



I fear my injunction to 'make the most of the sunshine' in the introduction to our last issue may have proved the kiss of death to any such opportunity –in the UK at least! However, as we move into another academic year, we can at least draw upon more of the bumper learning harvest presented earlier in the year.

Contributions here again draw upon the extensive work supported by the Inter/national Coalition for Electronic Portfolio Research and the National Action Research Network in the UK. We feature accounts at macro and micro levels, and early contributions particularly focus upon staff. Gordon Joyes and Lisa Gray, in an analysis which has received a good deal of positive critical attention, emphasise the potential of e-portfolio alongside the need to overcome key barriers and self-defeating beliefs in relation to implementation. At Birmingham City University Jo Powell discovers the positive response of staff to PDP for students, and particularly the sense that the parts of PDP – for them - may be of greater salience than the whole; while Sarah Chesney and Jeremy Benson at Cumbria highlight the importance of social engagement amongst staff in supporting portfolio use for recording non-formal CPD.

This links almost effortlessly to the importance of the safe/supportive space in supporting staff engagement with e-portfolio use at Wolverhampton. Again the involvement of and engagement with colleagues is highlighted (we all know that learning is predominantly a social activity and that the provision of 'soft spaces to fall' itself catalyses further engagement; we JUST need to ensure we recognise this in our support and development structures).

Shifting to a student focus, colleagues from the University of Northumbria demonstrate the connectivity between engagement in reflective writing and scores on ELLI (the Effective Lifelong Learning Inventory) associated with high student achievement; the next stage will be to design approaches which capitalise on this connection. Here ELLI also provides some of the scaffolding that secures student engagement. And finally, John Peters and Mark Tymms revisit the complexities of PDP, the challenges this presents for practitioners – as active agents in the provision of such opportunities - and practitioner researchers. We must not, they assert, lose sight of the primacy of the 'personal' within PDP. Which may well be the starting point for future contributions!

Happy reading!

**Rob Ward**  
**Director**

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# The trouble with e-portfolio implementation: A threshold concepts perspective

Gordon Joyes, University of Nottingham  
Lisa Gray, JISC

e-Portfolios are being used for a range of purposes including Personal Development Planning (PDP), assessment and application to employment or study, and they can support a range of learning processes including selection, reflection and presentation. This has led to complexities in defining what e-portfolios are as further contextualisation is needed to refine whether the focus is the e-portfolio processes ('e-portfolio-based learning' (JISC, 2008), product (the tool or system itself) or the purpose it is being used for. The following purpose- process matrix was used to support the analysis of e-portfolio use across twenty -one JISC funded projects led by a range of Higher and Further Education institutions in the UK. This matrix enabled the context of use to be set for each project, identifying both what the e-portfolio tools were used for and the main learning processes supported. The benefits of e-portfolio use and lessons learnt in each context were then further discussed and informed the project final report.

Purpose/Context	e-portfolio Process	Information capture	Information retrieval	Planning	Reflection	Feedback	Collaboration	Presentation
Personal Development Planning / Continuing Professional Development								
Transition/ Application								
Work Based Learning/ Employment								
Assessment								
Life-long learning								

Figure 1: The e-portfolio purpose-process matrix (Joyes et al, 2010)

The analysis revealed that there are tangible benefits associated with e-portfolio use. However there were some key misconceptions held about e-portfolios that were potential barriers to realising these benefits that centre on the purpose, learning activity design, processes and ownership in implementing effective e-portfolio practice and the transformative/disruptive nature of e-portfolios These are presented below from a design for learning perspective that assumes a mature understanding of e-portfolio use:

**Purpose needs to be aligned to context to maximise benefits:** Some contexts suit some purposes more than other and this

needs to be determined by an analysis of the benefits (and costs) of the purpose in that particular context. Examples of misconceptions associated with this are:

- There is one common understanding of an e-portfolio;
- One e-portfolio system works in all situations. (This of course depends on the system chosen, the range of contexts in which the e-portfolio is to be used as well the intended purposes);
- After students are inducted to e-portfolio processes, for example those involved in PDP, they will apply this across their courses.

**Learning activities need to be designed to suit the purpose:** There must be a conscious design and support of a learning activity/activities suited to the purpose and the context. Examples of misconceptions associated with this are:

- Users will work out how to use an e-portfolio system to suit their needs. (They will unfortunately not see the benefits without some structured activity as they are unlikely to understand the purpose);
- The e-portfolio implementation can be left to study skills specialists. (If the e-portfolio is to be embedded within the curriculum, then curriculum experts need to be involved in designing learning activities and supporting them).

**Processes need to be supported technologically and pedagogically:** The processes involved in the creation of the e-portfolio in the particular context must be understood and both technical and pedagogic support need to be provided. Examples of misconceptions associated with this are:

- Students are digital natives and so will easily adapt to using e-portfolios, for example using blogs for sharing reflections will be unproblematic;
- Users understand processes like feedback, reflective writing, selecting information, planning;
- Tutors / mentors know how to support their students in using e-portfolios.

