# Understanding Students' Experiences of e-PDP and the Factors that Shape their Attitudes

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Using an action research approach, e-PDP (electronically-supported Personal Development Planning) was embedded within an undergraduate psychology curriculum at an English university for more than two years. e-PDP was embedded in three ways: (a) information literacy micro-tasks, (b) blogs of learning activities, and (c) eportfolios submitted at the end of each academic year in which the students assessed their experiences and development across all units. This paper focuses on findings from the qualitative analysis of a sample of interviews with students. A system of five interconnected categories was identified at the center of which were the students' *attitudes* towards reflective writing and the construction of eportfolios. These attitudes were closely related to a perception of *purpose* (many different purposes, but also lack of purpose), as well as *technical aspects* (experiences of using the software), the students' willingness (or reluctance) to *disclose personal aspects* in their eportfolios, and the *guidance* received from tutors.

PDP (Personal Development Planning) was originally conceived of as a framework for higher education institutions in the United Kingdom (UK) with the aim of giving learners more control over their learning and development through reflection and planning (National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, 1997; Quality Assurance Agency, 2001). PDP has also been linked to employability in an attempt to provide a life-long learning dimension and highlight the practical relevance of education for the learner (e.g., Yorke, 2007). Many initiatives have taken place in the UK and other countries with varied outcomes (see Gough, Kiwan, Sutcliffe, Simpson, & Houghton, 2003). While conceptual critiques of the notion of PDP are indeed valuable (e.g., Clegg, 2004), practitioners often report of significant numbers of students and teaching staff that dismiss it as taking up precious time and having no real value (e.g., Blumhof, 2005). Finally, the switch to digital technology (Virtual Learning Environments, or VLEs, and ePortfolios) offered many exciting possibilities, but also introduced further challenges (Strivens & Ward, 2010).

For this project, PDP is understood as comprising activities carried out by the learner, but supported by tutors, of the following types: *planning* (i.e., deciding what to learn and for what purpose) such as goal-setting and producing action plans; *recording significant learning experiences* (e.g., learning logs); *reflecting* on the success of these activities (in order to better understand personal processes of learning and development); and *revising one's plan* in order to be more productive next time. These activities are supposed to enhance the development of transferable/generic skills as well as the learning of subject-related knowledge. At the University of Bedfordshire, these two important outcomes are part of the notion of learner development, but the latter also includes awareness and motivation (Atlay, Gaitán, &

Kumar, 2008; Bridges – Centre for Excellence for Teaching and Learning, 2007). e-PDP refers to the use of information technology, mostly in the form of eportfolio software, to support the PDP related activities mentioned above. PebblePad was adopted across the university based partly on the results of a pilot study conducted on the use of the Blackboard platform for producing eportfolios with students of computing and psychology (Gaitán, Manton, & Jankowska, 2007, 2008). In addition to several perceived weaknesses of the Blackboard platform, such as rigidity in its handling of images, it became apparent that it did not explicitly support a reflective style of learning.

PDP in the Psychology Department has evolved over the years. Initially, it was closely aligned to the role of personal tutors who for several years met weekly with groups of 15-20 students in the first and second years of the undergraduate degree (called in the UK Level 1 and 2; the final year is referred to as Level 3), an approach similar to that described by Savory (2007). Paper portfolios were produced at the end of the academic year and were not compulsory. Gradually, the personal tutor groups disappeared, and in 2008, following an institutionally-led curriculum review, skills-training was included throughout the curriculum, with a strong emphasis on employability (McMurray, Roberts, Robertson, & Teoh, 2011). While electronic portfolios had been offered as an option in 2007, in 2008, they were formally assessed for the first time with a weight on the grade in specific units at Levels 1 (PSY001-2 Introduction to Research Methods), 2 (PSY001-2 Social Processes & Lifespan Development) and 3 (PSY000-3 Research Dissertation). The process of relating PDP to the psychology curriculum could be described, in Atlay's terms (2006), as moving from an "additional model" (where a PDP strand runs parallel to the curriculum, but separate from it) to an "integrated"

one (where PDP activities are incorporated in individual units), but not quite having achieved full "embeddedness" (PDP informing the learning in all units in the curriculum). While some pilot studies in the UK, such as those that were part of the Individualized Support for Learning through ePortfolios (ISLE) Project (ISLE, 2007) and others (e.g., Brett, Lawton, & Purnell, 2008; Frith, 2007), provided valuable examples of embedding e-PDP: (a) they have done so in PDP-dedicated modules/units, (b) mostly at Level 1, and (c) the activities that were selected for enhancement by eportfolios do not refer directly to subject-specific learning.

