

Using e-Learning to Help Employers Contribute to Work Placements

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Abstract

The growth of Foundation Degree qualifications in the UK (HEFCE, 2007) has led to a more active view of employer engagement with Higher Education. Many full time Foundation Degree students are now taking up work placements with employers as part of their study.

As a result, a three-way conversation between learners, employers and tutors needs to take place on an ongoing basis throughout placements. An online environment utilising blogs, e-portfolio and online work-based contracts can facilitate this 'conversation'. Employers can be further supported through provision of online materials to support the process of mentor training.

This paper reports on an HE Academy, ICS funded mini-project to create such an environment at Hull College for students on the Foundation Degree course in Software Design and Development.

The project is still underway, and is in the middle of its year-long span. The environment has been chosen, developed and tested. The next phase will be to use the system for work-placement study.

This paper outlines the use of Elgg as a means of maintaining communication with students, employers and tutors and encouraging reflection during Foundation Degree work placements.

We aim to present the experience of using the online environment at the 8th Annual Conference of the ICS HE Academy in August.

More information on the project can be found at: http://www.ics.heacademy.ac.uk/HEinFE/HullCollege_MP.htm

Keywords

Employer engagement, Foundation Degree, work placement, reflective practice, PDP

1. Introduction

This case study details the start of an HE Academy, ICS funded mini-project. It is aimed at helping employers involved with Foundation Degree work placements as mentors, to better support the students assigned to them. The project is utilizing Elgg as a basis for an online environment to facilitate this. Elgg is an open source social networking environment that incorporates weblogs, or blogs, and an e-portfolio space.

The study started in September 2006, and will continue until July 2007. The students involved are studying the Foundation Degree in Software Design and Development at Hull College, both at NQF levels four and five.

Both cohorts are involved in work placements in the second semester of study. These are provided by employers in the region, with the aim of involving learners in 'real-world' projects.

The project aims to facilitate the three-way conversation involved in Foundation Degree work placements between student, employer/mentor and tutor via an online environment. Elgg, being an existing environment that already supports file upload and blogs with a comment facility, was chosen as an excellent starting point.

Another aim of the project is to aid employers in their role as workplace mentor to students by providing online access to mentor training materials, and access to a community of practice where they can be supported by peers.

2. The Problem

2.1 Work placement

Work placements in HE are a means of learning for work (Gray, 2001, p3) to enhance student employability (Knight and Yorke, 2003).

Whilst studying on the Foundation Degree, students are found work placements as part of their second semester of study in each year, where they undertake various computing-based projects. They are held over ten weeks for one day a week. After consultation with employers, they felt that this short period was the most time that could be spared so that students could be effectively supported, considering other business demands.

Assessment is via a work-based project, where a portfolio of work is created, alongside a report to provide an overarching account of project progress, followed by a presentation (Gray, 2001, p18). Learner objectives and activities are linked to work-placement outputs through the use of a learning contract (Gray, 2001, p3), agreed by student, employer and tutor. Activities are monitored by a workplace mentor and the unit tutor, who will visit the workplace at pre-arranged intervals (Gray, 2001, p20).

Raelin (2000) notes that, "...work-based learning is centred around reflection on work practices; it is not merely a question of acquiring knowledge and a set of technical skills (though these can be important), but a case of reviewing and learning from experience...". Accordingly, students, as part of their Personal Development Planning (PDP), are asked to keep a reflective log of their experiences, problems encountered, possible solutions considered and eventual solutions chosen. This is

to, "...strengthen the capacity of individuals to reflect upon their own learning and achievement and to plan for their own personal, educational and career development", (QAA, date unknown).

Gray (2001, p23) notes the importance of the tripartite nature of this partnership – the significant involvement required by student, workplace mentor/employer and tutor. The facilitation of the three-way conversation to agree progress on and completion of activities whilst 'on-project' is vital to successful completion of a work placement. Good and regular communications between all parties is also necessary to alleviate any problems encountered by both student and employers.

The Foundation Degree and associated work placements were first run in the last academic year (2005-2006).

2.2 Student perspective:

There are fifteen students at level four, and eleven at level five. They are all extremely IT-literate and regularly use Web 2 facilities for social interaction amongst friends. The majority are from non-traditional educational backgrounds. The students currently at level five have already undertaken work-placement at level four.

On the whole, the students found the previous years work-placement a positive and rewarding experience, however, they reported feeling 'lost' at times and unsure of certain practices and regulations, as it was their first foray into work placement at HE level. Thomas and Jones (2007, p20) note that this can often be the case for students from non-traditional academic backgrounds, as there is more of a reliance on independent learning, a focus on written learning methods, and little feedback on progress.