**Ownership needs to be student centred:** The e-portfolio processes and outcomes need to be owned by the student. Examples of misconceptions associated with this are:

- There needs to be one e-portfolio for life;

- Bespoke technologies, i.e., PDAs and digital cameras are best for information capture in the workplace.

**Transformation (disruption) needs to be planned for:** e-Portfolios are potentially transformative and as a result are *disruptive* from a pedagogic, technological and an institutional perspective because they tend not to fit exactly within existing systems. This has implications at an institutional level as they impact on the nature of the curriculum and its assessment as well as staff workload and pedagogic and technical support, particularly in novel, work based learning and life-wide contexts. It is at this transformation level that efficiency gains can be maximised in relation to reuse of data and integration of systems. Examples of misconceptions associated with this are:

- An e-portfolio will save everyone time;
- An e-portfolio can simply replace a paper based portfolio system;
- Human resources departments/employers/ admissions will value an e-portfolio in the application process;
- Successful project implementation will readily transfer to established practice
- across an institution;
- The curriculum and pedagogic approaches remain unaffected by the introduction of e-portfolios;

The authors have suggested elsewhere (Joyes et al, 2010) that these five key concepts related to e-portfolio implementation represent threshold concepts (Meyer & Land, 2003) in that they represent counterintuitive or 'troublesome knowledge' (Perkins, 2006). Once the threshold has been passed through a new and irreversible perspective is attained. This perhaps explains why those experienced in e-portfolio implementation can view the misconceptions above as rather naïve and why those new to their implementation fail to comprehend the extensive guidance available, for example the e-portfolios infoKit (JISC infoNET, 2008).

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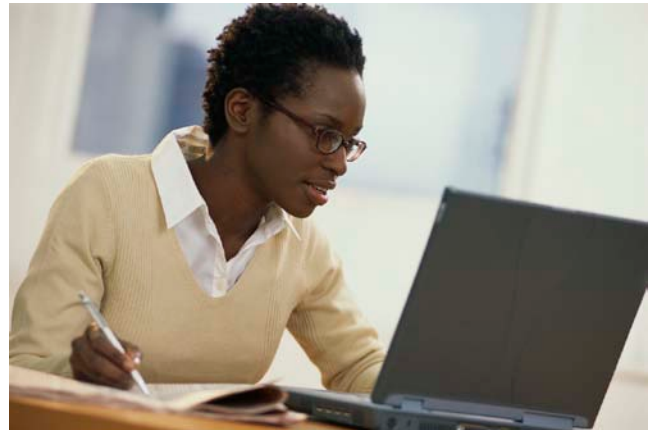
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## An “Imposition” or a “Conscious Approach to Learning”: Staff Perceptions of Personal Development Planning (PDP)

Jo Powell, Birmingham City University

In March 2008 I embarked upon a new journey – I started my new role as the Tutor for PDP and Employability. At that time I knew little about research and also about PDP at Birmingham City University. So, when I was told “you are going to be leading the NTFs NARN Project” (thanks Ruth) I was both excited and apprehensive! The National Teaching Fellowship Scheme National Action Research Network aimed to research and evaluate PDP and e-Portfolio (see <http://www.recordingachievement.org/research/narn-tree.html>). For the first 6 months of the project I procrastinated and when eventually decided on an area was then told – “nah, that won’t work!” Back to the drawing board! Meanwhile my first 6 months in post revealed academic and support staff with differing views about PDP. Voila! The research topic was born!

My literature review showed that much of the research into PDP to date was carried out with students (Gough et al. 2003). It also suggested that the experience students have of PDP is coloured by the academic staff who teach them (QAA, 2009). QAA Scotland (2009) suggest, 'The success of a PDP framework depends on the engagement of and the essential value brought to the process by academic staff combined with management support' (p28). With this in mind it backed my own intrigue about staff perceptions and understanding and gave me a strong research base on which to build.

Being relatively new to research I decided on a simple on line questionnaire that could reach teaching staff easily across our 9 teaching campuses. The questionnaire was designed to elicit both qualitative and quantitative data. Analysis led me to consider two main areas: the perceived usefulness of PDP; and the perceived usefulness of reflection, self awareness, action planning and employability (the elements at BCU we use to define the PDP process).

125 responses were received from academic staff from across the institution. From the responses 82.2% of participants considered PDP to be useful or very useful to their students – this figure was much higher than I had anticipated since anecdotally I thought PDP was not popular. Less surprising was that the elements of PDP were seen more positively with staff stating they believed it to be useful or very useful: Reflection 93.5%; Self Awareness 92.6%; Action Planning 91.8%; and Employability 92.6%. In fact, the results indicated that PDP as an overarching concept was seen as significantly less useful than its element parts ( $p \leq 0.001$ ).

As well as ranking the usefulness of PDP, staff were also asked to explain why they ranked PDP as they had. This data was explored to see if any themes emerged and responses fell into two categories: personal opinion; and personal experience.

