

FE1: DEVELOPING DIGITAL PORTFOLIOS FOR STUDENTS AT BISHOP AUCKLAND COLLEGE

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Aims

- To help students from the Test Bed areas to produce a digital portfolio demonstrating their vocational learning experiences throughout the year.
- To develop vocational tutors' skills and confidence with the technology.

These aims would lead to students being fully involved in all processes needed to create a digital portfolio; from using software to create the DVD covers and the actual DVD interface to taking photographs and video footage of the work they have produced.

Background

I work as a Web Developer for the Test Bed project at Bishop Auckland College. I started just under a year ago and my main roles include working alongside staff and students in the three test bed areas of the college, Hair & Beauty, Building Trades and Childcare, helping them develop their ICT skills. Other responsibilities include developing student and staff intranets and the college web site.

On arriving at the College one of the first projects I was given was to develop the digital portfolio concept, so that students would have an electronic record of their achievements at college that would have impact with potential employers and the community.

On first introducing the student portfolio concept to teaching staff, some were sceptical as to whether the students would have enough time and would be able to learn the skills needed to produce the end product. A number of staff were understandably cautious about the prospect of having to learn new programs in order to then teach students how to use them. Some other staff weren't ready to incorporate the project into their teaching timetable this year as they were preoccupied with other aspects of Test Bed provision.

Evolving a Strategy for involving staff in the production of portfolios.

After initial approaches, I managed to get one representative member of staff from each of the Test Bed areas of Hairdressing, Childcare and Technology who then became committed to the project.

Once members of staff became involved with the student portfolio project they started to come up with their own ideas on how best to record students' progress and development within their vocational areas. It was interesting to see how each area adapted the project to suit their own needs.

The portfolio project was very well suited to the Hair and Beauty group as this subject area has plenty of visual outcomes in practice. Both staff and students took video footage of students working on clients. This would demonstrate the students' competence in styling and cutting skills. Students could also take photographs of finished hair styles.

In Building Trades I worked with two Joinery students and their tutor. The tutor thought that it would be more beneficial to students if they included work that could be used in conjunction with their existing paper-based portfolio to show their vocational assessors. The

portfolio would visually demonstrate each student's competence to use workshop machinery and equipment.

In Childcare, because issues arose concerning the inclusion of small children in photographs and video clips, the member of staff with whom I was working suggested videoing each student going through a mock interview and self-assessment process to demonstrate their social and communication skills.

Evaluating the Approach in One Test Bed Area

a) The tutor's experience

As the first year of the student digital portfolios draws to an end and all student groups I have worked with have completed their own portfolio, I spoke to Sharon Tunstall, the Hairdressing tutor, to capture her opinions of the project. Sharon had developed skills in Adobe Photoshop and she also learnt how to burn DVD's.

She found that the most difficult aspect to manage was making sure she had taken video footage and photographs of all the students in her group and hadn't excluded anyone. In addition to managing the familiar Hairdressing teaching situation, tutor Sharon Tunstall found herself having to be more vigilant when it came to making sure all students were taking part in each session. Although the students did get involved in some limited ways with taking video footage of each other she did suggest that next year it would be valuable to give the students more ownership over the video cameras so they could additionally take them out to their work placements to record evidence.

Most problems arising at the beginning of the project concerned technical issues such as getting 15 students logged on at once to a wireless connection.

b) The students' experiences

On speaking to a group of hairdressing students who had just completed their portfolios they told me that they had enjoyed the project. When it came to completing the DVD case covers and labels they agreed that at first they found the initial laptop work frustrating as they kept losing a network connection. The students used a digital imagery software program to add their details onto a DVD cover template which I had designed. The template was kept to a high resolution size so the printed out version would keep its quality, but consequently the files were taking a long time to open up and save which added to the frustration.

I supervised and showed each student how to upload their video clips and photographs using another digital imagery program, but they said that if they were to continue their portfolios next year they felt confident using the program with less assistance. The students would have liked more content to put on their DVD and seemed inspired to make sure they took more responsibility for ensuring their future portfolios would contain photos and video footage of the full range of skills which they were developing.

My learning from this experience

- Initially it was important to persist in encouraging both staff and students to become involved with the project.
- I found that investing time in providing on-site support in the vocational areas with both the staff and students helped them have greater success with the technology than giving out handouts and expecting staff and students to manage the project by themselves.

- As well as developing technical skills, the confidence gained from the exercise seemed to improve students' interpersonal skills. For example, whilst completing the portfolio front covers, one student from the childcare group, who had completed her cover, showed great initiative and started going round the rest of the group helping others who seemed to be struggling.

Future developments

- Although I have only worked with a limited number of staff and students this year, after seeing some of the results, other members of staff seem keen to take the project on next year.
- As this was the first year of the portfolio project, staff had to be shown how to use the programs as well as the students, but next year the staff that I have worked with will be able to pass on their knowledge to other members of staff who want to become involved and my on-site input may be reduced.
- After the success of the Childcare students working together, there could be opportunities for students to also help other students in the following year.