Indeed, students reported finding it hard to keep track of project progress, and found the paper-based work placement contract confusing. A better means of supporting and giving feedback on project progress needed to be found.

Alongside the work placement, students need to complete a PDP log on their experiences. Hull College has a documentation standard for PDP for all its HE students. This was aimed at helping students to become more reflective practitioners in order to, "...understand how they are learning and relate their learning to a wider context" (QAA, date unknown). Students have to complete a written or word-processed form to document their progress, aims and reflections at semester intervals. This is often viewed as an 'add-on' activity, completed after the event, rather than being an integral part of the learning experience. Students also often have problems with being asked to write reflectively, either finding it a chore or simply recording what has been done.

The first cohort to undertake work placement on the Foundation Degree used blogs to record their reflections. This was proposed by the tutor as a means of making student reflection more integral to the placement process.

Also, it was hoped that by using a web-based system to complete regular short blog entries as needed, rather than waiting to complete a lengthy and less immediate piece of written work, students would engage more with the reflective process. As the QAA 'Guidelines for HE Progress Files' (date unknown) states, "PDP is likely to be most effective when it is...linked to the learning objectives/outcomes of programmes...", and, "...undertaken regularly".

Unfortunately, as Wakefield College (2006) found in their case study of using blogs to support Personal Development Planning, learners, "...simply presented a diary containing a factual account of what they had done, or what they planned to do." This situation was improved on the Foundation Degree when tutors on our course left comments on student's blogs, prompting them to reflect further. From a social constructivist perspective, it may be seen that learning to reflect is a socially constructed process (Gredler, 1997), where, "Individuals create meaning through their interactions with each other and with the environment they live in" (Kim, 2001).

Students reported enjoying using the blogs, and had found them useful both as a means of Personal Development Planning, and as a basis for writing their reports on the work placement experience. This is also in accordance with the QAA 'Guidelines for HE Progress Files' (date unknown), when it states that the PDP process is most successful when, "...owned by the learner".

2.3 Employer perspective:

There are ten local employers involved with the Foundation Degree work placements. Each student was assigned a workplace 'mentor' to monitor students' progress in the workplace (QAA, 2004). The work placement mentors all have varying levels of IT-literacy.

The mentor is an employee at the work placement environment, and one is assigned to each student to offer help, support and guidance and assist in enabling the student to assess appropriate opportunities to gather evidence, gain new knowledge and skills and consolidate and develop their practice. Phil Race (1995) describes a mentor as someone whose views and opinions are respected by the learner, who is willing and able to give learners feedback and who will help them to plan their actions.

It also involves helping them to accept responsibility for their own learning, developing their confidence and encouraging them to approach others for information / support. There may also be times when a student needs re-motivating especially when the work becomes challenging, or when other pressures affect their plans.

A key part of the Mentors role is to engage in the three-way planning process based around the work based-learning contract which is negotiated between the student, their personal tutor and their mentor.

An important role for mentors is to help students reflect critically on how and what they learn. Through this they develop an awareness that helps them to learn with increasing effectiveness. They also demonstrate a more questioning attitude to what they are learning. This reflective process is vital as it provides a crucial link between theory and practice.

Employers reported needing more support with their role as a mentor, and how this related to college requirements, as it was the first time they had been involved with Foundation Degrees and work placement at HE level.

If employers needed to communicate with tutors, either e-mail or telephone could be used. Most of the time, tutors are out of the office, and employers likewise, so telephone communications were problematic. E-mail was better, but some

employers did not have web-based e-mail systems (although remote Internet access was usually available), and so could not check e-mail when away from their offices.

Regular meetings for mentors were held at the college to facilitate networking, but it has proved very difficult to get busy business people in one building at the same time! After the placements had finished, most employers wanted more regular input from tutors and lamented the lack of opportunity for shared employer experience.

Mentors reported that keeping track of project progress was difficult using the paper-based work placement contracts, as they were presented in an academic manner. Some also had lost them, so had to rely on students or tutors providing them with copies.

Employers commented after the placements had finished that they would have also liked to be able to see the student's views on their placements to gain feedback on the experience and process, and suggested they would like to contribute to blogs with comments of their own in future. Students were receptive to this idea, but also wanted the opportunity to have reflective experience recorded privately, or only viewable by the tutor.