When PDP was ranked as useless or not very useful, the personal opinion offered appeared to be based around a view that PDP was a concept or fixed structure that was imposed upon the course, module or staff member by the institution. It was also claimed that the attitude that staff hold is also mirrored by students or vice versa. Examples of reasoning include:

*'We continually get barraged with new concepts'*

*'They [students] regard it as an imposition, I agree'*

*'Students do not grasp the significance of it. However this may be because most staff do not engage with the process'*



Looking at the reasons given when PDP was rated as useful or better, their experiences were often based on feedback or experience of students. The comments below indicate that staff often experience a change in student perceptions some time after introducing PDP:

*'We've had students come back to us after graduation saying 'now I get it''*

*'I sometimes hear students in final year remark how they now appreciate the value of what has been included in this field.'*

There were also comments such as 'because I would like it!' indicating that their own personal experience informs their perception.

When staff perceive PDP to be useful they clearly have a belief in the process. This is indicated by comments such as:

*'Developing themselves to become useful within their chosen specialism equips them for the real world'*

*'I think that the experience of compiling the profile will be an empowering and enabling experience for students'*

As indicated above there are indications of a causal link between staff opinion of the worth of PDP and student perceptions of it with one participant suggesting:

*'Though it is dependent on how they [students] engage with the concept; which in turn is dependent on how it is put across'*

So what have I learnt? Well, it is clear that a vast majority of academic staff at BCU who responded to my survey perceive PDP to be

useful or very useful, but see the elements as significantly more useful than the whole process. Many views show that champions are present within the institution that both believe in and value the process. Clear and meaningful communication with students may be occurring and some of the comments indicate this. However there may also be clear and meaningful communication that PDP is not worthwhile. Further investigation may offer clarification of why the elements of PDP are seen as more useful than the entire PDP process.

I have learned that some staff don't know what PDP (at BCU) is and given the likelihood that the view staff have of PDP directly impacts on the views of their students an immediate outcome is a need for better marketing of PDP to staff.

So how about my future in research? Well it has been a trying, testing and exhausting journey, one that has offered challenges and rewards. It has made me critically consider my philosophy of research, and where my interests lie. What I do know is that next time I carry out research I will know where to start, and what my philosophical base is – which will hopefully offer a firm foundation to build on.



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## Developing and supporting a PLS for staff continuing professional development.

### 'Anything other than silence':

**Sarah Chesney & Jeremy Benson**

#### Background

This is a brief summary of a small scale action research project run at the University of Cumbria as an offshoot of the JISC funded Flourish project which ran from March 2007-March 2009. Flourish was run by the Centre for the Development of Learning and Teaching. The project grew out of a desire to see how staff used a Personal Learning System (PLS) for recording & reflecting upon non-formal continuing professional development (CPD). We wanted to discover which, if any, activities, habits or strategies triggered the use of the PLS when there was no immediate or external pressure to engage with the environment and whether participants felt that regularly using the PLS had contributed to their CPD.

Before we begin...the elephant in the article (as it were) is the issue of recording and acknowledging informal CPD.

*"What academics seem to want is recognition for the huge diversity of CPD they do undertake (individually) whether informal or formal, for this to be linked to career development, and (organisationally) for development review processes to be meaningful and integrated so that a link is*

*forged between individual and organisational development.” (Rothwell, 2008 p 17).*

We had in mind the concept of a ‘tipping point’ (Gladwell, 2000). What could drive or trigger the (fundamental) shift from self-conscious exploration of the e-portfolio to conscious integration of the tool into a process or work flow. In particular we were looking at this within a staff development context at the University of Cumbria and focusing on non-formal CPD activities (such as networking, or working in teams)

Throughout our work we used a participative, action research approach aimed at enhancing the quality of our own practice, and that of our colleagues.

#### **Method:**

- We put out a call for bids with a small amount of funding;
- Successful applicants had to use the e-portfolio to record an aspect of their CPD for a period of eight weeks;
- Participants had to send a blog to the project leader each week recording their progress and agree to be interviewed by the project leader at the end of the eight weeks.

#### **Numbers involved:**

- Two teams (of three and two), and four individual staff were successful in applying for the funding i.e. 9 staff in total.

The weekly blog to the project leader reported on participants’ use of the PLS and was designed to oblige participants to get into the habit of logging on. Very early on in the project it became clear that the blog was seen by participants as not just a reporting tool but also a tool for dialogue with project leader.

