

Working with students – A reflection on the ALPS student ePortfolio project

The ALPS student ePortfolio project tried out a new approach of paying students to work on a project reviewing ePortfolios and their use. The aim was to empower students through treating them as members of a project team, working alongside academic staff to jointly undertake the project work. We hoped that this approach would lead to more radical and creative ideas coming out of the project with the students given more room to take the initiative, come up with their own ideas and lead on them. The features of the approach were that we:

- defined students as members of the project team, rather than a focus group whose views were being sought.
- paid the students a competitive wage
- provided students with a flexible way of undertaking the work in their own time, by allowing them to submit timesheets rather than being committed to a certain number of hours at defined times.
- managed the project's financial liability by putting a cap on the number of hours per week that students could claim. The figure chosen (5 hours) was based on discussions with students prior to the start of the project, to establish what was the likely maximum number of hours they would feel able to devote to the project in a week without it having a negative impact on their course work.
- recruited students from across 5 universities and a wide range of health care professions. Used a recruitment approach intended to ensure that all 5 universities and as wide as possible a range of courses were represented in the project team.
- held an initial workshop to introduce the students to the project and outline the project aims and the outputs that we hoped to achieve.
- provided students with a mix of structured and open tasks / activities to complete in their own time. These tasks were intended as starters (catalysts) that would give the students a bit of initial structure but from which they could develop their own ideas and approaches to tackling the main project work.
- offered support (from the staff who took on the academic support roles) to students in undertaking these activities.
- brought students together at regular Saturday workshops where discussions and activities took place all aimed at working towards achieving the project outputs.
- offered students the opportunity to write up and present their work at conferences through either poster presentations or workshops.

In evaluating whether this approach had achieved what we set out to do we considered:

1. Did the project team (students and staff) judge that the objectives were achieved?
2. Was there any evidence that the outputs were more creative or radical than we might have achieved through a focus group approach?
3. Did the students take the initiative?
4. Did the students feel that they were genuinely working *alongside* the staff as a team?
5. What could we have done differently (within this general approach) that might have led to more of these aims being achieved?

Other issues that we decided to look at included:

1. Did the students feel that they gained anything-else from their involvement with the project?
2. How many hours work did students claim for? Did the timesheet approach work and was it felt that it was robust?

Two approaches were used to gather answers to these questions. The first was a feedback questionnaire sent to students (see Appendix XXX) and the second was a discussion of these issues by the academic staff involved in the project. Feedback was received from 5 students.

Review of the approach – based on student and staff feedback

Did the project team (students and staff) judge that the objectives were achieved?

The students were asked to what extent they felt the project had achieved each of the three main objectives:

1. To increase student use of ePortfolios (where available)
2. To build a specification of an ideal ePortfolio
3. To try out different ways of championing ePortfolios to students and staff

The overwhelming response from the students was that they felt we had certainly achieved objective 2 (the specification); in their words *“our biggest triumph”, “distilled this quite well”, “have a good idea of this”, “ended up having a good image in my head of how I want my ideal ePortfolio to look”*.

They believed that we had done some good work on objective 3 (championing ePortfolio use), citing the posters and presentations (which arguably worked best as a way of promoting ePortfolios to staff) and also the lunchtime workshops that some of them had run with their fellow students.

However, they were less convinced that the work we had done on objective 3 had led to an increased use of ePortfolios by students (objective 1). There was some feeling that we had achieved this within the group (where they had access to a good ePortfolio), but they felt that it was less clear whether we had achieved this outside of the project team. The reasons given for this included the poor quality of some of the ePortfolios that students had to use, students regarding it as an extra demand on their time that they would not do unless it was compulsory and the need for students to use it and (*“if used properly”*) see the benefits. Interestingly one of our students gave in his feedback a clear example of how he had personally seen the benefits of using a reflective diary with a first/second order thinking model (*“jotting down stuff briefly and however it comes into my head... then editing and making sense of it at a later (not too distant) date.”*) as a way of collecting examples of practice and then relating them to theory. He had observed fellow students failing placement modules as they had failed to link theory to practice and he believed that they would not have had this problem, and would have been better reflective practitioners, if they had kept a reflective diary (one of the ways in which an ePortfolio can be used). Another student commented that she herself had not fully understood ePortfolios until another student had demonstrated them to her using her own ePortfolio.

This suggests some possible approaches to future work on promoting the use of ePortfolios:

1. Get students to demonstrate their own ePortfolio to new students and explain the benefits they have found in using one.
2. Provide training to students on using ePortfolios – not just the functionality, but on how they should use them effectively to improve their learning, practice and grades – using them “properly”.
3. Make the use of an ePortfolio compulsory at the beginning so that students get into the habit of using them and are likely to personally see the benefits.
4. Set up the teaching/assessment so that students who use the ePortfolios well will see early benefits in terms of useful tutor feedback, easier completion of assessments and higher grades.
5. Providing individual feedback to the students on their actual *use* of the ePortfolios (not just on the content that they put in there) – pointing out how they can use what they have put in here to help their other work or professional development.