2.4 Academic perspective:

Although tutors are allowed some working time to visit the work placement, this cannot be sustained on a weekly level. This meant that it took time for mentors to receive answers to questions, and it was difficult for tutors to track the employer's perspective on project progress. Students would sometimes have an entirely different, or more optimistic, view of how their work was progressing when asked in classroom tutorials, compared with their mentors.

This 'lag' in communications meant that some problems with the project, student or mentor might not be immediately obvious to the tutor. This could be detrimental to the project, especially as the placement period is over a limited amount of time – ten days.

2.5 Summary of problems:

- Students, employers and tutors need a more immediate way of communicating and monitoring project progress
- Students needed more feedback on project progress
- Students PDP needs to be integral to the work placement and become more reflective when individualised comments are given
- The majority of the students come from non-traditional academic backgrounds, so need more feedback and a wider means of recording project progress rather than just written means
- Employers often cannot find time to physically meet, gain training, or share experiences
- Mentors need more support whilst the project is in progress, and better contact with tutors

3. Approach to design

3.1 Student considerations:

The Pedagogy for Employability Group (2006, pp12-15) suggest that

pedagogical approaches to promote widening participation and employability include, “Providing cognitive ‘scaffolding’ to help students towards achievements currently beyond their unaided capability and progressively removing it as their capability develops”, and, “Encouraging the development of metacognition (e.g. reflection and self regulation via PDP, writing critical commentaries and reviews”. It states that, “These types of learning activities both address many of the difficulties new students face in making the transition into higher education and enable students to develop many employability skills”, (Pedagogy for Employability Group, 2006, pp12-15). Tutors using the comment facility on last years student’s blogs had helped to ‘prompt’ and ‘scaffold’ the students reflective processes (Oliver and McLoughlin, 2001).

Allowing employers to also add comments on blogs would add to this support, give enhanced feedback on the project compared with the tutors comments alone, and add to the reflective process. It also gives more validation to the PDP: The QAA ‘Guidelines for HE Progress Files’ (date unknown), state that the PDP process is most successful when, “...seen to be valued by society (e.g. employers and Professional Bodies)”. However, there also had to be facilities that allowed ‘private’ conversations to take place – students mentioned that they may wish to record feelings and opinions that were private to a specific group of people.

To further aid the review of project progress, the project brief could be accessible in web-based electronic format, with defined project stages ‘signed off’ electronically by student, mentor and tutor when each thinks the stage is complete. Through this, students can see which aspects of their placement work has been completed successfully and what is still to be done, or if they feel an aspect has been completed, but the mentor or tutor believe that there are aspects uncompleted.

An e-portfolio, where student files as ‘work in progress’ can be shared between all three parties, would also help to validate project progress, for example, by mentors and tutors reviewing videos, photographs, word-processed documents and spreadsheets (JISC, 2006). The final project submission can also be ‘showcased’ here, if applicable.

This will also facilitate widening participation, as alternative formats to written work can be utilised – as mentioned previously, all the students are already familiar with using computer-mediated communications, and most use their mobile ‘phones to record images and video, so they already use the technology in their daily lives.

3.2 Employer considerations:

Allowing tutors and mentors to also create their own individual and community blogs would give staff and employers access to a community of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991), offering support and facilitating the creation and dissemination of ideas and policies. As all employers reported web access, if not web-based e-mail, communications would be improved via a central area.

The online work placement contract would give a much more immediate view of the project to all concerned, rather than waiting for tutor visits to take place. Employers can see if tutors have confirmed that academic standards have been reached when they feel a project task has been completed.

Although the e-portfolio would allow students to share work in progress with tutors and employers, some files may be sensitive to the company involved. Therefore, access to files would have to be subject to controls.

Employers using the system would need training in not only the interface, but would need support with their role as a mentor to aid student reflection and personal development (Race, 1995). Training can be given on a face-to-face basis, but, as it is difficult to find a place and time that suits everyone, online materials can also be used to overcome these geographical and time constraints.

3.3 Academic considerations:

Allowing employers to also add comments to student blogs could give the tutor a richer picture of how the project was progressing, rather than relying on student reports and infrequent visits.

As mentioned, creating a community of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991) around the work placement can help tutors to see where greater support is needed and where learning outcomes or policies may need to be reconsidered.

The online brief can be updated and checked by all stakeholders more readily than a paper copy, and satisfactory progress more easily accessed and agreed by all, allowing greater control of the project.