Participants sought (and then received) reassurance from the project manager through the blog postings and confirmed in the interviews that they really valued feedback on their postings:

*Because this blog will be submitted and viewed by the project leader I hope there will be some feedback. Perhaps a pointer towards technical assistance, brickbats or bouquets, anything other than silence!*

In addition a desire to communicate with colleagues emerged:

*Responses continue to be posted on blogs I have set up to communicate with research participants and as ongoing discussion*

*following presentations. This is an unintended consequence of the project and is also used for two way communication with the Flourish project leader. It makes reporting more interactive and, I feel, the project is a co-operative venture.*



Participants used the PLS for a variety of different CPD activities, including as a log to record new responsibilities; to collaborate on research with colleagues; to gather evidence to be used in the staff annual appraisal. When one faculty endorsed the use of the PLS for appraisal, this was greeted with enthusiasm by participants in that faculty:

*Firstly, the good news: we can use Pebblepad for the appraisal process! This means that the value of this project has increased massively.*

#### **Discussion**

The strongest theme emerging from the data indicates that participants really valued getting feedback from peers, and it is ongoing communication that motivates them to log on. Initial concerns about privacy were soon overcome once the participants became familiar with the PLS. In addition to a growth in confidence in using the PLS, some participants started to experiment with other technologies (audio feedback, posting videos to YouTube) and used the blog to ask questions about how to complete these tasks. Use of the PLS in turn encouraged some participants to consider other new technologies to enhance their practice.

#### **Further work**

We plan to examine in more detail the adoption of new tools and technologies, and strategies that may help in the diffusion of such innovations. One of the key difficulties is battling inertia and over-reliance on paper based processes and we plan to examine the ramifications of the assertion that at an institutional level it is 'essential to introduce new types of innovation while deconstructing

old processes and organizations' (Moore, 2004).

**For more information please contact:**  
[sarah.chesney@cumbria.ac.uk/](mailto:sarah.chesney@cumbria.ac.uk)  
[jeremy.benson@cumbria.ac.uk](mailto:jeremy.benson@cumbria.ac.uk)

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## A soft place to fall (or at least to have a sit down for a while)

**Emma Purnell, Rachel Challen, Megan Lawton and Brian Penfold, University of Wolverhampton**

Members of staff wanting a soft place to fall? Of course not literally but a recent round of ePortfolio research at the University of Wolverhampton (UoW) found the theme of staff wanting this safe and supportive space weaved throughout the findings.

The aim of this research was to explore “*the facilitating and inhibiting factors in building capability and capacity in staff to support the use of e-Portfolio across the wider University?*” It builds on previous UoW studies and was undertaken as part of a team of nine national and international HE institutions known as The Inter/National Coalition (Cohort IV).

Although having had an institutional e-Portfolio system since 2005, with the potential to be available to 22,000 users, it became clear through working with academic teaching staff that there was a high engagement of embedded e-Portfolio practice within modules, but a much lower impact at programme level. Being involved in Cohort IV gave our team the opportunity to explore the reasons for this and to develop a research-informed strategy for embedding the e-Portfolio platform (PebblePad) at the course level.

The research used an institutional case study approach incorporating 1 macro case study and 2 micro case studies, which aimed to tease out issues that occurred in different environments. One of the key findings from this study was that staff, in variety of settings, needed a metaphorical ‘comfortable place to sit for a while’ as they became accustomed to the new technology and its impact on their teaching.

- *With the technology itself* staff preferred a support model of having an extra pair of hands in early teaching sessions of using the e-Portfolio just in case the software didn’t behave exactly as was expected. Having help at hand, provided whenever and wherever it was needed, further supported with anytime anyplace phone support was seen as cushioning the initial embedding process.
- *Being a member of a learning partnership* with like minded people was important for staff (especially for tutors who were lone pioneers in their department) when they needed to share experiences from the front line and to learn from those who have gone before or just starting out. Having the opportunity to ‘just sit down for a while’ in this environment where e-Portfolio batteries could be recharged was considered vital to successful sustainability of e-Portfolio practise.
- *Time and recognition for innovation* was also regarded as a soft place to fall if staff were given space (often afforded by project funding) to work outside of their comfort zone and traditional model of pedagogy. This space to experiment with e-Portfolio based learning as part of a structured and supported long term plan, provided a padding between perceived risk taking (the pressures of National Student Survey results for example) and not taking any small barriers of implementation as an immediate failed attempt.

What is clearly evident from this research, that if staff are given this metaphorical soft place to sit, chat and recharge their batteries, then more innovation, risk taking and adaptation of pedagogical practice should become part of the fixtures and fittings.

**For more details about the research and findings, please contact the Blended Learning Unit [blu@wlv.ac.uk](mailto:blu@wlv.ac.uk)**

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## **“Illuminating and measuring personal development: the impact of this work on learning and teaching”.**

**Wendy Clark, Jackie Adamson, Jamie Thompson, Alan White: Northumbria University**

### **Background**

This short article gives an overview of a small-scale case study research project based on a 2<sup>nd</sup> year cohort of students from the Business Information Systems area of the School of Computing, Engineering and Information Sciences at Northumbria University. The aim of this employability module is to prepare students for the recruitment process for their placement year in industry and to inculcate proper professional attitudes and behaviour. The teaching strategy uses the precepts of PDP, and an eportfolio is the vehicle for learning and assessment.

The research project was designed to investigate how successful we have been in encouraging students to take control of their learning, to realise that learning is a skill that can be consciously improved, and that their ‘learning power’ can increase.

