisal, reflection, contemplation, and development of a sense of self as a teacher, both in terms of skills and identity.

Through completing this web folio I have achieved something that I did not anticipate. By analyzing my own thoughts and experiences it has helped me to draw connections and relate subject matter to my own life. When sitting in a lecture or tutorial I am so busy writing notes and taking in information that I forget to stop and think about my thoughts to evaluate what I have learnt. In some cases, its not always possible to see the bigger picture until you step away from the immediate environment. (Education student)

This clearly demonstrates a level of learning beyond simple note-taking and describing. What the student describes above are higher order forms of learning including analysing, relating, evaluating and applying. These are known to be associated with higher levels of engagement in learning (AUSSE, 2008; Biggs, 2003).

Analysis

Analysis of the range of student outputs, together with interviews with academic teaching staff and feedback from students allow some tentative conclusions to be drawn about the value of using a PLS in teacher education programs:

- For the teacher and educational designer the PLS provides a range of new possibilities for curriculum design and delivery which takes the emphasis away from teacher directed content and allows for the construction of knowledge by the student.
- The PLS not only supports but encourages reflective practice in both students and staff.
- The PLS provides multiple opportunities for ongoing formative feedback by the teacher.
- The PLS provides the continuity of a learning space between subjects and across years allowing students to draw connections between all aspects of their course.
- The PLS provides rich and varied opportunities for sharing and collaboration.
- Both students and teachers value the control and ownership over the PLS.
- The nature of the PLS has challenged both teachers and students to do things differently. Some have found this difficult and have required additional support to make the transition.

Conclusion

The PLS provides opportunity for engaging pedagogy that is not readily possible in other elearning spaces. Key enabling characteristics of the PLS include inbuilt and teacher designed scaffolding and templates; easy inclusion of digital media; sharing, collaboration and submission via live links; ongoing ownership and control over records of learning beyond the time in the institutional setting; and the total privacy and security of the students' learning environment.

This new space undoubtedly presents challenges for students, teachers, and educational designers alike. If these challenges can be seen as opportunities and if time is taken to rework curriculum and teaching pedagogy in order to maximise engagement with this space, the learning outcomes can be tremendous. As stated by Julie Hughes (2011), one of the foremost PLS practitioners, the PLS "...allowed me/liberated me to journey, to create, to connect, to model, to inspire in ways I had never imagined with earlier technologies." It can be argued that the PLS enables engaging pedagogy that can be enjoyed by students and teachers alike. This can only be positive for education!!

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