Involving stakeholders in Action Research to develop e-portfolio Assessment for Social Work Field Education.

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Abstract

Social Work students participate for a total of 140 days over two Field Placements in a variety of practice settings across Australia and Internationally to meet the Australian Association of Social Work practice standards.   Students are supported and evaluated by the Dept of Social Work staff, professional Social Work Field Educators from the community and Human Service Agencies. Feedback from all stakeholders indicated that the current evaluation tool was restrictive and difficult to use.
This paper documents the community development process utilised to engage with stakeholders in the Action research project to develop an ePortfolio assessment tool that enhances student learning whilst on field placement. The conclusion links the project design process to lifelong learning strategies of collecting information, reflecting and interacting with the process and products of the project with student engagement with the e-portfolio.

Keywords: Social Work, e-portfolio, Action Research, Community participation, Assessment, Field Education

In Australia, Social Work students participate for a total of 140 days over two field placements in a variety of practice settings across Australian and internationally to meet the Australian Association of Social Work Education Standards (Australian Association of Social Workers, 2010a). This paper presents evidence to support a collaborative and participatory project facilitated by the authors to inform the design, implementation and evaluation of e-portfolio assessment for Social Work Field Education. The environmental context of the project with a brief summary of the benefits of e-portfolio assessment in developing student lifelong learning skills is provided to explain the origin of the project idea.   The overarching project design of involving key stakeholders is outlined and supported by community development literature, action research methodology and meshed with current research informing e-portfolio implementation into University Institutions.

The decision to create an e-portfolio assessment tool for the James Cook University (JCU) Social Work Field Education programme was developed in response to feedback from students, field educators and staff regarding the current process being cumbersome and ineffective.   The paper-based assessment tool was considered inadequate to support and document the evaluation of the students' learning due to the size of the document, convoluted language and its reliance on text. The design of the assessment tool directed the students in a linear process by documenting their learning goals, method for learning, evaluation of learning and feedback from the Field Educator. The Field Education stakeholders noted that a more flexible assessment tool that provided an environment in which to collate, reflect and interact with the students learning whilst on placement would be more useful. The e-portfolio provided an opportunity for the assessment tool to include both formative and summative evaluation (Taylor, Thomas & Sage, 1999) of the students learning.

Portfolios have been utilised within a range of professional education settings including Social Work (Heron, 2011) and are well established for collecting evidence of competence in Tertiary education (Taylor, Thomas & Sage, 1999). Benefits of portfolios to enhance student learning by linking theory to practice and as a tool for self-reflection are well documented (Fitch, Peet, Glover Reed & Tolman, 2008) though physical portfolios are "cumbersome to store, transport, present or display" (Swigonski, Ward, Mama, Rodgers & Belicose, 2006, p814). By contrast e-portfolios provide a more manageable digital platform for students to engage with artefacts in diverse ways, transforming portfolios from just an outcome to a process as well (Fitch et al, 2008, p38). That is, students' learning was seen to be enhanced by collating and reflecting on artefacts to create an e-portfolio final product to demonstrate the achievement of learning objectives (Cambridge, 2010, p88). E-portfolios also provide an opportunity for Social Work students to learn by reflecting on artefacts to "build a theory or narrative to understand 'self' in context" (Cambridge, 2010, p49) which is congruent with the Australian Association of Social Work (AASW) Standards (2010a) and informed by the JCU Learning, Teaching and Assessment Policy (2011). E-portfolios provide a format of assessment that provides a rich picture of the process and outcome of student learning.

The process of including stakeholders in the development, design and implementation of the e-portfolio into the JCU Field Education programme was congruent with community work principles of involving people throughout the project (Beilharz, 2002). The principle of participatory collaboration encourages sustained, effective engagement by all stakeholders including students, field educators and staff. The decision to involve stakeholders in the design, trial and evaluation of the e-portfolio was to generate "energy, interest and a sense of excitement" (Henderson & Thomas, 2002, p31). Research suggests that once engaged in the creation of e-portfolios students continue to work on their portfolios in a sustained manner (Bhattacharya & Hartnett, 2007). Social Workers within the JCU Social Work Field Education programme and JCU Social Work Advisory Committee had also expressed interest in developing their engagement with the Tertiary environment to inform their own practice and the Social Work degree for the benefit of student learning for practice. Inclusion of Social Workers and students was to inform the project with local knowledge, resources, skills, culture and processes (Ife, 2002). This participatory strategy was implemented to address the ineffectiveness of a 'top down' approach by the University (Swigonski et al, 2006) in implementing e-portfolios into the Tertiary system and develop a culture that values e-portfolio (Swigonski et al, 2006) as an effective lifelong learning tool.