The difficulty with such a project is the identification of an appropriate measuring tool. The Effective Lifelong Learning Inventory (ELLI), which identifies 7 dimensions of learning ‘energy’, was developed by a team at Bristol University in response to the growing realisation that the instrumental approach to learning and teaching which has dominated formal education – an approach consisting of, typically, codified curricula and high stakes assessment in the form of tests of knowledge,

skills and understanding – was no longer relevant to the needs of the modern world.

In 2006, the Leitch Review of Skills pressed universities to lead in making the UK a world leader in delivering skills for work, again reminding HE of the inadequacy of codified curricula to meet the constantly changing needs of the modern global workplace. Staff in HE already implementing PDP to address these challenges recognised the potential of ELLI to both enrich the learning experience and provide a means of evaluating its effectiveness. Continuing research at Northumbria and elsewhere into the connection between ELLI and student achievement has established a very strong correlation between 2 of the ELLI dimensions, Critical Curiosity and Changing and Learning, and high student achievement. Strategic Awareness also showed a positive correlation to high achievement, although not statistically significant.



### **Methodology**

The importance of reflection in the development of the deep approach to learning necessary for learning autonomy is widely recognised. Because of the personal nature of reflective writing and the commitment needed on the part of the students to produce good reflective writing, it was felt that the quality of the reflective writing could be used as a proxy for engagement with the process. A taxonomy for the assessment of reflective writing was therefore developed by members of the team, based on the work of Biggs and Collis, Hatton and Smith and Jenny Moon. Analysis was carried out to determine whether changes in the measured learning power of the students were mirrored by their reflective writing marks. Textual analysis of their reflective writing was undertaken to investigate their understanding of the learning process itself.

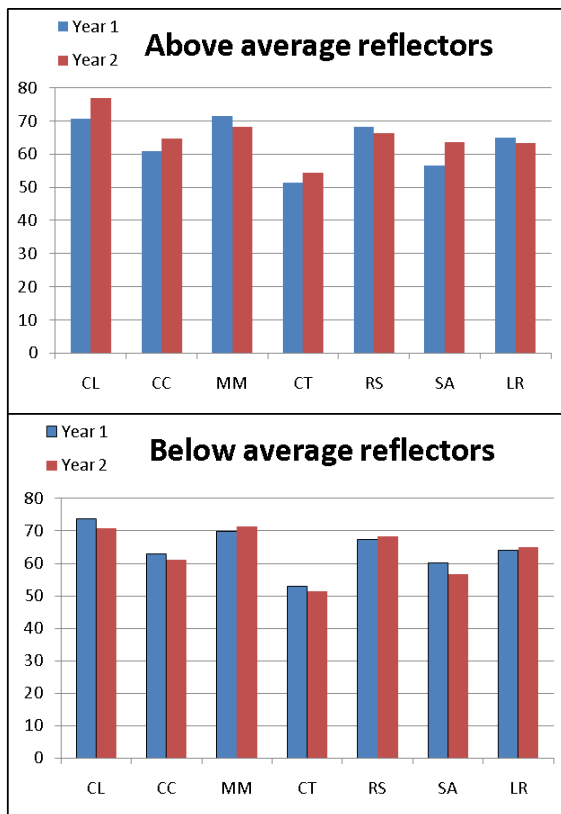
### **Findings**

Comparison of ELLI ‘scores’ achieved during the first year of the degree course with those of the same students at the end of the second



year module with reference to reflective writing ability indicated that those who engaged with the PDP/e-Portfolio process – i.e. those whose reflective writing showed deeper thought – showed most positive change, whereas those who did not engage showed a decrease in learning ‘power’ in those dimensions identified as having a significant correlation with high achievement (Critical Curiosity, Changing and Learning and Strategic Awareness)

Our project in the context of the wider ELLI research now has to address some key questions. The Dispositions to Stay research has indicated that three specific ELLI dimensions are associated with academic success. (Critical Curiosity, Orientation to Change and Strategic Awareness). The next stage of the project will seek to identify ways to devise PDP and e-Portfolio structures and processes that encourage the growth and development of these dimensions.



Textual analysis of student reflective writing showed that many students were becoming aware of learning as a process, as a skill that could be consciously improved with practice. Our analysis also indicated that ELLI constitutes a very useful way of increasing awareness of the PDP/e-Portfolio aims. Its novelty arouses curiosity, and its vocabulary helps students and staff to articulate their thoughts about learning itself.

### Conclusion

Our experience suggests a way of understanding how ELLI has contributed to a synergy between PDP and e-Portfolio. We have evidenced that the language of ELLI and engagement with the tool has been a catalyst for reflection, self awareness and understanding. The language of ELLI and the dimensions it describes have also provided a useful framework for portfolio structure, and helped students to understand the process (and necessity) of becoming lifelong learners.