In view of the above, an action research project was designed to explore the following research questions:

1. How can e-PDP be embedded in a curriculum so that it is closely linked to subject-related learning?
2. To what extent will students at Levels 1, 2 and 3 engage with e-PDP, through the use of eportfolio technology, when it is embedded in the units they are studying?
3. How does engagement with e-PDP embedded in a curriculum contribute to subject-specific learning as specified in the learning outcomes, as well as learner development as constructed by the learners themselves?

## Method

### Approach

Action research (Lewin, 1946; Reason & Bradbury, 2008) was adopted for this project. It is "a form of research carried out by practitioners into their own practice" (Kemmis, 2003, p. 177) with the aim of understanding these practices and the contexts in which they take place in order to make improvements. It entails designing an intervention and putting in place procedures to document the process as well as the outcomes in order to determine whether its aims were achieved and to what extent (i.e., planning). The next stage is the implementation of the intervention (i.e., action) followed by monitoring of its effects (i.e., observation). This is followed by systematic evaluation of the experience which allows the researcher to understand the extent to which the outcomes were achieved or not (i.e., reflection). The understanding gained through this sequence will enable him/her to make adjustments to the intervention that will be implemented again in the next cycle. In our project, systematic monitoring and collection of data (i.e., observation) occurred alongside the implementation; therefore, the process can be understood as comprising

three stages repeated in two cycles, each lasting one academic year (see Table 1).

To summarize, the intervention focused on the micro-tasks, blogs and eportfolios, all of which were to be strongly linked to learning subject-specific knowledge. The micro-tasks related to information literacy (i.e., use of electronic databases to search and retrieve relevant sources for an assignment), and were attached to two units at Level 1 (Psy001-1 Foundations to Psychology) and Level 2 (PSY002-2 Biological and Cognitive Psychology). These tasks included considerable reflective components. The blogs were introduced in two units: PSY003-1 Counseling and Interpersonal Psychology (Level 1) and PSY001-2 Social Processes and Lifespan Development (Level 2). While the former focused on exercises related to counseling training, the latter focused on group work over the duration of the unit. Students were required to produce eportfolios at Levels 1, 2, and 3.

### Participants, Sources of Data, and Ethics

All students enrolled in a psychology undergraduate degree program were exposed to the intervention in the sense that the micro-tasks, the blogs, and the eportfolios were essential parts of the units they took, and general statistics on engagement were obtained (e.g., submissions). All students were invited to sign consent forms. A total of 112 students signed consent forms over the two years of the project. 107 consented to having their coursework analyzed, 111 agreed to their eportfolios being analyzed, and 71 to be interviewed.

However, this paper will not attempt to evaluate the success of any of these activities or the quality of the outcomes (for an evaluation of the first year of the project, see Gaitán & Robertson, [2009]). Instead, we will focus on students' experiences of e-PDP, in particular, the construction of eportfolios using PebblePad.

The source of data were 11 interviews about PDP and eportfolios carried out with five students at the end of the first year of the project – Helen, Basmah, Ali (studying at Level 1), and Kate and Ralph (Level 3) – and four further students at the end of the second year – Tracey and Sue (Level 2) and Mohammed and Sarah (Level 3). Helen and Basmah were interviewed again at the end of the second year. All names have been changed. The interviews were semi-structured in nature with the research assistant starting with the general question "Overall, what was your experience of using eportfolios like?" and then went on to explore engagement (e.g., continuous/sporadic use, enjoyment, role of reflection), technical aspects, support and training received, use of specific tools (e.g., action plans, blogs, etc.), the relation of the information literacy micro-task with the eportfolio (Levels 1 and 2), and feedback from tutors. There was no standard list of

