

# Welcome...



Welcome back to our Newsletter, and to a rich and eclectic range of contributions which we hope will serve to stimulate thought and catalyse action as the nights draw in and the first semester gathers pace. In some sense we are reflecting the 'easier-wider-deeper' title of the contribution from the University of Ulster throughout this issue. The initial contribution from Nick and Kelvin emphasises the social significance of the PDP process in facilitating both the construction of individual meaning and the provision of feedback to the group or cohort; in a 'near mass' system the importance of feeling part of a community is ever more important. Stephanie Richardson's contribution, from a CPD perspective, confirms the challenges to e-portfolio implementation colleagues in HE will recognise; of support for users, the demotivating experience of re-entering data you just know is available elsewhere in the organisation and the value of 'scaffolding' to support effective engagement. Interestingly, the issue of access from employer premises is also confirmed by our experience within the 'e-portfolios for employer engagement' project. Louise Frith's contribution echoes the recognition of difficulties with reflection and – perhaps – of ensuring the recognition of significance – in this case by ensuring a strong connection to the academic discipline - in seeking to support reflective activity, and we look forward to seeing how this 'work in progress' is taken forward.

The contributions from Sharon and Victor, and indeed from Alison, emphasise, in their different ways, how far we have come in making the transition from exciting individual practice to the development of resources – for staff and student use – which can ensure we develop high quality practice for all. Like Stephanie and Louise, Alison also emphasises relevance – in this case to the visual orientations of creative arts students – in supporting engagement. Sharon, Victor and Alison will further outline their ideas

at the CRA Residential seminar later this month, and both will contribute to the wider theme of the event – innovation in the world of personal development planning, e-portfolios and recording achievement with an emphasis the development of the Higher Education Achievement Report (HEAR) and the increasingly significant issue of evidencing wider student achievement. We hope to see as many of you as possible there.

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## Shared Thinking as a Social Approach to PDP

**Nicholas Bowskill & Kelvin Smith (Scholarship Student), Faculty of Education, University of Glasgow.**

*"It made me think about some of the very basic assumptions we make when we design PDP activities."* [University Tutor]

Learning happens in a social world. Development involves conversations with others around shared interests, agendas and concerns. Talking, and support for student questions, can also inform the development of thinking and writing (Mercer, 2003). Discussion of concerns is important both for individual development and for the health of the learning community (McConnell, 2006). Such conversations help the individual *participate* and to understand themselves in the social context in which they learn and reside. This also helps to create a sense of a shared endeavour.

Student development should therefore be re-located within the social context of the learning community. This creates a picture of development that, still valuing the written word, becomes more rounded. This goal is supported when the notion of

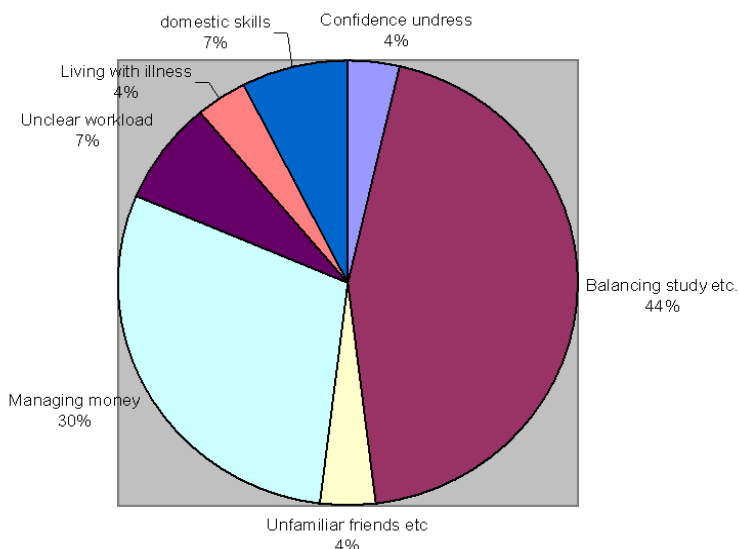
learning acknowledges and supports the development of the student voice; recognises the feelings that emerge in the experience of any course; and understands the real need students have for face to face conversations with tutors and peers. It is a rounded form of development that provides support for students to learn with each other and to learn about each other. Peers are partners in the life and work of the student. Learning conversations about the concerns and ideas that exist within the learning community in turn support the social, emotional and intellectual development of the students. This is support for lifelong learning.