## Defining Personal Development Planning: putting the personal in PDP?

John Peters & Mark Tymms

Professor Sue Clegg has repeatedly argued that PDP is ill defined, most recently describing it as ‘a chaotic concept.’ (Clegg & Bufton 2008, Clegg 2004). She quotes Fry *et al's* (2002) assertion that the PDP literature is characterised by “several concepts that are ill-defined, are often used with multiple meanings, are under-researched, poorly problematised and very often dependent on context.” (p. 118) Clegg and Fry have a point. Talk to PDP practitioners; each will provide a different definition of what they do and each will place different emphasis on its key purposes.

To educational researchers this clearly matters [and promises years of research publication!] but should it matter to PDP practitioners? There are a number of reasons why it might. It is difficult to provide an educational rationale for our practice if we have no educational theorisation to fall back on. It lays us open to challenge from many of the very same academics and educationalists we might want to help us implement PDP practice. It makes it difficult for us to claim that we are engaged in evidence based practice and makes it equally difficult to develop an evidence base demonstrating the educational impact of PDP practices. Instead, practitioners have tended to resort to policy statements for their rationale. This leaves us at the whim of changing policy and leaves PDP to ‘suffer from over-expectation’ (O’Connell 2003 p.28) when it is repeatedly offered as ‘the answer’ to yet another new policy initiative.

However, we should not be lured into trying to provide a clear cut and simplistic definition of PDP just to make life easier for ourselves.

Such a definition would not be sustaining or capable of including the variety of PDP practice across the educational and career sectors embracing lifelong and life-wide learning. Perhaps, as Jackson & Ward (2004) suggest, PDP needs to be left as a complex, ill-defined construct which can be adapted and adopted to each area of situated personal practice as a means of structuring and representing individual learning in a super-complex, post-modern world.

Yet leaving things too vague has its dangers too. Well meaning but ill-informed projects to support PDP have sometimes resulted in the imposition of narrow, bureaucratic, institutionalised, tick-box frameworks, which are controlling and impersonal. Yet PDP practitioners would argue that PDP should clearly be personal, developmental and empowering. We can only criticise and resist restricting, disempowering frameworks if we have a clear idea what PDP is and, therefore, what it is not. So, we might accept that PDP defies simple definition but that does not excuse us from seeking to establish its core nature and the educational values we would wish to claim for it.

There are many ways in which we could seek to go about defining PDP. We could look to policy statements, examine the range of implementation frameworks, explore the intentions and purposes of PDP practitioners, relate it to existing educational theories and models, or examine the experiences of those on the receiving end of PDP who should, ultimately, own it. Examining these fully would take a PhD thesis but it might prove useful and encourage further debate to set out a few key ideas here.



## Policy

The touchstone when it comes to defining PDP are the QAA guidelines for the implementation of PDP in HE, produced in 2001 and recently updated. (QAA *et al* 2009) These state PDP is:

‘a structured and supported process undertaken by an individual to reflect upon their own learning, performance and / or achievement and to plan for their personal,

educational and career development.’ (QAA *et al*, 2001 & 9)

Many PDP practitioners can recite this definition by heart. Yet what does it actually mean?

- *Process*: PDP is a verb not a noun. It is an ongoing educational process not a document or file.
- *Individual*: The focus is upon, and the responsibility lies with, the learner her/himself.
- *Structured*: It is a process that involves a number of stages that build upon each other.
- *Supported*: Though the focus is on the individual learner it is not undertaken alone but with help from tutors, colleagues and institutional systems.
- *Reflect upon their own learning, performance and/or achievement, and to plan*: Suggests a number of elements of the PDP process and relates to the EPPI-Centre systematic literature review’s chosen definition of PDP, for the purposes of their search, as ‘processes that connect reflection, recording and action planning’ (Gough *et al* 2003).
- *Personal, educational and career development*: Emphasises the three spheres of learning that PDP draws together, helping to make connections between the development of the individual, their educational experiences and life choices.

It is a rich definition but it also leaves a great deal open to interpretation and local implementation. In fact local interpretation and implementation was actively encouraged by the original Guidelines. They specified that, as long as institutions could assure themselves that PDP was being implemented effectively, ‘the nature and scope of opportunities for PDP, and the recording and supporting strategies will be determined by each institution’ (QAA *et al* 2001). This means there is no shared policy definition of what the PDP process specifically involves, how it is structured, and, fundamentally, how to strike the balance between support and structure on the one hand and individual ownership and responsibility on the other.

As PDP has been included by reference in numerous other policy statements and across other sectors, implementation has remained open to interpretation. Its role and processes have been appropriated and negotiated by governmental and professional bodies. Its frameworks have been left loose to include

explicit, implicit, skills-based, competency-based and modular formats, each shaped by different processes and the outcomes of each being shaped by such decisions.

