Personal Journal Writing and Collaboration Tools to Assist Doctor of Practical Theology (DPT) Students.
School of Arts, Histories and Cultures
Religions and Theology

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Outline

The aim of this document is to act as a specification detailing the provision, ongoing support, maintenance and administration of self-reflection/journal writing and collaboration tools required by students on the Doctor of Practical Theology (DPT) programme, and how these tools could be used to assist an enquiry-based approach to learning.

This report will examine the institutionally supported collaboration tools within the Blackboard VLE and consider some of the freely available, externally provided alternatives and attempt to weigh up the pros and cons of each.

This document will also propose a number of possible approaches to this provision, assess what staff and student training would be required and recommend a possible course of action.

Overview of the DPT

The Doctor of Practical Theology (DPT)[1] is a practice-based research degree aimed at professionals from a range of contexts and institutions across the public, private and voluntary sectors. The course was designed with part-time students in mind, but students can also enrol full-time. Students are expected to draw on their professional, voluntary or ministerial practices to inform their research. The DPT is assessed by means of portfolio work, literature review, research proposal, publishable article and dissertation. Students on this course are expected to keep a reflective journal for at least the first three years in which they are expected to reflect critically on their development as researchers and practitioners, with the expectation that the journal material and this reflective process will have positive effect on students' doctoral theses.

Although the course has been established for a number of years, the potential use of technology to support this group of students has still to be explored, in particular the use of on-line tools to assist core research tasks and to facilitate peer-group identity.

Potentially, technology could enable:

- Students to create their own private on-line journal.
- Students to communicate effectively with their supervisory team and the programme administration.
- Students to debate their research ideas in a supportive environment with their peers and academics.
- The creation of a lasting social network that could extend beyond the end of the programme.

Requirements analysis

Research is required into how a bespoke online learning environment or process can best be tailored to the needs of this group of students and which tools present the best option for the programme in terms of ease of: use, reliability, cost, training, administrative burden, longevity and, ultimately, how the student learning experience can be enhanced.

The following lists describe some of the functional requirements desirable in an online learning environment of this type. A more detailed requirement specification is

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[1] Paraphrased from the application for learning technology support document by Elaine Graham

presented in tabular format at the end of this document where these features are considered in relation to the technical possibilities of each piece of software.

Student requirements

A student on the DPT programme may use an online learning environment to:
- create a reflective journal over three years – possibly for the full five year duration
- keep sensitive areas of this journal private
- create a 'for print' copy of journal material
- communicate with internal and external supervisors
- communicate with programme administration and management
- communicate and discuss research with student peers in a supportive environment
- keep useful information
- find out important programme information
- comment on other students' writing

In addition the student should:
- find the technology easy to use
- get a worthwhile return on the investment of learning new technology
- be confident that the chosen technology will be available for the duration of the course

Programme requirements

The administrative and academic staff on the DPT programme may use an online learning environment to:
- communicate with students individually and en masse
- communicate with supervisors
- post programme/calendar/timetable information
- comment on journal writing
- evaluate, review and comment on student work
- maintain 30 student journals with minimum effort

In addition the programme administration should:
- get technical support if and when they require it

Options

Many options are available in terms of the online learning tools, hosting and the amount of administrative control given over to the students themselves. This report considers a limited subset of tools that *could* be used to support this type of practitioner-based, research-led reflective study. The document does not set out to produce a rigorous cross-comparison of the key features of these tools; however, sites that do this have been referenced (for detailed further reading) where they exist. The software tools considered in this report have been pre-selected on the basis of availability, cost and support infrastructure.

These tools can be broadly categorised as follows: *Institutional VLE (Virtual Learning Environment) systems*, open source *CMS (Content Management Systems)*, *ePortfolio systems*, *blogging tools* and *online office applications* (the final two categories contain tools that cannot fulfil the requirements of this programme individually but may still be a viable option when used in combination with other tools).

Blackboard (Institutional VLE system)

The University of Manchester currently supports the *Blackboard Learning System (Vista)* campus-wide. Blackboard is a widely used commercial virtual learning environment that merged with their main competitor WebCT in 2006 with the Blackboard name being retained. What the UoM uses is actually WebCT Campus Edition 6 rebranded as Blackboard. *"Blackboard's Client Commitment"* statement says that the merged company will *"develop, innovate, upgrade, improve and support both Blackboard's and WebCT's products,"* as well as develop a new product incorporating the best of both companies' work.

Blackboard (WebCT CE) was designed for teacher directed/centred delivery of content and is especially geared for lower-level courses, large classes, although there are many examples of Blackboard being successfully deployed in UoM and elsewhere to support small-scale group working.

Blackboard contains typical VLE tools for tracking student activity and achievement, communicating (discussion, built in email client and chat rooms), and for producing and presenting content in a structured way.