Very much related to this, an inter-disciplinary project at The University of Glasgow has initiated a new concept and an emerging form of practice known as Shared Thinking. This socially-oriented view of development involves reflective conversations to do with the university experience of students. It is a process supported by discussion protocols and to this is added the use of voting technology.

This voting technology (see Draper et al, 2002 for an academic perspective on this technology) has become familiar to many people when contestants on the TV show "Who Wants to be a Millionaire?" invoke the opportunity to "Ask the Audience." A question is put to the audience and their responses generate a shared display showing the number of votes for each option. The contestant then decides the option to choose as their answer.

In Shared Thinking a similar approach is used. The key difference is that the questions are co-constructed by the audience (the students) from discussions and the display of votes is to serve thinking for the 'audience' not just a given individual. The display, thus, makes visible (Ritchhart, 2008) and shares the collective thinking of the participants and their concerns. The image below is an example taken from a course on Physiotherapy using Shared Thinking.

Issues that remain in year 2



Shared Thinking has been trialed at 2 different universities (new and old) with, in one case, up to 400 students. Initially, these trials have been run in support of induction and transition (as the first stages of student development). In a 3 session structure (plus a preparatory session for mentors), the first 2 sessions involve same-year peer-discussions. In the 3rd session, volunteers from Year 2 mentor participants from Year 1. They do this supported by the technology and with an agenda constructed from the issues that formed common ground for the 2 year-groups. This extends the process of collaborative reflection from small group work to whole-year work and across different year-groups. It also combines informal learning with formal learning giving a broader view of experience *at university*.

The initial analysis suggests that seeing the thinking and concerns of others, generated by reflective conversations, helps students to realise that they may have broadly similar concerns. Participation in this process also appears to have greater credibility when compared to the same message being simply *told* to them by parents, tutors etc. The conversations amongst peers help to give students the chance to voice their concerns and to hear the response and experience of others. The process also supports the socialisation of students making the 'crowd' seem more human. There is also some evidence of students reflecting upon their own needs and re-assessing their self-management practices.

Shared Thinking is early research. It has been trialed in only a few contexts and with only limited data and evidence currently available. Other trials, looking at the collaborative review of placement experience and with other year-groups in single-session structures, are already being planned. This is however a small PhD project with limited resources. Despite this, there is some reason to believe that Shared Thinking, if repeated at intervals, may offer a socially reflective system or backbone for development that could also support individual writing and reflection. It also indicates a student-centred and social approach to learning-support in which students better recognize themselves as resources for their development. Various departments and other universities have already expressed some interest in this concept. More importantly, Shared Thinking may offer new opportunities to re-think current PDP practices.

A web site is under development and is available at: <http://sites.google.com/site/palandvoting/>

*Acknowledgements:* Vic Lally and Steve Brindley (Education), Steve Draper (Psychology) and Quintin Cutts (Computing Science) – my supervisors at The University of Glasgow.

# Disparate Adult Learners and E-Portfolio Systems- Lessons Learned by the Institute of Physics

**Stephanie Richardson, Professional Development Manager, Institute of Physics**

In 2006, the Institute of Physics decided to invest in an online CPD management system which would allow members to plan and record their CPD. It was hoped that this would allow:

- -members to recognise and capitalise on learning gained from diverse methods (i.e. beyond formal courses);
- -members to keep independent records of their development to which they would have continued access when changing or leaving employment;
- -the Institute to support and track members participation in CPD;
- -increased assurances about the competence and credibility of the Institute and its members.

The general idea was that members would be able to self-assess their competence against the requirements for professional qualifications offered by the Institute, and upload evidence in support of their assessment, and also set their own independent development goals and, again, upload records of learning activities. For an activity to formally count towards their CPD, they would have to reflect on the ways in which it had benefited their practice.