### Purpose

So, we find ourselves in a position where as individual practitioners we continue to be constrained within a wider range of policies and pressures, at both a national and institutional level. Can this really explain such a diversity of models being used within higher education, in particular, and can we continue to place our emphasis on these and deny our own influence within the construction and presentation of PDP? As Clegg & Bradley (2006) commented, our response to such initiatives is generally driven by 'broader feelings about the nature and purposes of higher education' (p. 469), but such feelings are surely driven less by external pressures and more by our own individual attitudes to both ourselves and our roles as lecturers or HE practitioners. Bound by this simple statement PDP becomes a process, which is not only personal for our students, but a reflection of ourselves.

Such statements may seem simplistic, but the shift from the collective to the individual, which is bound within it, must surely highlight a significant problem for practitioners, policy-makers and researchers in PDP, particularly if its conception has become so vague and multi-dimensional as to make comparative study impossible. Certainly, there are great benefits in a 'policy framework geared to encouraging diversity and customization' (Jackson, 2001, p.6-7), however few authors have striven to truly recognize and resolve the pragmatic complexities that have been initiated by such organizational freedom, and few even comment on the uniqueness of the processes which they are studying. The recognition of complexity may be simple enough, but working with it would seem far more difficult.

But work with it we must, and how we work with it must surely be seen as a threat to the very freedoms that we so seem to cherish. If we take Clegg & Bradley's (2006) study of PDP types, in which they concluded that it could essentially be constrained within three specific 'ideal types' in accordance with their underlying purpose; an employability model, an academic model, and a professional model, we are faced with an approach which openly claims to 'compare and contrast different approaches' and yet has done so in a conveniently reductionist manner. Whilst admitting that 'none of them existed in pure form' (p. 57) and that ultimately all PDP practices are a complex hybrid of these dimensions, the subsequent result of their approach was to strongly emphasise a normative, purpose-driven attitude towards

PDP, and essentially dismiss the individual, ideological and pragmatic beliefs that actually underpin the construction and presentation of each model. For Clegg & Bradley, the founding purpose of PDP becomes employability and so, once a singular role has been decided upon, categorisation becomes acceptable. This is not to attack Clegg & Bradley, but to highlight that *their* research parameters, *their* beliefs, and *their* decision to pass over a more personal and developmental route, defines their study and how they chose to control the complexity which we are all faced with as PDP practitioners.



### Theory

So once again we return to the complex nature of PDP. Is it about policy, is it about process, is it about purpose, and can these be recognised in such a way that allows for a singular and accessible definition? If we turn to the theorisation underlying different standpoints regarding PDP, the picture unfortunately remains equally as problematic. Educational models of reflective learning, such as that by Kolb (QAA, 2009), have been used to highlight the role of reflection within PDP as a process, but generally a wider interdisciplinary search has been made to support the existence of its various forms. For instance, much of Clegg & Bradley's approach has been driven by an existing underlying theory of discipline identity (see Bernstein 2000), and this is largely typical of an initiative which has been introduced without evidential support and has therefore forced theory to be applied retrospectively. Once again, as with PDP modelling, theoretical choice would seem to be strongly underpinned by both the purposes of the chosen PDP model and the deeply individual attitudes we all hold towards major philosophical issues, such as the role of higher education and even the nature of being itself.

Educationalists with a focus on general development beyond academic achievement have commonly turned to psychological theory as a base point, Knight and Yorke (2003) claiming specifically that 'self-theories,

particularly attributional patterns... locus of control... and their motivational concomitants' (p. 7), lie at the very core of employability. Dispositional and personality issues, such as self-regulation, self-efficacy, and perceived control have been gaining considerable interest, spurred on by comments by personality researchers that 'we are beginning to understand how to change it ... By concentrating on beliefs driven by social experience we start to recognise a process of intervention'. (Dweck, 2009, p.391) Our ethical right to direct such change is rarely placed under question. But education's relationship with general psychological theory is a chequered one (Davis, 2008, p.50), and rarely is it noted that no single psychological theory has been accepted as dominant, even within its own field, so once again the choice of theory must strongly reflect the views of the individual choosing them.

As researchers seek ever more diverse theoretical foundations, social models, such as complexity theory, have further been used to support the ability of PDP to adapt to a complex learning environment (Jackson & Ward, 2004). Complexity theory, as would be expected from the name, is once again a multi-dimensional concept and is perhaps better seen as 'a way of envisaging complex phenomena' (Kuhn, 2008, p.177), rather than a single school of thought. With this in mind, much can be made from the socio-constructivist interpretation that Jackson & Ward apply, and their focus on the university environment as an operational system rather than on individuals as systems in their own right. Here is a model of shared meaning and the co-creation of knowledge, where individuals are a product of the social environment. Whilst some criticism may be levied at Jackson & Ward (2004) for their attempt to support a prescriptive process from a descriptive model (Morrison, 2008, p.30), their use of the model can clearly be seen as a reflection of *their* attitudes towards the interaction between the individual and society, *their* choice being neither neutral or necessarily objective.

