

A ROLE-PLAY LEARNING ACTIVITY USING PEBBLEPAD FOR INDUSTRY PRACTITIONER INVOLVEMENT

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Abstract

Use of an ePortfolio application to enhance industry participation in assessment is described in this paper. Students enrolled in a third year counselling and consulting unit complete a one-to-one interview role-play, which they digitally record and upload to PebblePad. Practitioners currently working in a coaching, counselling or consulting role are given access to the students' recordings and literature review, which they review and post comments on. This case study is an example of institutional policy shaping curriculum design and assessment and shows how technology can facilitate the achievement of desired learning outcomes. It also shows how it is possible to respond to policy imperatives while at the same time developing engaging and challenging learning experiences. The learning activity and associated assessment described in this paper show how students can benefit from opportunities to interact with industry experts and that this interaction does not have to be face-to-face to be effective.

Using PebblePad's Gateway Functionality to Facilitate Industry Practitioner Feedback on Students' Interview Sessions

An assessment task consisting of a role-play of either a coaching, counselling or consulting scenario is described in this paper. The role-play activity was developed in response to institutional policy requirements and was designed to provide students with opportunities to interact with industry experts. A key learning outcome from the role-play was to provide students with industry-standard feedback, with opportunities to interact with current practitioners facilitated by the use of technology. In this paper we provide background to the use of role-play for teaching and the importance of feedback for skills learning, before describing the assessment task in more detail. How PebblePad was used to allow industry reviewers access to students' role-plays and literature reviews is also described and results from student evaluations reported.

Assessment and Feedback on Skills Learning

A challenge with using role-play for teaching students interviewing skills is providing effective feedback that can be used to improve performance. Typically students practice their interviewing skills in pairs or small groups, providing feedback to each other. Or their performance is assessed by a trained interviewer, usually the teacher, who provides feedback for improvement. The assessment method discussed in this paper extends the

provision of feedback to include industry practitioners critiquing students' performance in a role-play simulation. Involvement of the industry practitioner is facilitated via PebblePad's gateway function, which provides a means for interaction between the practitioner and students.

Developing interviewing skills is important for students studying undergraduate business degrees where consulting is likely to be part of their future roles. Consulting involves a range of skills, including problem identification and solving, formulating recommended courses of action and assisting to implement these (Cherrington & Stocks, 1986). Included in the tools and techniques consultants require is being able to ask questions in a structured and systematic way in order to understand the nature and scope of the problem. Interviews are one way in which this can be done effectively in a consulting setting. Interviewing is also a skill that is needed where counselling, coaching or mentoring is performed.

As the long history in medical education shows, interviewing skills can be readily taught in an undergraduate setting. However, it is not without its challenges. One area that has received considerable attention in the research on teaching medical students interviewing skills is whether role-play with peers is as effective as simulated patient interviews. At least two studies (Mounsey, Bovbjerg, White & Gazewood, 2006; Lane, Hood & Rollnick, 2008) have found that teaching students interviewing skills by allowing them to practice with fellow students is as effective as training them with interviewees who have been specifically trained for the role. However, a drawback to having students provide feedback to each other is that they may not provide the same quality of feedback that a trained interviewer does (Mounsey et al., 2006), which could potentially impact on learning. The provision of feedback to improve performance needs to be present in order to maximise learning outcomes and to provide direction for improvement for future attempts (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004). However, according to Gibbs and Simpson (2004) the feedback also needs to be appropriate to the purpose of the assessment and needs to be received, attended to and acted on by the student.

The credibility of the feedback is also an important factor for students. Just as assessment tasks should be authentic, so too should the feedback provided to students as part of the assessment process. One way of providing this authenticity in the business curriculum is to include learning activities and assessment tasks in the curriculum where industry is involved. By providing real world examples, input and feedback from current practitioners, students can benefit from insights from the professional world (Kamoun & Selim, 2007). Feedback from current practitioners also helps provide credibility, which in turn can serve to reinforce key messages and concepts delivered in the course (Eveleth & Baker-Eveleth, 2009).