Having viewed many proprietary systems, from those used in Higher Education to those used by other professional associations, the Institute eventually decided to develop a new system, in partnership with its membership database provider. This decision was made for reasons of:

- access control- the system would need to be available only to Institute members, but would have to be available to them wherever and whenever they wanted it;
- reporting;
- quality- as this was a new development for the provider, it would effectively be providing a bespoke system for the Institute. It was hoped that, as well as effectively meeting users needs, this would be a source of competitive advantage (in terms of member recruitment and retention);
- cost.

The system went live on 1<sup>st</sup> July 2007, and, two years on, has been significantly enhanced, following feedback.

## **Lessons Learned, The Development phase;**

The main lesson learned during the course of the development phase, and at launch, was about the importance of communication, and ideally face to face communication, between the client and the supplier. Although there were face to face meetings at several stages, many of the conversations (and demonstrations) took place remotely. This meant that some wrong assumptions were made on both sides that resulted in the

building of unnecessary features and the omission of some others. The system also did not have a dedicated project manager at the Institute (it was managed by someone who already had a full workload) which meant the relationship was not managed pro-actively to prevent this.

## **Implementation**

Although the system was piloted and tested, nevertheless, several issues arose at the implementation stage. Most of these were related to useability. For reasons of cost, and because they were used to supplying databases for defined users, who could easily be trained to use them, the supplier did not provide help information within the system. For remote users, who could be accessing the system at any time and from any location, this is absolutely vital- the lack of it led to much frustration and annoyance. In some ways, the comprehensive features provided added to this- the more features there are, the more opportunities there are for people to mis-step, or overlook the one most useful to them.

It was clear early on that professional learners are exposed to many e-portfolio systems from different environments- they might be members of more than one professional body; they might be studying part-time at University; their employer may also supply a system. Feed back from our users suggested that they do measure these systems against each other, and that they also find it a burden to have to re-enter information from one into another- they would like to be able to import and export, or, preferably to use one system for all of these purposes.



Users also suggested they did not want such a system to be imposed- then keeping a learning portfolio becomes a bureaucratic obligation, rather than something of value in itself. This is a tricky issue- we have found that those most likely to use the system are those who are required to (to retain their Chartered Scientist status)- but that requiring use results in alienation of some learners, particularly if they find the system difficult to use.

Feedback from employers\* has also been instructive. Many employers, for example, have firewalls and security systems which means that their employers cannot use the key features of some interactive systems- for example, uploading evidence. Their employees have to use the system at home, or not at

all. Most also have employees who are members of more than one Institution- whilst they are supportive of the use of e-portfolio systems for CPD, they do not want to have to retain information about many different systems. One for all would be far preferred.

Some lessons were related to wider issues, rather than the system itself. Many of the learners found reflection difficult; but were able to undertake reflection effectively when provided with a template or examples of challenging questions to ask themselves- in future it would be useful to integrate this into the e-portfolio system, particularly as reflection provides the means to recognise and capitalise on learning that takes place beyond formal courses.

Queries from users, and also reports of their activities, also showed that many of them do not fully understand what is meant by the term 'CPD'- it is either associated with the portfolio record, or with formal training courses, rather than being an overall term for their ongoing professional development. Integrating a list of potential activities (but making it clear this is not exhaustive) has helped overcome this and has encouraged more users to use the system, by embracing the diverse nature of professional learning.

2 years on, the system has many happy users and provided the Institute with new ways of understanding its members and engaging with them. Users tell us that it has allowed them to focus on planning their development, and given them the opportunity to make their learning from informal methods more explicit. But it has not been a straight path to this point, and if I were beginning again, I would hope that taking account of all these experiences would ensure we arrived that much sooner.

*\*Employer names have not been supplied for reasons of their own commercial confidentiality.*



## A Threshold Concepts approach to PDP

Louise Frith, University of Kent

PDP emphasises students' reflection on their learning but many students and tutors have difficulty with this, seeing it as a bolt-on approach which doesn't really help students to develop their subject knowledge (University of Kent, PDP review, 2004). According to the HEA the characteristics of effective PDP practice

are; '*integration with mainstream academic pursuits and links to the learning objectives/outcomes of programmes*' (2005, p1). This article outlines a current project in the University of Kent's Physics department which explores the potential of Meyer and Land's 'threshold concepts' theory (2003) to develop a discipline-based approach to reflective learning and PDP.