Pros
- support available at Institutional, Faculty and School levels
- linked to student records and administration systems
- considerable staff training opportunities and student user guides, CEEBL could also provide bespoke training in the use of the Bb group work and communication tools
- admin tools built in
- it is backed up so data can't really be lost
- can easily print out journal
- can link into the library reading list system via TalisList and Link2List

Cons
- the communication tools (discussion, blog, journal) are basic
- possible problems with longevity and transferability of journal information if the University decides to upgrade to a new Blackboard/WebCT hybrid product in a few years time
- it may be problematic allowing external supervisors access through Campus Solutions
- user control for private space is limited
- no ability for user to personalise the learning space
- not sure yet how Blackboard/CS deals with non-semester based working patterns
- perhaps more suitable for non-research based courses

Moodle

Moodle is an open-source Course Management System (CMS), sometimes referred to as a Learning Management System (LMS) or a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE)[2]. Moodle shares many of the same attributes and tools as Blackboard; however, Moodle, unlike many other VLE systems, which describe themselves as 'pedagogically neutral' - was designed from a pedagogical standpoint outward. The

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[2] http://moodle.org

thinking behind the Moodle system stems from a social constructivist philosophy – as expressed by Moodle creator Martin Dougiamas' 5 referents below[3].

1. All of us are potential teachers as well as learners - in a true collaborative environment we are both.
2. We learn particularly well from the act of creating or expressing something for others to see.
3. We learn a lot by just observing the activity of our peers.
4. By understanding the contexts of others, we can teach in a more transformational way (constructivism)
5. A learning environment needs to be flexible and adaptable, so that it can quickly respond to the needs of the participants within it.

This philosophy is evident in Moodle's activity-based model and 'out of the box' toolkit which includes tools for blogging, messaging, group discussion, and collaboration (wikis) to encourage the formation of communities of learners.

Moodle can be installed on an Apache server with PHP installed and uses a MySQL database. Once it is installed, it can be customised to suit the intended group of learners. The University has some expertise in running Moodle installations; the system is widely and successfully used in the Schools of Mathematics and Computing.

Pros
- look and feel customisable by administrator (but not by students)
- good blogging and journal writing tools
- It is free to install (although there may be costs associated with administration)
- large committed group of users and developers

Cons
- not supported by the University of Manchester as an institution and is not linked to the Campus Solutions student registration system, therefore enrolling students and staff would require some form of manual registration process
- heavyweight system for such a small group of learners
- administrative commitment for someone within the university
- bespoke training required for students and staff
- politically not desirable as the University is keen to promote the widespread use of Blackboard as its VLE of choice

Web Content Management Systems
CEEBL are currently investigating open-source web content management systems (WCMS) as an option for supporting small groups of students. WCMS systems are software applications that are used to create, edit, manage, and publish content in a consistently organized fashion[4]. Typically these systems allow users to manage many different types of media content (text files, web pages, audio, video, images) in an ordered way. There are numerous open source WCMS systems[5] available, each with its own feature set (often including discussion tools, blogs, wikis, etc.) available as part of the standard installation; these features can often be extended at no cost

[3] http://docs.moodle.org/en/Pedagogy#Moodle_in_three_short_paragraphs
[4] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Content_management_system
[5] http://www.cmsmatrix.org/

by adding in extra modules developed by the open source community. Some of the better known systems include Mambo, Joomla! and Drupal.

CEEBL are currently evaluating Drupal as an option for supporting small-scale collaborative projects with students.

Drupal (similarly to Moodle) can be installed on an Apache (or Microsoft ISS) server with PHP installed and uses a MySQL database. This is a typical set-up and there are a couple of test installations running on the University servers at the moment. Once it is installed, Drupal can then be customised by adding modules (which control the functionality), themes (which control the look and feel) and by altering template blocks (which control the layout) and permissions (which control who can see what). The number of possible configurations is limitless.

Pros
- extensible new modules are being developed all the time
- highly customisable
- lots of useful tools (wikis, discussion fora, blogs)
- really powerful admin controls
- active developer community
- DrupalED packaged version for education

Cons
- steep learning curve
- administration of students not straight forward – audit trial, etc.
- not supported by the University
- Bespoke training required by students and staff (CEEBL could deliver this in the first instance)

ePortfolio systems
There are several ePortfolio systems available[6]; however, this report is only considering the use of the commercial PebblePAD[7] system which describes itself as a Personal Learning System. The University of Manchester already has some expertise in the use of this system which has been piloted in Humanities for online PDP support at PGR level and on the UG Combined Studies programme. The Faculty of Engineering and Physical Sciences also uses PebblePAD for participants to store evidence for the assessed portion of the programme and the associated reflection required[8]. The PebblePAD system is designed in Macromedia Flash by a team from the University of Wolverhampton and has been used on a number of JISC sponsored ePortfolio[9] projects.