Table 1
*Activities Undertaken as Part of the Action Research Process Repeated Over Two Cycles (2008/9 and 2009/10)*

| Stage | Activities |
|---|---|
| A. Embedding e-PDP in the units involved (planning) | 1. Identifying key learning processes in several units of the new Psychology Curriculum 2008. |
| | 2. Designing micro-tasks involving e-PDP to support key learning processes. Encouraging the use of blogs. |
| | 3. Designing guidelines for the construction of eportfolios. These portfolios were supposed to document the learner's (learning and work) experiences, her reflections and development, as well as progress on her employability. |
| | 4. Designing assessment of eportfolios: specific marking criteria for each level to match the expected learning outcomes for each level. |
| B. Implementation included (action and observation) | 5. Implementing micro-tasks and blogs in the selected units. |
| | 6. Supporting the construction of eportfolios and their submission in the designated unit. |
| | 7. Supporting the assessment of eportfolios by staff using the marking criteria designed by the researchers. |
| C. Evaluation included (reflection) | 8. Assessing student engagement. Attendance records and statistics of use of the VLE (Blackboard), as well as completion/submission of micro-tasks and eportfolios through PebblePad will be used as measures of engagement. |
| | 9. Assessing of learning and development in terms of the learners' academic performance, as an indicator of achievement of the learning outcomes, as well as the learners' perspective expressed in one-to-one interviews. |
| | 10. Evaluating the marking criteria for eportfolios: Researchers-Tutors record their impressions of using the marking criteria. |

questions or interview schedule. The role of the interviewer was to encourage the participants to describe their experience in their own terms and as clearly as possible (probing and asking for clarification).

Particular care was given to ethical issues that could arise from the fact that the researcher was also the students' lecturer, something that is common in action research in educational settings. For instance, students could believe that, by signing a consent form, they could expect preferential treatment or higher grades in return for helping their lecturer. On the other hand, they could think that their grades could suffer if they did not volunteer. Several safeguards were put in place, such as having a research assistant collect the consent forms so that the researcher would not know the identities of the students who signed the consent forms. The research assistant anonymized data as much as possible before the researcher received them. More importantly, the research assistant conducted all the interviews after the marking of all assignments, including the eportfolios, had been completed.

**Data Analysis**

Although some parts of the evaluation involved numerical data (e.g., attendance, submission, and grades), most of the data were qualitative (e.g., interviews and students' reflections contained in their eportfolios). The interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Pidgeon, 1996; Pidgeon & Henwood, 1997) in three stages: (1) open coding, (2) generating and managing categories systematically (i.e., axial coding), and (3) building a grounded theory around a core category. Taxonomies were generated to group codes under a key category (e.g., technical issues). Comparative analysis was used to identify opposite categories (e.g., positive/negative attitudes) or dimensions (e.g., from absence of purpose for producing an eportfolio to having a limited purpose to being a truly purposeful activity). Links between categories were identified and examined further against the data. This led to the realization that the main categories were intertwined aspects of the students' experiences of working with e-PDP that influence each other but with a distinct 'core category' (attitudes to PDP and eportfolios). This system constitutes a grounded theory, but it is proposed as a tentative (substantive) theory. The researcher and the research assistant worked jointly on the open coding stage to ensure consensus regarding all the material coded. The researchers gave particular attention to reflexivity in order to make explicit ways in which their commitments to beliefs and values, their institutional

roles, their disciplinary perspectives, and their pedagogical relations with the participants may have influenced the research and vice versa.

### Results

After two years, this action research project can claim modest results: (a) micro-tasks aimed at providing training on information literacy at Levels 1 and 2 were supported through PebblePad in the first year and continued throughout the second year, but no new micro-tasks were designed; (b) a journal of counseling exercises which is part of a Level 1 unit was done as a blog in PebblePad by many students, but marked on paper and while students were encouraged to write a log of group work experiences in the Level 2 unit using the blogging facility in PebblePad, this was not a requirement; and (c) the numbers of students at all levels who submitted eportfolios at the end of the second year increased compared to the first year. Overall, 80% of all students submitted an eportfolio at the end of 2009/10, 26.3% more than in 2008/9 (see Table 2). The fact that eportfolios were made compulsory and were formally assessed for the first time in 2009/10 seems to have made an important difference. However, this paper will now focus on the 11 interviews with the students on the process of producing eportfolios rather than the products themselves.