Learning Activity with Industry Practitioners' Involvement

The assessment task described in this paper was developed to address the learning outcomes for a third-year

subject “Consulting and Counselling” relating to acquisition of skills and competencies in consulting and counselling processes and understanding the theory and practice of consulting and counselling for performance improvement. Interviewing was one skill that was focused on in the unit. To engage students with the task they were given scope to choose an area of interest, research it further and then write a literature review. Based on this work they then applied the theoretical concepts identified to a role-play which involved a one-to-one consulting, counselling or coaching interview as part of their assessment in the subject.

The design of the assessment task also provided the opportunity for students to practice and further develop important generic skills such as communication, team work, managing and using information and problem solving (Hager & Holland, 2006). Universities in Australia have had a strong focus on teaching employability skills which is usually supported by institutional policy (Woodley & Armatas, 2010). An example of this is the Learning in the Workplace and Community (LiWC) policy at Victoria University (VU), with the policy designed to promote engagement with industry as part of the curriculum. The policy includes a commitment “to make at least 25% learning in the workplace and community a universal feature of VU courses” (Victoria University, 2008). The University’s LiWC policy articulates an institution-wide approach to embedding LiWC activities into courses to enhance the student experience and enable students to be work, future and career ready.

The assessment task was designed to address the challenge of assisting students to acquire knowledge and skills relating to consulting, counselling and coaching, with a specific focus on interviewing skills. To ensure that students were able to apply these skills to a level considered appropriate for industry standards, current practitioners were used to assess and critique students’ performance on an interview conducted as part of a role-play simulation. In this way the assessment also met the requirements of the University’s LiWC policy whilst at the same time providing improved learning outcomes for the students.

The unit co-ordinator together with a curriculum designer and an instructional designer in the Faculty of Business and Law worked on the design of the assessment task so that it met the desired learning outcomes. A solution based around the gateway functionality and the reflection feature in the institutional ePortfolio application - PebblePad - was devised which provided a means for practitioners to participate in the assessment easily and efficiently. Students digitally record their interview simulation and upload it to PebblePad. This recording is attached to a reflection form where students respond to a series of reflection prompts provided by the teacher. Through this process, students are able to comment on their performance. Industry practitioners currently working in a role requiring consulting, counselling or coaching skills are given access to the students’ recordings and literature review which they review and post comments on via the gateway. The participation of current practitioners is considered essential to the student learning experience as it provides them with “real world” feedback.

Students work in pairs for this learning activity and their first task is to decide on the area they wish to learn more about. This can be in the area of consulting, counselling or coaching, with students deciding on a specific topic within one of these areas. They then identify a Human Resources (HR) practitioner within an organisation to interview to develop an understanding of how the HR practitioner handles a counselling, consulting or coaching situation with a workplace employee. With the help of the teacher, the students develop questions to ask the HR practitioner about their chosen area so that they can understand what occurs in the workplace and how this compares with theory. The first point where industry practitioners are involved in the learning activity is when the students interview the HR practitioner. After completing the interview session, the students then delve into literature in their chosen topic and relate theory with practice. The students complete a literature review, including their findings from the interview with the HR practitioner, which they upload to PebblePad. Once they have received feedback from their teacher on the literature review, the students then work on crafting a one-to-one interview script that fits an ideal role-play of a consulting, counselling or coaching situation they have researched.

The second point of contact students have with industry practitioners is when a panel of industry experts is given access to the work students have uploaded to PebblePad. These industry practitioners specialize in either consulting, counselling or coaching and their role in the assessment is to close the feedback loop and to critique students' performance in the interview role-play. Students are matched to industry practitioners according to the practitioners' expertise and the area of interest that the students have chosen. The experts provide some structured feedback while unstructured comments allow the practitioner to provide insights from their experience on how their roles, interview questions and the way it is handled in particular industries are done in practice.

Using PebblePad to Scaffold Assessment and Facilitate Industry Engagement

The rationale for using PebblePad as the delivery mechanism rather than the institutional Learning Management System (LMS) was to provide the students with a flexible system that facilitates reflecting upon their experiences, while at the same time providing them with a means for interacting with industry experts. PebblePad also provided the ability to engage industry experts to provide feedback on the student's recorded role-play without them needing to have institutional accounts, which would have been the case if the LMS was used. This in turn made getting access to the assessments very easy for the industry experts.