PebblePAD users[10] are able to create records of their achievement and experiences and present these as web pages, journal entries and blog posts. Students are able to share content and assign different levels of permissions (view, comment, copy, collaborate, etc.) – these permissions can be extended to external stakeholders. All assets that students create remain private, unless they choose to share them with others or publish them to a gateway controlled by a teaching staff, mentor or administrator.

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[6] http://www.jiscinfonet.ac.uk/InfoKits/effective-use-of-VLEs/e-portfolios/e-portfolio-choosing-system
[7] http://www.pebblelearning.co.uk/
[8] http://www.eps.manchester.ac.uk/tlc/nap/eportfolio.htm
[9] http://www.jisc.ac.uk/media/documents/publications/effectivepracticeeportfolios.pdf
[10] http://www.pebblepad.co.uk/cs_documentation/Getting%20Started%202008.pdf

Pros
- can handle lots of media types video, audio, etc.
- contains action planning tools to allow students to describe what they want to achieve and to plan their learning accordingly
- designed with personal reflection and professional development in mind
- learners can create multiple assets but only share what they want others to see
- hosted at PebblePAD – so technical responsibilities lie with third party

Cons
- cost, for 100 licences (the min pilot amount) plus hosting with PebblePAD would cost £1750 per year
- Bespoke training required for administrator and students

Blogging tools

Blogging tools could be used in conjunction with other software to allow this group of students to communicate as a group and to work on their own reflective journals. Once again, there are many freely available blogs that could be used; some of the most widely used include: Blogger[11], Wordpress[12] and Livejournal[13]. These tools share a typical feature set which includes:

- The ability to create, tag and order chronological posts containing text, images and other media and publish these to the web
- Automatic stamping of each entry to create a diary/journal; posts can then be searched, ordered and categorised based on the date of creation or other user defined classifications (i.e. private, research, policy)
- Allowing the blog site to be visible to all or to restrict access to a selected group of people (other students, supervisors and administrators)
- The facility to allow or disable comments from people viewing the blog
- A customisable look and feel by altering predefined templates
- The ability to create group blogs where many can contribute

Blogger
Blogger is probably the simplest to use of the blogging tools considered in this report. It is owned by Google which has the potential advantage of using the same username and password as other Google services - so a student would use the same credentials for their blog, their iGoogle and Google Mail accounts. Recent updates include the provision for posting directly to Blogger from the owner's mobile phone.

Livejournal
The big advantage of Livejournal is that it allows users to control the visibility (i.e., who sees what) at individual post level; this feature could be highly desirable to students on the DPT who will conceivably wish to make confidential and public journal entries.

Wordpress
Wordpress enables users to create individual (non blog) static webpages which may be useful for creating 'about' pages or 'contact' pages that the student would like available at all times. Wordpress' has comparatively advanced administration tools

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[11] http://www.blogger.com
[12] http://wordpress.org/
[13] http://www.livejournal.com/

that allow bloggers to create contributors each having different (and configurable) privileges with regard to publishing and editing options. Wordpress allows users the ability to password protect individual blog entries

Edublogs

Edublogs[14] is an especially customised standards-compliant set of blogging tools based on Wordpress technology, selected for the learning and teaching community. It is widely used across the school sector in the US, Australia and, to a lesser extent, in the UK. What differentiates Edublogs from other blogging tools is that widgets to allow podcasting and video are available to bloggers as standard (without customisation) and a supportive community of users who are all experimenting with blogs in an educational context. An Edublog, like the other blogging tools discussed, is available free; however, the company offers a couple of paid for services which extend the core functionality. Edublogs Campus allows administration (at an institutional level) of many blogs from a single admin control for $900 (about £650) per year and an Edublogs Supporter licence allows a single teacher/administrator to control up to 30 blogs (without advertising banners) for $39.95 (about £29) per year.

Pros
- simple to use
- students can customise the look and feel
- 'vanilla' versions of these tools are free

Cons
- administering 30 blogs may be problematic/labour intensive
- not backed up so data could be lost
- Not all these blogs allow total visibility control over individual posts
- may not be easy to produce print copy

Online office applications

Other tools that could be considered as part of a package of technologies to support DPT students include *online office applications* such as Google Docs[15] and Zoho[16]. These tools enable users to create typical office documents (text docs, presentations and spreadsheets) online, and both allow the document originator to invite collaborators and viewers. Completed documents can then be exported from these programmes in a number of formats including pdf, rtf and doc or published directly to a blog. Google Docs is already used by students on CEEBL-supported projects in Pharmacy and Sustainable Development.

Pros
- version control
- ability to publish and export in useful formats
- compatible with MS Word
- Google and Zoho both offer a suite of other free tools which integrate with these online office applications

Cons
- both Google Docs and Zoho are still only available as beta versions, which means their future is uncertain
- neither has discussion or blogging tools built in.