Was there any evidence that the outputs were particularly creative or radical?

Overall there was nothing in the students' feedback that suggested that they thought this particular approach had led to the project outcomes being more creative or radical than they might have been from a more traditional focus group approach. As will be described below, they did see benefits to the project team approach in that it made them feel their ideas were valued and they felt proud of their contributions, but there is nothing to suggest that they felt this led to more creative solutions being proposed.

This would concur with what the staff themselves thought and is probably linked to the fact that the students did not really take ownership of the project work in terms of setting their own tasks and coming up with their own ways of approaching the problem. As is described below, students preferred to be given a clear task and instructions on how to go about doing it. This of course meant that the staff ended up structuring most of the work and the ambition of passing more control over to the students and them coming up with inventive, new ways of looking at the problem, that had not been considered by the staff, was not really achieved.

Did the students take the initiative?

A clear message comes through from the students' feedback that they liked it when they were given structure and instructions making it clear what had to be done – *“I quite liked the tasks ... as it was clear what I had to do”* and that when this was not there then they found it more difficult - *“I would have done more earlier but it was difficult to know what to do”, “a bit more structure early on would have been beneficial”*.

The language used in their feedback tells us something about how they saw their role – they talked about how they hoped to *“influence”* decision-making, rather than perhaps leading it. Several students highlighted how useful they had found the presentations by lecturers and how much they had learned from these (particularly on the poster design and the 1st/2nd order model of reflective thinking). They rightly identified things we could have done better at the start of the project, such as providing them all with the same ePortfolio. Perhaps if we had managed to pass ownership and control over to them more effectively they would have searched for free ePortfolios themselves and come to the group with the suggestion that we all try these out and perhaps use them to communicate with each other.

It seems that we did not manage to effectively pass over ownership and control to the students. One reason for this may be that the students did not want it, as is suggested by some of their feedback. However, another reason may be that we were giving out mixed messages. Despite saying that we were working as a project team (all in it together), we did set the agenda and content of each of the Saturday workshops. Despite encouraging them to set their own tasks, we then limited them by pointing out that they could not survey students or undertake a mini research project as this would require ethical approval. Despite encouraging them to propose their own tasks, we also presented our proposed set of tasks and a very clear procedure for completing and reporting on those tasks.

If this approach was to be tried again and if it was thought to be valuable to make sure that students did take the initiative (perhaps because it was thought this would lead to more creative solutions), then careful consideration would need to be given to how best to ensure that control and ownership was passed over to the students and that they understood why we were doing that. The handover approach that we tried to use (providing some initial tasks to get them going and using the workshops to try to keep them focused on the main objectives) did not lead to the students taking over. Perhaps handing over control earlier (after outlining the objectives), identifying individuals to take up certain leadership roles and identifying the academic support staff as that – people they could go to for help, but not the people who were directing the work – could have worked better. However, some of our experience (the students not leading on the poster design despite reporting how much they had gained from that session) suggests that students may not have wanted to take up this more complex, responsible role and the work may not have progressed as far as it did. In fact one of the student's comments *"I feel that a bit more structure early on would have been beneficial as the project may have moved faster"* makes it clear that they felt more would have been achieved if they had been provided with greater direction from staff.

Maybe there is something to gain from thinking about providing the students with *breakable structures*. When we asked the students to give comments on a draft poster design (but one that actually looked like a finished product) we did not get much feedback and the changes suggested were minimal. Whereas when we asked students to give comments on a draft presentation (that was clearly in an early draft stage) we had much more constructive feedback that resulted in more fundamental changes being made.

Did the students feel that they were genuinely working *alongside* the staff as a team?

Whilst students did not readily take the initiative and lead on the work, their feedback does suggest that they largely regarded themselves as part of a team working with the academic staff – almost a co-researcher dynamic rather than a teacher-student dynamic. They talked about *"being part of the development"*, *"getting involved with research"*, *"feeling completely involved in the process"* and *"working alongside staff gave greater acknowledgement to our input."* One of the things that could have helped to produce this feeling was the length of time that the project ran (27 weeks) and the semi-formal nature of the Saturday workshops, which were all followed by a communal lunch and chat, allowing good relationships to be built between staff and students. The students commented on the "lecturers" (interestingly they assumed we all were lecturers) being *"helpful"*, *"polite"*, *"patient"*, *"friendly"* and *"passionate"* with a *"wide range of crazy and relaxed personalities"*.

The approach used certainly seems to have led to students feeling that their work was valued and has possibly contributed to increased confidence - *"I felt as though I had been completely involved in the process and I felt proud of the work I had done."*

What would students have liked us to do differently?