PebblePad is often thought of as just an ePortfolio application. However, it is also a personal learning space that allows for:

- the aggregation of digital items;

- users to participate in online communities and engage in dialogue with a variety of colleagues, peers and professionals in a secure, password protected environment; and
- an institutional online space, called a ‘gateway’, to be easily set up where users can share items they create and allow others in the same gateway to view them for a variety of purposes, including assessment or review.

To scaffold the activity, a webfolio template was developed. The webfolio tool in PebblePad is a means for students to create an evidence-based website where pictures, movies, audio or links to external references can be attached. The webfolio template created for this task contained a number of forms for the students to document their progress and upload evidence to. Templates are easily accessible to students via the gateway. To get started the students only need to select the ‘copy and publish’ button within the gateway to access the webfolio template in their own asset store. After this, any changes made to their version of the webfolio are immediately published to the gateway. The gateway is illustrated in Figure 1.

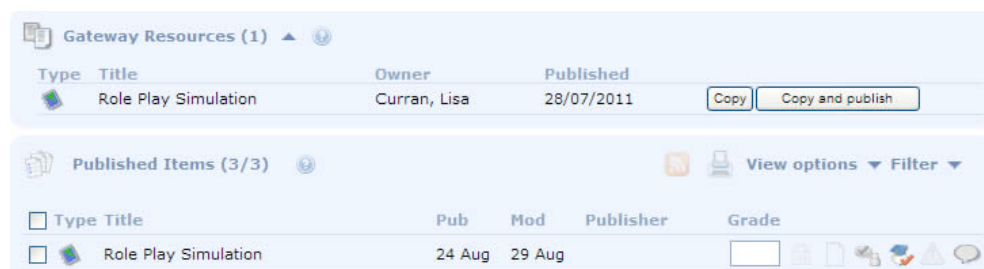


Figure 1. The gateway set up in PebblePad for the assessment task.

About the assessment task

There are several discrete activities in the “Role-play Simulation Assessment.” The first set of activities require the students to work in pairs to complete components in the webfolio template described above, which they access from PebblePad. Students are also required to reflect on their choices made during these activities. After completing the first set of activities, students will have:

- found a partner to work with and decided on whether their interview simulation will be a counselling, consulting or coaching scenario;
- developed interview questions for an industry practitioner working in a relevant role based on their research on a specific issue that clients may present with;
- interviewed the industry practitioner and used their responses to develop a script for a role-play about the chosen issue or situation; and

- recorded the role-play, completed a structured reflection on the activity and uploaded both the audio of the role-play and the reflection to their gateway for external review.

The remaining activities require students to demonstrate that they can recognise their strengths and areas for development. With these activities they also reflect on their learning experience by first reviewing the feedback received from the external reviewer (industry expert) and then responding by reflecting on the feedback itself and how they could apply it to their initial planning of their role-play.

Chickering and Gamson's (1987) seven principles of effective learning were incorporated into the design of the assessment task and tools provided to students to support them in completing the task. These principles have been successfully applied to online and web-based courses (e.g., Arbaugh & Hornik, 2006; Billings, Connors & Skiba, 2001; Thurmond, Wambach, Connors & Frey, 2002). The first principle encourages contact between students and faculty. For this assessment task, the gateway functionality in PebblePad was used to facilitate interaction between students and the industry partner. Reciprocity and co-operation between students, the second principle, was built into the design by having students work in pairs to complete the assessment task. This required negotiating how the task would be completed, who would do what, setting timelines, etc.

Use of active learning techniques is the third principle (Chickering & Gamson, 1987), which for this task was addressed by including a role-play in the assessment task. Role-play is an active learning technique that provides opportunities for students to apply concepts, solve problems, and develop leadership skills (Rubin & Hebert, 1998; Venable, 2001). It can also increase student interest and consolidate previous learning (Joyner & Young, 2006). In this course 'Consulting and Counselling', through role-play and the activities associated with it, students were able to teach each other and to understand and apply complex concepts in a simulated context. This in turn allows students to develop their own authority and knowledge, while at the same time developing an appreciation for the subject matter.