3.4 Summary list of requirements:

A web-based environment to be accessed by students, employers and tutors, which includes:

- Facilities for group and individual blogs with access controls and comment facilities
- E-portfolio facility with access controls
- An online work placement contract/brief that includes the ability for all parties to 'sign-off' stages
- Mentor training materials

Now – how were we going to implement this?

4. Solution

We have decided to use the Elgg environment for the student blog and e-portfolio style file upload space. It is free-to-use, open source software that can be readily modified by our content-development team, so a bespoke work placement contract can easily be included. It already has the facility for individual and community blogs and an e-portfolio included in one environment – this has the advantage of only needing one password to access all of these, rather than using individual environments.

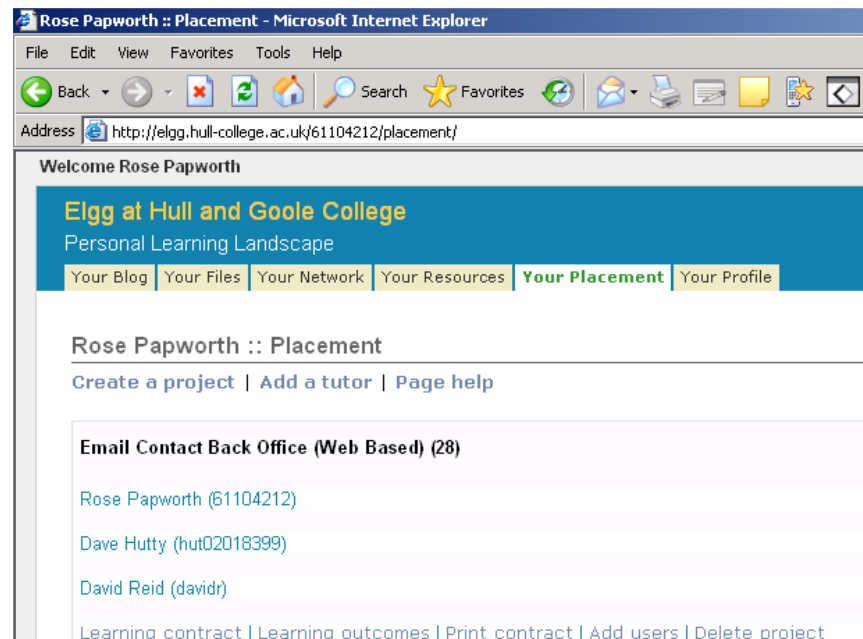
Elgg already has a security element, where access to files and blog posts can be controlled via access groups, effectively creating a division between a private and shared area.

Employers, students and tutors search for each other in this environment and specifically link to those people they have connections with. This helps to make viewing the amount of people involved in a project manageable.

Blog comments can be 'flagged' so that users can easily see if their posts or comments have been responded to – a necessary facility for busy workplace

mentors. The files uploaded to Elgg can be linked into a blog post, making it ideal as a reference point for when students are reflecting on a specific piece of work, or when employers want to share a document or image amongst a group.

Hull College already had a standard work-placement contract, and it was relatively simple for the content development team to transfer to electronic form. This form was put into a special tabbed section in Elgg called 'Your Placement' (see below).



This section allows users marked as 'tutors' to create new projects and add an 'employer' and a 'student' to the project. Both mentor and student details are added into the first form – these automatically go into Elgg's individual user 'profile', where they are marked as 'private' access as default.

The second form allows the creation of as many learning outcomes as is needed for a specific project. This makes the online brief useable by many units with different numbers of outcomes (see below).

Unit Learning Outcomes and Project Deliverables

Create an outcome

Learning Outcome: Use information sources to obtain the necessary information to enable a plan of action for a project to be devised
Project Deliverable: Interview employer to establish requirements and existing work practice, Investigate HTML, SQL and ASP
Start Date: Tue 6 Feb 2007
Completion Date: Tue 13 Feb 2007
Sign Off: Learner: <input type="checkbox"/> Mentor: <input type="checkbox"/> Tutor: <input type="checkbox"/>
Edit Delete
Learning Outcome: Formulate a plan of action with clearly defined check points and completion date, for the accomplishment of the project;
Project Deliverable: Within first week define boundaries of application, functionality, obtain approval from employer. Produce schedule and resources required

The specific outcome is then entered, along with a specified deliverable to match that outcome. This makes requirements and deliverables of the work-based project clear to all parties. A start and end date can also be entered.

Finally, each outcome has a set of three check boxes. These can be 'ticked' by tutor, mentor and learner respectively when each party feels the deliverable has been achieved – the outcome can be deemed completed when all three boxes have been 'ticked'. This gives an instant view of project progress to all parties.