Threshold concepts are described by Meyer and Land as the 'concepts that bind a subject together and that are fundamental to ways of thinking and practicing in that discipline' (2005, p1). They also describe them as the parts of the curriculum which open up new 'ways of seeing' the discipline, hence the use of the word *threshold* to suggest a doorway into the discipline. They identify the key features of threshold concepts, including:

- **Transformative**, they open up new ways for the student to see the subject
- **Irreversible**, once learned they are not easily forgotten
- **Integrative**, they provoke students to ask new questions of the subject
- **Troublesome**, they are difficult to understand and often counterintuitive.

To help to illustrate their ideas Meyer and Land give a number of examples of threshold concepts in different disciplines, such as; *opportunity costs* in Economics, *the state* in Politics, *metabolism* in Sports Science, and *heat transference* in Physics.

Threshold concepts theory has similarities with reflective learning which is why it might be a useful way approach to PDP. Like reflective learning, threshold concepts theory seeks to identify the 'deep learning' (Gibbs 1999) areas of the curriculum. In both there is emphasis on transformation for the learner. The transformative aspects are often the most challenging too. Threshold concepts draws on Perkins' (1999) description of 'troublesome knowledge' i.e. that which is alien or counter-intuitive. This seems to have parallels with a widely held view amongst reflective learning theorists that the most fruitful sources of reflective learning are the situations that students find most challenging (McDury & Alterio 2002, Moon 2004), or as Brookfield (1987) puts it, reflection on 'critical incidents'. Therefore targeting reflective questions at threshold concepts is likely to be most powerful in supporting student transformation.

Identifying the threshold concepts in a discipline is not straightforward. Some work has been done on this in different disciplines leading to a number of interesting studies to identify threshold concepts such as Computer Science (McCartney & Saunders, 2005), Economics (Davis & Mangan 2007), and Cultural Studies (Entwistle 2005).

During 2008/9 the University of Kent's Physics department worked in partnership with the University's Learning and Teaching Unit to identify threshold concepts in Physics. Initially, as part of a staff meeting lecturers and teaching assistants were introduced to threshold concepts theory and then asked to identify threshold concepts but it was difficult to establish a consensus as colleagues felt they were too far removed from the undergraduate experience to remember what had once seemed troublesome or threshold. Next, based on Cousins' recommendations to involve students in identifying threshold concepts (2006), three groups of physics undergraduates (foundation year, year 2 and year 3) were presented with a set of questions based on key features of threshold concepts. The questions were;

1. Can you identify any area of your learning that has enabled you to see new aspects of the subject?
2. Has there been anything that has changed the way you think about the subject?
3. Is there anything that you have learned that really sticks in your mind?
4. Have you encountered anything in the programme that you have found troubling, counter-intuitive or alien?

The degree of consensus amongst students was strong, for example, nearly all students recognised the centrality of Calculus in enabling them to see new aspects of the subject. A majority of students identified practical and applied Physics as the elements of the programme which are most memorable. The two parts of the curriculum that most students said were counter intuitive were Quantum Mechanics and Optics. One group of students also discussed their desire to be supported in 'making links' between the knowledge they were gaining and the 'importance of repartition' for their learning. From these responses the project will pilot a set of reflective questions in one module, Quantum Mechanics, Year 2, to see if the questions help students process their learning .

The theory of threshold concepts advanced by Land and Meyer provides a useful approach to discipline-based PDP for a number of reasons. Firstly it facilitates a new framework in which to discuss the curriculum with staff and students. Secondly it enables reflective questions to be structured at the most challenging points of the programme instead of bolted-on at the end. Finally it provides an explicit (and recognisable) link between subject knowledge and the transformation or personal development of the student which is one of the central aims of PDP.