The process to create an e-portfolio for JCU Social Work assessment was supported by the professional "belief in collaboration as the cornerstone of effective practice" (Australian Association of Social Workers, 2010b, p9). Throughout the Action Research cycle of planning, implementing and reflecting on the project (Dick, 1993), stakeholders were invited to inform, trial and evaluate the e-portfolio as an assessment tool for Social Work field education. The involvement of stakeholders in the project directed the e-portfolio format allowing the technology to "support the practices of the e-portfolio genre…rather than dictate the form" (Cambridge, 2010, p188). Strategies used to involve stakeholders were developed utilising existing forums of engagement between the University and the community including workshops, email and meetings. The strategies used to involve stakeholders also provided an opportunity to initiate the change in culture needed to successfully implement e-portfolios (Swigonski et al, 2006) by developing a common language, understanding of stakeholder capacity to engage, understanding of each other's goals for the project, and become a process of education (Sheil, 2003). This process utilised and developed the whole of community approach to student learning within Social Work.

A dual evaluation process for the project was designed utilising both Social Work and Action Research emphasis on reflective practice to inform and enhance future practice. The project is being evaluated utilising two frameworks developed with equal emphasis on the effectiveness of stakeholders participation in the project and the engagement of stakeholders with the e-portfolio to enhance student learning in Field Education. Stakeholders participation is evaluated by level of participation, activities created for participation, community representation and community attitude (York & Itzhaky, 1991) within the project. Lorenzo and Ittelson's (2005) model frames the evaluation of student engagement with collecting, reflecting and interacting with the e-portfolio as a lifelong learning tool. Both frameworks incorporate the involvement of stakeholders to ensure a holistic evaluation of the project, re-iterating the benefit of involving people throughout the project (Beilharz, 2002). In line, with the Action Research methodology, the evaluation process directs the next stage of the project of re-design and further trialling of e-portfolio as assessment (Dick, 1993). The future stages continue to engage stakeholders to build a supported learning environment for students, Field Educators and staff.

Evaluation to date has focussed on the participation of stakeholders in the design and development of the e-portfolio. Utilising York and Itzhaky's (1991) evaluation framework for stakeholder participation, the project design has facilitated key stakeholders active engagement in a diverse range of activities to inform the e-portfolio design. Staff members, Field educators, students and the wider university community have participated in the development stages of this project. Engagement activities have included focus groups, education workshops, surveys distributed by email and student workshops. Initial feedback from stakeholders has been positive about both the approach and proposed content of the portfolio.

The researchers' recognised that further engagement with stakeholders around the design of the e-portfolio would be useful. A decision was made to trial a paper-based interface prior to design the final e-portfolio. Students, Field Educators and JCU Staff trialling this format have provided preliminary feedback that the design utilises a practice based language effectively which facilitates the development of student learning goals, methods for practice and concrete assessment that demonstrates the AASW(2010) Standards achieved whilst on placement. This process likens itself to the lifelong learning strategies outlined by Lorenzo and Ittelson's (2005) evaluation framework. This extra stage of engagement with stakeholders on the design has provided more insight into the needs of stakeholders and will inform the final design of the web based interface.

The conceptual design of this project as outlined in this paper emphasises the process of developing the e-portfolio was as important as the outcome of the e-portfolio project. Evidence was provided to support the project design which was initiated by listening to feedback from key stakeholders and sourcing technology that would support the goals of the JCU Field education programme. The community development and action research methodology principle of including stakeholders at every stage of the project was beneficial to building a culture that values and engages with e-portfolios for lifelong learning. The project continues to develop through the planning, acting and reflecting cycle of Action Research (Dick, 1993) with each stage informed by the previous phases and stakeholders input. The project has modelled the envisaged goal for student engagement with e-portfolios by collecting data, reflecting on the data and interacting with the data developing lifelong learning skills along the way for stakeholders.

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