### Key Categories that Emerged through Axial Coding

Five main categories subsumed all the codes used to interpret the transcribed interviews: attitudes, purpose, disclosure, technical issues, and guidance. In order to preserve as much as possible the meaning of the categories as expressed in the interviews, quotations are included throughout this section.

Table 2
*Submissions of ePortfolios Over the*
*Two Years of the Project*

|  | Year 1 (2008-9) | Year 2 (2009-10) |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Level 1 | 49 (50%) (n=96) | 134 (75%) (n=184) |
| Level 2 | 64 (72%) (n=89) | 66 (91.7%) (n=72) |
| Level 3 | 8 (11%) (n=70) | 74 (86%) (n=86) |
| Total | 121 (53.8%) N=225 | 274 (80.1 %) N=342 |

**Attitudes.** The first category refers to quite strong expressions of positive or negative attitudes toward PebblePad and eportfolios. Helen, interviewed in Level 1, said: "I have a very strong opinion against PebblePad," and a year later, "Yeah, they're still very strong [opinions] against it." On the other hand, Tracey (Level 2) pointed out at the start of the interview, "I'm like the biggest waver of the PebblePad flag. I love PebblePad. I love portfolios." She was quick to add, "I've always liked English and stuff and I've done quite well in my GCSE's and writing to me is like second nature." This is indeed an important clue: enjoying writing and having the ability to write.

Sue (Level 2) offers an important insight into her peers' negative attitudes and their source:

> Everyone hates it. I think I'm the only one that puts my hand up and says "It's alright, I don't mind using it," but I think the general thing is everyone hates doing it because it's time consuming and because everyone rushes to do it at the last minute.

However, in her view, this attitude comes from the fact that reflective writing competes with other urgent matters:

> [B]ecause at times (when) you are overloaded with work, the last thing you want to be doing is writing about yourself 'cos all that you feel is, I'm not going to pass, I'm not going to do this, so why am I writing about myself when I've got a big old essay to write or a massive exam to prepare for.

Finally, Sue provides some insight into how attitudes towards reflective writing and the production of an eportfolio may change:

> It might seem tedious at the start . . . So, I think it's, although at first it's like "why am I doing this?", I'm talking about myself, which no one feels comfortable doing, once you get in the swing of it and you actually realize OK, this is helping me, it becomes a lot more creative and a lot more better to use, I think.

So, it is after persevering and practicing that the task becomes enjoyable and "creative." Hence, what enabled the change was the sense of mastery ("getting into the swing of it") and the increase in self-awareness (of strengths and weaknesses) in relation to the task at hand, which led to the realization that "this is helping me."

**Purpose of eportfolios.** The students' views on the purpose of e-portfolios were grouped using a simple classification describing them as (a) purposeful, (b)

having some purpose, but expressing some concern, and finally (c) as lacking all purpose.

In the first category, some students understand that eportfolios can capture their development in general terms (e.g., "It is so you can see yourself grow between three years" [Basmah, Level 1]), or the acquisition of a specific skill (e.g., "I can understand that you would need to show how you can manipulate another software" [Helen, Level 2]). The former student mentioned personal growth, which can be observed throughout the three years and possibly implied that a sense of pride is derived from this, but there is no further aim. The latter refers to the possibility of verifying that students have mastered yet another piece of technology, a comment that may contain an ironic element, given the general content of her interview. However, in the second year of the project, we were surprised to find a student (Tracey) who could articulate a wide range of purposes worth examining in detail. The first purpose for her is to create a memory you can go back to: "Like not only to yourself cos you can think 'oh yeah I did enjoy that,' or 'oh yeah I remember when I done that,' you can sort of remember stuff." The second, more important, purpose is to support her learning in different ways: (a) she identifies what works and what does not work, (b) focuses on instances of poor performance and identify possible causes and (c) reflects on the results in terms of goal-setting and formulation of a strategy (e.g., the need to read in advance of lectures).