## Deeper-Easier-Wider PDP: the Journey at Ulster

Dr Sharon Milner & Dr Victor McNair, University of Ulster

This article describes the journey that Ulster has taken in embedding PDP. A key point in this journey was the development of the Ulster PDP Forum in February 2008 which was developed in response to a growing

awareness that there needs to be a structure in place to keep a strategic eye on internal and national PDP developments. The Forum is a vehicle which informs, disseminates and coordinates support strategies and materials across the University.

One of the first tasks of the Forum was to build a wider team of informed staff to provide a catalyst for raising the profile of PDP at School and Faculty level and to restart the debate about the role of PDP in teaching and learning. Central to the delivery of these goals has been the development of the online U-MAP tool (Ulster Module Action Planning tool) and the online PDP module 'Reflect on Me'.

U-MAP is a pilot project that has been generated through internal seed funding. It consists of a database that has been created to assist staff in the design of modules and programmes where they need to include PDP-specific learning outcomes. These statements which have been validated through the University's quality assurance processes have been collated into a database which can be searched on the following criteria: Higher Education Qualification Level; Subject as well as Knowledge and Understanding, Transferable skills, Intellectual qualities, and Professional/practical skills (KTIP). These can be used as 'oven ready' and dropped into course or module documentation, more frequently however, they can be adapted to suit the user's needs. (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: U-MAP search

The screenshot shows the U-MAP search interface. At the top, there are two columns of filters. The first column, 'Check All Outcomes:', includes Knowledge (K), Intelligence (I), Practical (P), and Transferable (T), each with a checked checkbox. The second column, 'Check All Levels:', includes Sub-Degree (3), Year 1 (4), Year 2 & Placement (5), Final Year (6), and Post Grad (7), each with a checked checkbox. Below the filters are buttons for 'Reset', 'Click to View Outcome Matches Below', and 'Suggest a new Outcome'.

Below the filters is a section titled 'Outcomes'. It contains a search instruction: 'Highlight the Description that best suits your requirements and Copy-Paste it into the Programme/Module Specification document. Use the table headings to select a sub-set of the Outcomes. You can also search the Description by entering text to search in search.' Below this is a table with the following data:

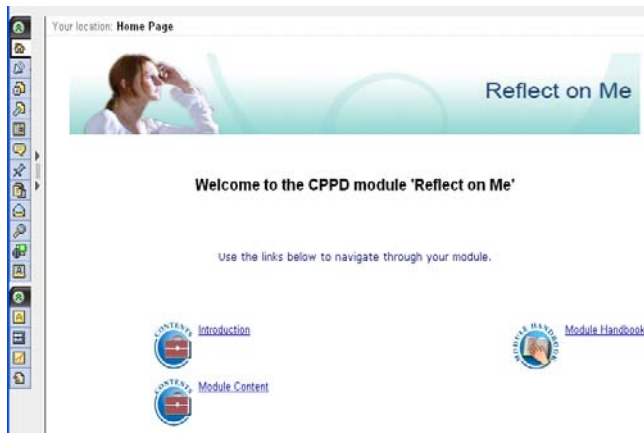
Subject	Outcome	Level	Description
ESURE EVENTS AND CULTURAL MANAGEMENT	K	4	Identify the steps required to carry a piece of research on a topic
OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY	K	4	Have knowledge of skills and strategies for dealing with interpersonal conflict.
OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY	K	4	Understand the requirements for effective team building and inter-
OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY	K	4	Appreciate the usefulness of models as a means of organising the
OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY	K	4	Gain a knowledge of relevant ethical and legal issues.
OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY	K	4	Acquire professional knowledge and skills.
OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY	K	4	Describe the role of effective communication in the context of a
OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY	K	4	Describe the formation and functioning of multidisciplinary teams.

Our plan is to launch and to disseminate U-MAP during this academic year to establish its ability to help staff to streamline the identification and inclusion of quality-assured PDP-related learning outcomes. We anticipate that this tool will be a valuable resource for course teams in both validation and revalidation processes.

'Reflect on Me' is a 10 point, level 4, University-wide online CPPD (Certificate in Personal and Professional Development) module. Its aim is to enable students to take responsibility for their own learning from the outset of their university career. Focusing on the three different aspects of their

university experience; their study, work and leisure activities the students will be required to reflect on their own skills and knowledge and generate a growing body of evidence that they can use to enhance their employability (see Figure 2 below).