Due to assessment restrictions, the contract needs to start out as a paper-based document to be physically signed, and has to be physically signed again after completion. The brief starts as a MS Word document, which is then printed so that it can be signed by all and filed by the tutor. The information is then transferred online. When all check boxes have been 'ticked', the online version can be printed off, signed again to certify completion, and filed with the original for assessment moderation.

The 'profile' section is useful for students to build up an online 'CV', as well as being an additional place to store contact details.

Having the contact details of all involved online means that, unlike business cards or paper-based contracts that can be damaged or mislaid, they can be easily re-accessed when needed via the web. This helps to facilitate 'phone and e-mail contact.

Some students have already seen benefits – when one student wanted to contact another as they were placed at the same business, they could simply look up the e-mail address under their profile.

Specific 'getting started' guides were written for tutors, employers and learners and added to the initial welcome page as links on the bottom of the right-hand side menu. An online 'training manual' for employers that goes into more depth has also been added, as has the mentor training handbook.

More interactive materials to facilitate mentor training still need to be developed. Currently, it is felt by the college that prospective work-place mentors benefit from attending face-to-face sessions, and that online provision should complement this, rather than replace it.

4.1 Evaluation to date:

In October 2006, the first implementation of our Elgg-based system was tested with all students and a selection of employers. Both were presented with a list of tasks to accomplish, and then asked to rate the ease of the task, adding comments if there was anything perceived as being particularly difficult to achieve, or if something could be improved.

No additional help, apart from that within Elgg, was provided in order to test how intuitive the interface was.

Feedback on the interface was, on the whole, very positive, although some users stated that the search facility for other users was situated in a hard-to-find place at the bottom right. Others had problem with adding a user to their personal network as the link was then in the top right. However, these users agreed that, once they had worked out how to use these features successfully, they were easy to use at the second time of trying.

The majority of comments were along the lines of, "easy layout", or, "designed well".

Some students used the Elgg facility to add RSS feeds – this was a surprise, as they hadn't been specifically asked to do this. They mentioned that they would find such an aggregator useful in their studies.

It has to be noted here that both students and employers are IT literate to start with, and use facilities such as 'My Space', MSN, search engines and e-mail on a regular basis. The familiarity with the interface would vary, depending on the IT literacy of the user, and this aspect has yet to be tested.

The main complaint was about the profile, as there are many fields that can be filled in, and each one has a separate access group facility. The students requested an overall level of access for the 'profile', and this has been added.

The file upload copyright agreement check box also proved a source of frustration. The fact that it had to be checked before upload lead to many aborted attempts! Accordingly, the box has now been set to 'checked' as default and the wording changed to state that if the box has been left checked, students are agreeing to the copyright statement.

Access group security proved fine for restricting access to files and blog posts – the students tested this aspect thoroughly, and could not break the access rights!

Employers have started posting on the community blogs, and have already started to share thoughts on current college work placement policy, and, interestingly, on what they perceive a mentor to be.

5. Conclusion

(the extent to which the solution addresses the needs of students, employers, academics, reflection, mentoring, PDP etc. needs discussing.)

It is hoped that interaction with this sort of online environment will offer the student and the employer more continuous engagement, interaction, feedback and support than previously experienced. It is also anticipated that using the blogs will enhance students use of PDP by demonstrating that it is, "...supported and valued by staff...", and ,"supported by institutional structures, resources and expertise" (QAA, date unknown).

Student feedback and 'scaffolded' support will be improved via the blog comments and online contract, whilst widening participation will be improved via the possibilities of using audio and video files alongside written work. Employer engagement will be improved via participation in student reflection and the ability to view the progress of the project via the online contract and e-portfolio. The online environment will provide ongoing support that is not time and place dependent. Tutors will be able to control the project more effectively, getting a richer picture of the project's progress over time instead of relying only on physical visits.

The second semester has just started as this paper is being written. The students have all got accounts on Hull College's ELGG, and have created an online version of their work placement contracts. They are enthusiastic about using the environment, and have already discovered some benefits.

In the near future the employers will receive face-to-face training on using the ELGG environment and becoming a mentor. As expected, not all can attend, so there will be some reliance on the online training materials provided, as mentioned earlier.

The environment will then be used 'for real'; it will certainly be interesting to see if it will deliver the benefits predicted.

We aim to present our experience of using the online environment described above at the 8th Annual Conference of the ICS HE Academy in August.

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