Other students are also aware of the value of monitoring their progress for goal-setting. For example Sue (Level 2):

> I definitely think . . . if you actually spend time doing it every week or every other week writing about your units and whatever, it does show you what you need to be focusing on more to get better grades and what you need to be doing less of in terms of ok . . . what to improve on.

In addition to using PebblePad tools to learn from experience, in a way that closely resembles an experiential learning cycle, Tracey used her eportfolio to *integrate knowledge* from different areas: "That's what I do, like I used criminal stuff from Social Processes and Social Processes (a Level 2 unit) in Research Methods. I just mash them all together. I just mix them all up, but I think writing about stuff does help my learning."

The third purpose for using PebblePad is to learn to reflect, and therefore, it prepares you for the future. Tracey is aware that becoming a reflective practitioner is a future career requirement: "I want to get into forensic psychology and they require a three year portfolio from what you've done at the end of unit

through your masters and stuff. So this is setting me up; it's preparing me." Sue sees the similarity with appraisals she has had to do at work, only this is more personal, and she understands that the marking of the eportfolio is more on how you reflect rather than what you achieve.

Finally, Tracey described a fourth purpose that is to *communicate with her tutors*. This is born out of a need to express what she is doing and be acknowledged for it:

> [I]t's sort of like showing to them what you're doing and then how you're doing as a student. . . . Because I feel like I do a lot as a student to push myself to get the good grades to go to the talks, writing this and that and it's sort of like had my tutors not read that that I've written in my portfolio they wouldn't know I was doing it. . . . [I]t's like a "look at what I've done, please acknowledge this," sort of thing.

At the heart of this is a sense of pride in all the things that she is doing and the effort she is putting into her studies. Tracey also aims to give feedback to tutors in order to help improve things.

Other students, however, see eportfolios as having some purpose, but this is limited. Ralph, a Level 3 student interviewed in the second year of the project, noted:

> [W]e just saw it as a requirement of some bureaucratic process rather than some useful kind of workload. . . . [It is about] engendering reflection about how you work and making people think about the task they undertake and how they could make them more efficient or effective. Then if you already do that to an extent, it's sometimes more onerous.

So, although for Ralph there might be some benefit in doing an eportfolio (planning one's learning), this is not necessary after the learning has taken place.

Kate, another student from Ralph's cohort, stated that, "I used it as very much a record of academic achievement and work and employment history and things like that. I wrote very little personal information on it." Kate's statement links to the feeling of intrusion that is referred to below.

Finally, we have statements that express *no purpose* in using PebblePad or producing an eportfolio. This is related to a perception that there are no explicit aims or criteria. For instance:

> . . . there is no, well, not that I have seen, maybe it is my fault for not looking, defined criteria for how

whatever you do put in there is valued or graded or granulated. . . . I had to define my own goals.

Additionally, some students, such as Kate, might feel that the effort required is not justified compared to what they get in return, "Because a lot of the time it's not marked, but you have to submit it to get an overall mark and it just feels like added work for nothing work really." Stronger statements include: "It's the last thing that's helped me with my academic studies" (Helen, Level 1), and, "I do think PDP's a waste of time. . . . They say you need them for job interviews and stuff, but I've never ever been asked for one" (Kate, Level 3).

Except for Ali (Level 1), and Sue and Tracey who were discussed above, the rest of the interviews analyzed did not seem to contain very elaborate notions of purpose associated with eportfolios or completely deny any sense of purpose.

**Disclosure**. The ease with which students like Tracey write about themselves and the problems they encounter must be considered exceptional. In contrast, several students expressed problems with the idea of reflective writing, which is essential to the broader notion of PDP. For many, reflection entails a personal element and the idea that it will be read by someone else generates discomfort: "I don't do reflection . . . I don't like writing personal things" (Kate). While students can be reassured that the readers of their reflection will only be tutors, this is still vague and anonymous (which tutor?). This is expressed clearly again by Kate: "I don't actually know who (is) going to (read them)," and Ali: "the intrusive factor actually hindered one's personal development." At one level, one can argue that students are not required to make personal disclosures and can limit themselves to learning experiences, and therefore have complete control over what they include or don't include; however, at another level, their goals, their insights and reflections on their learning process are nevertheless personal. Therefore, the issue of disclosure is indeed a very complex and deep issue that must be explored in greater depth.