The principles relating to feedback and time on task (Chickering & Gamson, 1987) were also addressed in the design of the assessment. Students were able to get feedback from the industry partner about their performance on the task and to reflect on this as part of the learning process. The structured nature of the assignment, the instructions given to the students in PebblePad and the use of templates (e.g., the webportfolio and reflection form) ensured that they were clear about what needed to be done and when. Chickering and Gamson (1987) also include communicating high expectations as one of their principles of good practice. In this assessment task, high expectations were created by students being aware that their work was to be assessed by a current practitioner and that it would be judged against industry standards. Finally, the principle relating to respecting diverse talents and ways of learning was embedded in this assessment by having several aspects to the assessment

which included not just the role-play, but a literature review and reflections about the task.

The role of industry practitioners

For the three semesters that this assessment has been used, industry practitioners known to the subject co-ordinator have been approached to be involved in the review of the audio recordings of students' role-play. Reviewers have been recruited based on their areas of expertise, so that practitioners whose principle roles involve either consulting, counselling or coaching are invited to be involved in the role-play assessment. A total of three industry reviewers with between 25 and 30 years of experience in their field participated each semester, reviewing between 10 and 15 role-plays each, with role-plays being 12 minutes in length maximum. Reviewers were paid for their time based on how many reviews they conducted.

The external reviewers gain access to the gateway via a web address and a password. Once they log into the gateway they can then review the role-play component of the task. A feedback form is provided along with a comments dialogue box to support the process. In addition to technical information provided to them on how to set up access to the gateway and review the role-plays, the reviewers are also sent a two-page handout by the co-ordinator. This handout provides a rationale for the assessment task and describes their role as industry experts in providing feedback to the students. In this handout they are asked to provide feedback in PebblePad by:

- listening to the audio recording,
- reading the students' report, and
- providing feedback using the online form.

Reviewers do not provide a grade for the role-play – this is determined by the tutor once students have completed the second reflection. In providing their feedback, they are told that they can write as much or as little as they think is appropriate. However, it is stressed that sharing their insights as practitioners would be valuable, as would pointing students to further material. Comments on their analysis and suggestions about other things they could improve are also encouraged.

Evaluation of the outcomes

For the second semester cohort in 2012, after the assessment task had been reviewed and feedback provided by the industry practitioner, students were invited to complete a short survey on the assessment task. This survey consisted of 20 statements relating to aspects of the task including usability of the software, the resources provided, the application of theory to practice, the provision of feedback and the value of the activity. Students were asked to rate each statement thinking about their experience using MyePortfolio (PebblePad) to complete the assignment for this unit using a 5-point response scale (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree).

Student sample. The total enrolment in the unit for this semester was 60 students, with 23 students completing the online survey, representing approximately 40% of the student cohort for that semester. Overall, responses indicated that students felt that this was a positive learning experience. In particular, as the descriptive statistics for each item provided in Table 1 indicate, they agreed that the manual provided was helpful, they could access all the required links in PebblePad, the assignment helped them to put theory into practice, the feedback from industry experts was valuable and that they could see their progress and improve with feedback. They also tended to agree that they improved their knowledge and skills relevant to the unit through the activity, that the reflections were beneficial to their learning and that the technology platform was easy to navigate.

Evaluating the Learning Experience

Evaluation of this assessment task has focussed on usability aspects associated with PebblePad as well as any improvement in learning outcomes for students as a result of this change to the assessment. Trialling this assessment model has highlighted the successes and challenges associated with using the ePortfolio concept as an external engagement system. Through the use of this tool, it should be possible for students to manage their learning by completing the assessment requirement, posting the assessment artefact for feedback from industry persons relevant to this unit of study, then reflecting on how they could have performed that activity better. In this way the assessment-feedback loop includes teaching staff, industry practitioners and the students themselves. The evaluation of the pilot by both students and the industry practitioners highlights the enhanced learning outcomes that can be achieved and the benefits to students in terms developing their skills and confidence for future practice.

Table 1.