The students identified two things that they would have liked us to do differently:

- Provide greater structure and direction at the beginning (as discussed earlier)
- Provide all students with a good ePortfolio which they could use from the beginning of the project

The staff also recognise that the provision of a common ePortfolio for all students from the beginning would have been very useful. At the time we had hoped that they would all have access to a reasonable ePortfolio system within their courses, but this was not the case. Subsequently we thought that they could either use the ALPS system (although it was not really set up for this purpose), attempt to use Blackboard (which some universities are doing) or search themselves for a freeware version. One of the main reasons we did not provide them all with the same ePortfolio at the beginning was that we did not want the project to end up being a review of one particular system. However, in hindsight, it was difficult for those students who did not have prior experience of using an ePortfolio, to get started on the project when they did not have access to a reflective ePortfolio system and support from us in using it.

Did the students make other gains from the project?

The students' feedback is clear that they felt they had gained a lot from their involvement in this project. Examples given include gaining new skills and experience in the areas of team working, interprofessional working, reflection, communication, poster design, presentation and digital media.

One student felt they had gained valuable experience that would be useful to them not only in their course but in their professional life as well - *"Working in such a big group with different types of students and staff meant that the group was very diverse and at first I thought it would be impossible to work together in order to collaborate all the different ideas while still having a voice of my own. However the ePortfolio group worked smoothly and everybody was allowed to contribute. I can now use the ePortfolio group as a model for future group work during my course and career."*

It may be that the size of the group, the fact that students were chosen from a range of professions and the staff also had different backgrounds and professions (and indeed *"a wide range of... personalities"* as noted by one student) may have meant that students were exposed to a wider range of opinions and views than they might normally have come across in the university group work. One student noted that they now realised how difficult it was *"setting up new initiatives as everyone has such different ideas"*. Exposure to this difference of opinion and the management of it may have brought benefits in that it gave at least one student a model of effective interdisciplinary teamwork.

Several students commented on how their understanding of ePortfolios had changed as a result of their involvement in the project. As well as understanding how it could be used to support reflective practice effectively, they also commented on how they now realised that it went beyond reflection - *"Now I see ePortfolios as a tool that is supposed to help me and make my life easier and more organised (as well as somewhere to reflect)"* *"more important for personal development than I thought"*.

Student engagement and working hours

15 students were offered places on the project. Although all these students accepted the places, the number of active students (based on attendance at workshops and timesheets sent in) was actually 11.

Need to check workshop attendance sheets to make sure I have captured everyone in here.

The average number of hours that students claimed during the project was 38, which averages as 1.4 hours per week. However, there was quite a range within this average - with two very active students putting in 91 and 75 hours each, and 3 less active students only putting in approx 10 hours each during the project.

It is interesting to note that even the two highly active students (who contributed to poster and presentations) still only averaged around 3 hours work per week, well under the maximum we were prepared to pay of 5 hours per week. It is not entirely clear whether this was due to there not being seen to be 5 hours' worth of work to do each week or whether it is a comment on the number of other demands that the students had on their time. It would certainly appear to be evidence that students do not attempt to overclaim and concoct timesheets to claim up to the maximum hours (which had been a fear raised by some).

It should also be noted that the project work included 5 Saturday morning workshops, each lasting 3.5 hours and so 17.5 hours of work could be achieved simply by turning up to these workshops. This accounts for 46% of the average hours total submitted by student. This fact perhaps supports the suggestion that students really wanted to have their work structured for them and found the more independent, flexible working in their own time harder to manage (and did not do that much of it) instead gaining many of their hours simply from the workshop attendance.

The relatively low (though not negligible) importance of the money was demonstrated by the fact that 3 of the active students did not submit any timesheets until the very end of the project, despite the fact that we had offered to pay them monthly on receipt of the timesheets. This also supports the students' own comments about how money *alone* would not have kept them interested in their project. They made it clear that they had joined the project because they felt it would also contribute to their "*continuing professional development*", understanding of the technology and reflective practice - "*if I hadn't seen any benefit to myself I wouldn't have joined*".

Conclusions

The approach of paying students was successful in several ways: the project objectives were mostly achieved with a specification of an ideal ePortfolio being drawn up, the use of ePortfolios and reflective diaries increasing within the project team and various approaches to championing ePortfolios being tried out.

The students enjoyed working as part of a project team alongside the academic staff; feeling their work was valued and that they gained important skills and experiences from their involvement. Interestingly the skills they reported gaining were in the common competency areas (team working, communication and interprofessional working) that the wider ALPS programme has been supporting.

Despite this the students did not take control of the project work (taking the initiative and setting their own tasks) as much as had been hoped for and the solutions reached did not appear to be more creative or innovative than those we would have gained through a more conventional focus group approach. In fact one of the requests from students was for staff to provide more structure and direction and they clearly found the work easier to manage when this was provided. If a future project wanted to use this approach to try to get more creative or radical solutions to a problem, then careful thought would have to be given to how to provide the initial support and direction that students want whilst still enabling and supporting them in taking over ownership of the project.

However, the other benefits that were seen from the project – the new skills and confidence gained by students, these students' increased understanding and use of ePortfolios and reflection, students gaining experience of inter-professional working – provide plenty of reasons for using this approach again even if the project ownership stays with the staff.