**Technical issues.** This theme included some statements regarding advantages of the software (e.g. "PebblePad is a very good thing because our tutors can access our assets if we allow them to" [Basmah, Level 1]). Helen, at the end of the first year, said that PebblePad kept crashing and was not compatible with Windows Vista (however, this seems to have been more to do with her machine or an installation issue). A close friend with knowledge of IT had strongly criticized the software in the first year. Helen also pointed out that it was slow. However, at the same time, Helen said she "would have given [it] eight out of 10" and admitted that, apart from the crashing when she tried to upload things, "It did work whenever I needed it. Yeah, that

was not bad, the interface, that was alright, I managed to do everything, very easy, not a big deal at all." Helen stressed that everything she can do in PebblePad she can do in Word and e-mail (e.g., archiving, etc.). At the end of the second year, Helen still did not like it but did not raise any further technical issues.

The opposite experience was illustrated in Tracey's interview: She highlighted integration as an advantage:

> You can keep it all in one place. Because you just log in and it's all there, you haven't got to go through files and folders and what did I name it? And stuff like that, so I think that's good.

Tracy also noted PebblePad's simplicity: "I love PebblePad; I'm like the biggest supporter of PebblePad. I think it's so good cos it's easy, it's just four little things, it's not all big and complicated." She also enjoyed personalizing her portfolio:

> I like my homepage, like I changed my homepage and it's all yellow with pink stripes, it's all yellow and I've got a picture of me and my friends with Bandura and I like my homepage, it's quite cute and tidy. It's very me, you know having control over your own homepage is good.

Both Helen and Tracey are very technically able, but had totally opposite attitudes to PebblePad as software. This suggests a kind of user-software fit, but it is possible that this cannot be entirely separated from the perception of purpose of PDP and eportfolios. Sue also thought PebblePad was an easy platform to use: "An online website where you can record what you want and when you want it by, so it's basic." However, she wished PebblePad were more compatible with mobile smart phones.

**Guidance.** Guidance is not dealt with in detail in this paper, because students did not tend to mention it in the interviews, except to point out that they were aware of their tutors' views on PDP and eportfolios: Helen in the first year said "One of them was, very very much enthusiastic. The rest were not bothered and one specifically did not like it at all."

In the second year of the project, tutors marked the eportfolios using the marking criteria expressed in grids or rubrics that varied slightly from one level to the next. Written instructions (but not formal training) were also provided on how to enter comments on the eportfolios themselves (i.e., on specific pages and general ones). These comments constitute the most efficient form of feedback as the students can see them as soon as the team decides to release the feedback. By contrast, the traditional paper feedback grids filled in by hand cannot be returned within the academic year and have to be handed in at the start of the next academic year. Data

on the feedback provided by markers for the three levels were collected, but due to reliability issues, only the results of Level 1 eportfolios can be presented here. Nevertheless, it is illustrative.

As can be seen in Figure 1, there was considerable variability in the way the markers chose to give feedback. Of the 135 eportfolios submitted at the end of 2009-10, only three had both general comments and comments on the pages. About half had only comments on the pages (51.9%) and over a quarter (27.4%) had only a general comment. Although the best practice may be to write both types of feedback, it could be argued that detailed comments on the pages may be preferable to just a general comment. However, the content of the comments was not analyzed at this stage. In any case, the number of portfolios with no comments (18.5%) raises questions. It was initially assumed that, in all cases, a paper feedback grid would be returned at the start of the next academic year. However, at least two markers later admitted to not having used the grids. It was decided that grids could not be returned to some students and not others.