Descriptive statistics for evaluation questionnaire items

Statement	Mean	SD
1. I found it easy to navigate through the assignment materials in MyePortfolio (Pebble Pad)	3.9	1.2
2. The Manual was helpful for completing the assignment	4.0	1.1
3. The interface was easy to use	3.7	1.2
4. I could access all the linked resources easily.	4.0	1.1
5. The content for the assignment was relevant, appropriate and clear.	3.7	0.9
6. The assessed elements of the Role-play were appropriate for the learning objectives	3.7	0.9
7. I learnt to analyse theory in the Role-play Simulation	4.0	1.0
8. I learnt to apply theory to practice in the Role-play Simulation	4.0	0.8
9. I was able to take my theoretical knowledge and apply it to practice in this assessment.	4.1	0.6

10. I value the feedback from the Industry Experts	4.3	0.6
11. Feedback from the industry expert showed whether my learning was practical.	3.9	0.9
12. Feedback from the industry expert showed whether my learning was current.	3.9	0.8
13. Feedback on this assignment helped me to understand if my skills are at an industry appropriate standard.	3.6	1.1
14. The online learning activities improved my knowledge about Consulting and Counselling.	3.7	1.1
15. The online learning activities improved my skills relating to Consulting and Counselling.	3.7	1.1
16. I was able to see my progress and improve with feedback.	4.1	0.8
17. I found the MyePortfolio a useful tool for completing this assessment.	3.3	1.3
18. I think this type of online tool helps make working with a partner easier.	3.4	1.3
19. The reflections in this assignment helped me to understand what I learnt through completing this assignment	3.7	1.0
20. The technical aspects (e.g., using MyePortfolio) made this assignment more difficult than it should have been (Reverse scored)	3.2	1.4
21. The technical aspects (using MyePortfolio) made this assignment more difficult than it should have been (Reverse scored)	3.2	1.4

Although this was not really reflected in the survey responses, a number of students and one of the reviewers experienced technical problems that detracted from the experience. In particular, some students had problems uploading their audio, with the application appearing to save the work but it not being visible to the reviewer via the gateway. This created some frustration for the students and reviewers alike and required problem solving by the instructional designer to manage. Similarly, there were some issues with the industry reviewers setting up their access to the gateway which slowed down the review process. However, with each semester that this assessment is used, the kinks are being ironed out, which allows us to anticipate and hopefully prevent some problems experienced previously. This is important for the continued co-operation and involvement of industry experts. Although they are paid for their time, the remuneration is not usually sufficient to make up for time and effort wasted due to technical problems.

The interview role-play assessment task and industry engagement has been running for three semesters now in this unit. During this time the coordinator has observed that student learning and engagement has significantly improved in a number of areas. First, students are more active in identifying their interests and the area they want to learn more about. They engage with the lecturer and tutor through PebblePad which allows them to focus on their assessment and keep their conversations tracked which assists them in their learning. Working in pairs is also a change which under normal circumstances

is a high risk, particularly when assessment is involved. However, for this assessment task it has been very successful. This could be due to the way in which students found a partner for the task, which was facilitated through an in-class activity, and which helped students to partner with someone with similar goals and interests. It could also have been as a result of the way that the PebblePad resources are set up such that only one student has sign-in for the pair but together the pair managed the required tasks. This means that students need to co-operate closely with one another to successfully complete the assessment for which they are being jointly evaluated. The step-by-step instructions provided for the tasks also help them keep on track and to meet submission deadlines.

In their reflections students highly commended the industry practitioner's feedback and found that their learning from the preliminary investigation, delving into literature and writing a script and then conducting role-play, stimulating and useful. They also commented that they became more aware of their verbal communication, tone and expressions through this exercise and this built a lot of confidence. Furthermore, the reflection piece that the students completed brought a conclusion to the learning experience. Students reported that they enjoyed being able to review comments from industry, gain assessment feedback from the tutors and having the final say in how they think they performed, what they learnt and what could be improved.

Summary

As a model for industry engagement, this assessment task shows how to use technology to effectively and efficiently create opportunities for industry experts to be involved. In this case the technology platform provided a streamlined way for students to upload their work and for it to be reviewed by specialists in the field. The gateway functionality and reflection forms in PebblePad were used to structure the activity in a way that facilitated students achieving the desired learning outcomes. The role-play and the associated activities students complete for this assessment are designed to extend their understanding of interviewing techniques and skills, promote interaction with peers through small group work and enhance students' knowledge and confidence. The role-play requires simulation of a consulting, counselling or coaching scenario researched by the students and incorporates active learning to promote a deeper approach to learning. The inclusion of industry experts as reviewers also provides valuable feedback that students use to reflect on their performance and to plan for future improvement. The approach of e-learning, engagement and involvement with industry partners was definitely supported through the use of PebblePad's gateway feature.

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