### Ownership

Ultimately, we must return to the point that as PDP practitioners we *are* the educational providers, influenced by external factors but not equal to them. As Collier (1993) quite rightfully noted, our 'interpretations are not simply "theoretical" or "academic" statements but have an existential reality for the students', and therefore our roles as shapers and drivers of particular PDP processes cannot be ignored. Yes, governments constrain PDP, yes institutions and professional bodies constrain PDP, but so do we as practitioners. Perhaps, in reality, PDP models can be defined solely by the issue of ownership. Is it owned by politicians,

economists, employers, therapists, us or is it owned by the student themselves?

This may not be as abstract a matter as it may first appear. For theorists such as Brooks & Everett a prescriptive approach to PDP threatens 'to create models of "normality" which are not relevant to the individual or their perceptions of attaining such states.' (Brooks & Everett, 2008, p.326). Such a concern has been further strengthened by the recent work of Clegg & Bufton (2008) in which they highlight the difficulties associated with such an approach if it fails to account for the experiences, aspirations and expectations of individual students. Pointing towards the issue of PDP being temporally inappropriate for first year undergraduate students, Clegg & Bufton highlight the possibility that ultimately how PDP is perceived lies, not with the lecturers or institutions at all but with the students. The significant word here is 'relevant', and relevance cannot be collective, as would indeed be supported by a range of social, psychological and philosophical models. For PDP practitioners a complex problem may therefore exist as to how students can be self-regulating and autonomous within a system 'which supports a student-centred vision of higher education' (Haigh, 2008, p. 69), and yet where the goals and processes of that system are imposed upon them. Can we claim that PDP is personal just because the student writes the reflective journal, whilst others are directing where that student focuses that reflection and for what purpose?



### Conclusion

Clegg (2008) refers to PDP as a 'pedagogic technology' (p.447) and a collection of processes, but to limit it to just process, or purpose, or theory is to deny its complexity. PDP is essentially personal; personal to those presenting it and those receiving it. As practitioners, perhaps our primary role within PDP is to balance that relationship, to negotiate its purpose with the students who will be receiving it. There are clearly grounds for considering it to be a learning model in itself: one which places emphasis on personal

agency but also suggests the need to scaffold learners towards autonomy by provision of structured processes which facilitate learning and, by the recording of those processes, encourages meta-cognition. However, if it is to mean anything, then it must be a person-centred, holistic learning model in which autonomy is a truly valued.



Perhaps it should therefore not be defined or over controlled by the educational provider but remain free to be defined and controlled by the learner. To do this will inevitably demand change, not from the student, but from Higher Education providers and practitioners. Ultimately, the key for PDP's success may yet lie in the term itself – it's personal.

**For more information please contact:**

**[j.peters@worc.ac.uk](mailto:j.peters@worc.ac.uk)**

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# PDP in a leaner meaner world'

## The Tenth Annual Residential Seminar of the Centre for Recording Achievement

Monday 22<sup>nd</sup>- Tuesday 23<sup>rd</sup> November

at Winterbourne, The University of Birmingham

The Dearing Report and the recommendation to implement PDP seems – and is – a long time ago. Recently (and not only in HE) e-portfolio systems have –for many but not all - come to be seen as an important tool in capturing the personal accounts that have resulted from the PDP process. More recently still we have begun to talk of e-portfolio functionality as a way of linking such tools more closely to student learning and assessment. We've also seen the re-awakening of interest in 'graduate attributes' and an explosion of interest in extra-curricular 'skills' awards. The former has the potential to emphasise more integrative aspects of assessment, the latter to utilise the 'plan-do-review' cycle that is at the very heart of PDP. Additionally, the development of the Higher Education Achievement Report (HEAR) presents new opportunities for institutional debate and decisions about 'richer pictures' of student learning and achievement and the role of staff and students in fashioning such records. It also revisits a concern common across sectors; how to capture and recognise learning outside formal environments. Within HE, connections across disciplines/levels/key agendas, and between all academic levels – from Foundation Degree to post-doc are key. Beyond it we need to continue to nurture connections to practice in schools, employers and professional bodies, not least because student progression and employability are ever important concerns.

This is a large agenda! Much of this territory remains contested and open to debate; especially in a tough climate. The overall challenge however is of duplication of initiative rather than synthesis; for innovation overload, for loss of sight of how these initiatives might fit together and reinforce one another. Our opportunity is to develop 'bigger richer pictures' for ourselves of how such initiatives can fit together, pictures which emphasise synthesis, make full use of our collective memories and locate PDP processes at their heart.

Our annual residential seminar will:

- Enable you to make the most of connections in the PDP/e-portfolio community, to help you make progress with the challenges you face.
- Keep up-to-date with new and developing practice, including not-text based PDP work, and the successes and failures experienced with these.
- Help you to connect your work to other – key – agendas.
- Connect you to current and emerging policy debates and intentions.
- Enable you to contribute to 'a bigger picture' of the event through the innovative use of technology.
- Contain – for members – the AGM of the CRA.

Please contact Amy Marsden [amy@recordingachievement.org](mailto:amy@recordingachievement.org) for more information

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