**Towards a Grounded Theory**

The many links between the key categories clearly indicated that the different aspects of the students' experiences of e-PDP represented by the key categories were inter-related. Most links illustrated explanations offered by the participants of why they held particular attitudes towards e-PDP, and this led to the adoption of attitudes as the core category (see Figure 2). Awareness of the importance of some of the categories explored

above for engaging students in PDP has existed for some time in the higher education sector, as illustrated in the following statement by Miller, Weyers, Cross, Walsh, and Monaghan (2009):

> The process appears to work well for the students when they appreciate its relevance to them personally, consider this type of work as integral to the curriculum, understand the benefit of reflective practice, and realise the value of career planning from an early stage to enhance their employability. It vital that students perceive that staff are committed to the ethos of PDP (p. 33).

Strivens and Ward (2010), referring specifically to eportfolios, also pointed to a diversity of purposes, the importance of guidance, the role of tutors, and the existing tension between ownership and control of the information. They echo Cambridge and Hartley (2010, as cited in Striven & Ward, 2010) who emphasized that among the "things we need to know" are the "psychological processes that support and impede the take-up of ePortfolios for both staff and students" (p. 13). Gough et al. (2003) mapped a large number of studies across 15 countries and in different settings, including higher education, but focused on outcomes rather than the students' experiences of using e-PDP. Therefore, it is hoped that the present study can make a significant contribution towards addressing this need through identifying key aspects of the students' experiences and the relationships among them. The latter are summarized below, once again remaining close to the data.

Figure 1
*Types of Comments Written by Markers on Level 1 ePortfolios (2009/10)*
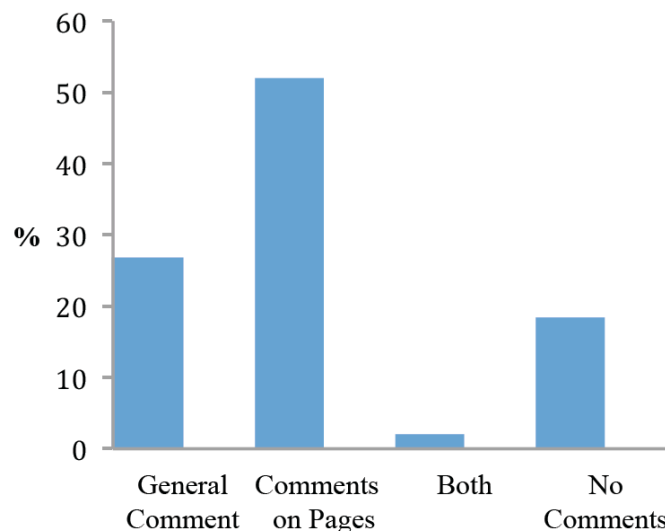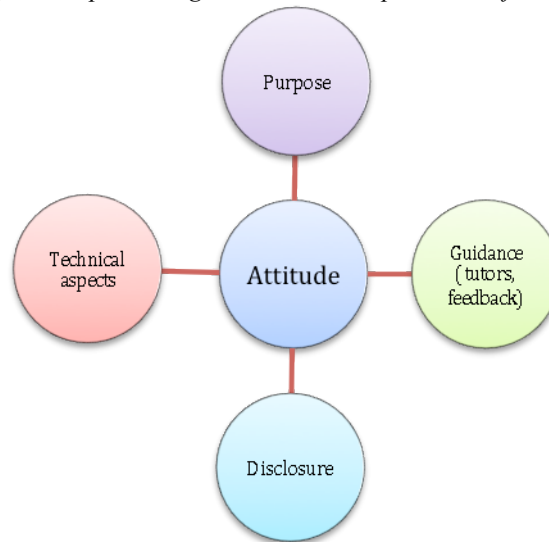
Figure 2
*Main Categories Representing the Students' Experiences of Using ePortfolios*



*Note*. Attitudes Towards e-PDP is the core category with important links to the other categories. The former are affected by the latter.

**Attitudes-technical aspects.** Helen's technical difficulties and frustration experienced when she started to use the software, combined with the criticisms voiced by a friend with expertise in IT, determined her strong negative attitude towards e-PDP which lasted two years, despite having produced outstanding portfolios and obtaining top grades throughout her studies. By contrast, Tracey who, as we saw, had a very positive attitude was very complimentary about the technology and its advantages.