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[14] http://edublogs.org/
[15] http://docs.google.com/
[16] www.zoho.com/

Other Considerations

There are a few other issues to consider in relation to providing ongoing technological support and provision of online communication and journal writing tools.

CEEBL is due to close (certainly in its current format) in March 2010; therefore support for the DTP could not be guaranteed past this time. It is worthwhile considering how support for the technology, students and administration of this module will be sustained after this point and what contingency plans are required before then (staff training, etc). CEEBL's closure may also have an impact on where the online journals and communication tools are hosted (at UoM, with the software supplier or with and external hosting company) and the amount of administrative control given to the students themselves.

Recommendation

Based on the requirements specification and the research carried out to create this document, CEEBL recommends a number of possible options for the delivery of the self-reflection/journal writing and collaboration tools required by students on the Doctor of Practical Theology (DPT) programme.

CEEBL recommends the purchase of a pilot PebblePAD licence (100 users) at a cost of £1750 per year. CEEBL would be willing to finance this in the first year with subsequent years funded by the DPT. This option has a number of advantages: the yearly cost includes hosting and support from PebblePAD, so some of the challenges associated with using Blackboard to support this type of course (e.g. ongoing maintenance, longevity, rolling on courses across semesters and enrolling external stakeholders) should not be an issue.

The PebblePAD system appears to offer the flexibility required by the DPT students and course administrators in that it allows the recording of reflections for any material added to the portfolio. Choosing an e-portfolio system is also in tune with wider objectives, namely providing a means of encouraging reflective practice both in students and staff in the University. Also using a piece of software that has been designed specifically to support reflective-journal writing and personal development planning seems intuitively correct.

Development Plan

The plan for development would be:

- **Jan 2009** – formalise project plan.
- **Feb 2009** – carry out focus groups with DPT students to find out what their requirements are and install/create learning environment
- **March 2009** – trial run of learning environment, evaluate and modify this in light of user feedback
- **April 2009** – write support materials of staff/students and carry out training sessions with DPT administrators
- **September 2009** – students start using reflection/journal writing and collaboration tools
- **January 2010** – first evaluation of reflection/journal writing and collaboration tools

Requirement	Blackboard	Drupal	PebblePAD	Wordpress	Blogger	Edublogs	LiveJournal	Googledocs	Notes:
Student requirements									
Administrator can personalise look and feel of learning environment	No*	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	* The look and feel of Blackboard has been decided at institutional level
Student can personalise look and feel of learning environment	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	
Blogging tool for journal	Yes*	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	* The blackboard blog tool is rudimentary, does not support searching and sorting by date.
• student control over blog privacy/visibility of individual posts	No	No	Yes*	Yes**	No	No	Yes	Yes	*PebblePAD allows individual students to control the visibility of assets. **There is a plug in called WP-CMS Post Control that allows Wordpress to be customised in this way
• compile blog for print	Yes	No	No	No*	No**	No*	No*	Yes	*Can be compiled as a PDF using free service such as www.blogbooker.com/ **Can be printed by Blog2Print
• upload inline images to blog	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes*	* Obviously not a blog but images can be incorporated in shared documents
• upload other media to blog audio, video	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No*	* Students can still use inline images etc into their Google Document
• publish selected blog entries to group area	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No*	* Students could publish out from their google document to a shared blog or wiki
Built in private communication tool (email)	Yes	No	-	No	No	No	No	No	
Group discussion forum	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	
Ability to create static html pages	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	
Ability to upload files to store	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No	Yes	
find out important programme information	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	
comment on other students' writing	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	

Central admin interface for all students	Yes*	Yes	Yes	No	No	No**	No	Yes	* The admin of Blackboard in managed by Bb and institutionally
Word processor	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	
• copes with large **documents**	No	-	Yes	-	-	-	-	Maybe	
• can share **documents** with supervisor	No	No	Yes	-	-	-	-	Yes	
Programme requirements									
communicate with students individually	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	
communicate with students en masse	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	
communicate with supervisors	Yes*	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	Yes* Blackboard external supervisors would need to be registered through Campus Solutions
comment on journal writing	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	
calendar or timetable facility	Yes	Yes*	Yes	No	No	No	No	No*	** could use Google calendar * Drupal would require customisation using the Events Calendar module
Centrally maintain 30 student journals with minimum effort	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes*	No	No	*If one of the paid services was selected
longevity of journal (3years+)	Maybe*	Maybe**	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	* Cannot get guarantees that journals will be available across semesters/years ** Drupal will be available but CEEBL will not exist in its current format past March 2010
cost	Free*	Free**	£1750 per year*	Free**	Free**	Free** $900 $38	Free**	Free	* Blackboard is free to academics and students at the point of use but obviously has huge institutional costs. ** They all have administrative costs