**Attitudes-disclosure.** Some of the students who expressed negative attitudes referred to having to disclose their personal thoughts as a major issue (see Kate and Ali). Conversely, those who have positive attitudes, such as Tracey, may not see it that way. Tracey explained that, for her, writing about her learning was easy, and she did not mind admitting that she was having a problem:

> It's just easier for me to write it all down. Maybe other people are more private and stuff; I'm quite an open person. So writing "I had a really bad day today" doesn't make me upset; I don't feel shy to say that. Some people are too proud to say they don't understand or "I'm struggling," but I'm ok to say "I find this really difficult, can you explain it?" So I think this might have something to do with why other people don't like it.

**Attitudes-guidance.** The staff's views on eportfolios, reflection, and PDP were perceived by students; this was expressed explicitly by Helen. In other words, the staff's willingness to engage with the technology as well as their level of technical competence became apparent to the students. More generally, the perception of lack of clear guidance can be de-motivating. However, it is not clear how to best collect data on the staff's views in order to address them. An attempt was made to ask all teaching staff involved in marking eportfolios to write a short paragraph on the place of reflection in learning in Higher Education and another on their experience of reading and marking eportfolios. Their responses were to be sent by email directly to the research assistant and anonymized before the researchers would see them. However, of 15 members of staff, only one responded, despite two reminders. One colleague raised his concerns regarding this consultation on methodological and ethical grounds, given that the external examiners had recently expressed very positive comments at the examination board. In his opinion, staff would feel compelled to agree with these views.

**Attitudes-purpose.** Purpose, which included the largest number of codes and quotations, is also related to attitudes. Tracey, who had the most positive attitude to e-PDP, was able to articulate a diverse range of purposes served by e-PDP. Sue and Basmah, who also had a positive attitude, expressed clear purposes. Those who saw only a limited purpose or no purpose had negative attitudes towards e-PDP. Finally, in some cases, the recognition that e-PDP has a purpose may not be sufficient to offset the impact of another factor on the student's attitude. For example, in Ali's case, it was

the requirement to disclose: "The concept of an eportfolio is great, but asking students to submit it is counterproductive."

### Conclusions

The analysis of interviews carried out at the end of the first and second years of the project revealed several important aspects of the students' experience of e-PDP which seem to be inter-related (a grounded theory). It seems that students' attitudes to e-PDP are strongly related to both their perception of a purpose for producing an eportfolio as well as technical aspects. We suspect that their attitudes are also affected by the perception of guidance (as absent, appropriate, or taken-for-granted) and the degree to which their tutors support eportfolios. However, there was less evidence of this. Understandably, students might have been reluctant to express criticisms of tutors, or may have taken guidance and support for granted and not mentioned it in the interview. The issue of *disclosure* is an important concern for some students, and it affects their attitudes towards reflective writing, which is at the center of PDP and eportfolios. Authors such as Moon (2001, as cited in Miller et al., 2009) acknowledge that "not all students may find reflection easy when it is introduced as a requirement" (p. 48). This is clearly an issue that requires further investigation since, in reality, it is impossible (and perhaps not desirable) to remove the personal aspect of PDP.

Since the role of tutors (guidance) was only explored here in relation to its impact on the students' attitudes to e-PDP, there is an urgent need to consider it in future research and implementations of e-PDP. Research-wise, it remains to be seen if a similar system of categories represents the tutor's experience of e-PDP. It has been recognized that among the list of "things we need to know" put together by Cambridge et al. (2010, as cited in Strivens et al., 2010) are "how reluctant tutors can be persuaded or encouraged" as well as the "most significant institutional barriers and enablers" (p. 13).

This paper may indeed contain more challenges than solutions. However, it becomes clear that while training and technical support to students is essential, the real driver is the clarity of purpose, institutionally and for the individuals involved (tutors and students). If reflection and ePDP become standard aspects of learning subject-specific knowledge (ePDP fully embedded in the curriculum), and at the same time eportfolios support highly personal re-presentations of the student's achievements, it is likely that more students will engage in these practices and render them meaningful in the terms described above. Perhaps, the challenges are for both staff and students just as much as for the current

academic culture, which often works against reflective learning.

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