Figure 2: Front page of WebCT module 'Reflect on Me'



The module will be piloted in semester two of this year and has three intended outcomes. The first is to evaluate its 'fitness for purpose' across a varied range of programmes. The second is to evaluate the potential for the skills developed within the module to be transferable to subsequent programme activities. The third is to assess the feasibility for developing a staff version of the module.

## Personal & Professional Development at University of the Arts London: Introducing PPD Coach

Dr Alison James, London College of Fashion

In November 2009 a new resource comes online to all students at the University of the Arts London to support their Personal & Professional Development (PPD) – the UAL moniker incorporating PDP.

PPD Coach has been created to complement the many tools that guide students in embarking upon careers and professional practice. It is deeply rooted in the 'life wide' and holistic models of PDP; however its main differences lie in its focus on visual content and the Personal element of PDP. This latter is prioritised through activities to support the development of meta-cognitive and critically reflective capacities, while encouraging students to think of the future in terms of who are they and where are they going, not just what they can do or have done.

In prioritising this focus on personal identity, attributes, values and drivers, PPD Coach echoes the increasing number of publications on successful career/future building (Whitmore, Wilson, Goleman et al) which identify understanding these things as the starting point for any elaboration of professional path or goals. PPD Coach builds on this recognition to place understanding of the individual, their histories, feelings and characteristics at the heart of employability profiles, cycles of plan-do-review and decisions for the future.

A disclaimer here about such a focus on the personal, exploration of which can sometimes make people nervous. Does this mean forcing people to open up areas of vulnerability to others or bare their souls when they do not want to? Emphatically not. PPD Coach is available to students to use, as *they* choose, in tandem with other curriculum opportunities or on its own, while simply reminding us that we are not compartmentalised beings in our educational lives, separate from the other complex elements that constitute our human existence. Emotions and external events *will* infiltrate our learning. Nor is it for narcissistic navel gazing. The role of PPD Coach is practical as well as philosophical; to provide ideas and opportunities for students to boost self awareness and confidence, while also learning to see the 'hidden side of[ their] stone' (to paraphrase Dewey, 1910) and explore where they might flourish and apply talents to achieve outcomes.

On opening PPD Coach, students find themselves in front of a PPD maze, in a cheerful, animated landscape (perhaps this was wish fulfilment on the part of staff!) with a range of options carved into a tree. Clicking on any one of these leads immediately to visual resources – movies, presentations, talking heads, images, and colourful newsletters – offering ideas on how to enhance PPD and inform creative and professional practice. The themes deliberately avoid a skills or task orientation; Identity, Emotion, Learning, Confidence, Story, Reflection, Employability, Mindgames and Life Coach. In the example of Reflection, the resources were created to help provide a common language and understanding as to the scope and depth of critical reflection, given the highly divergent views as to what this is and how to do it which exist within courses, not just institutions. The potential richness of reflective practice is illustrated by the inflatable Pod, use of wikis, blogs, collaborative exercises, sketchbooks and journals. The Library provides further links and reading, as well as acknowledgements of the many people who have contributed ideas, support or resources to its creation.



Content with short, simple, accessible elements was crucial given the visual orientations of creative arts students. The word is obviously still essential, but is often more popular when united with audio, video or kinaesthetic counterparts. In addition, given that not all students are as awestruck with the potential of PPD as we might like, PPD Coach needed to be easy to engage with and visually pleasing.

However, offering a PPD resource for six diverse Colleges with myriad subjects across many levels is not straightforward. For a start, terminology can cause trouble; with courses spanning fashion, printing, graphics, cosmetic science, fine art, industrial design, theatre and performance and more, even the words to describe future employment can be sensitively loaded. Some espouse practice, others profession, or craft or job, or career and many will firmly reject any of the other terms used in different fields. Issues of cultural ownership, within a field or College, may also arise. Efforts to offer a pleasing visual may not be appreciated by all user groups, some of

whom might have preferred a blank canvas. That is on the horizon with the advent of our e-portfolio, within which PPD Coach, with other tools, will be embedded.

Although produced for the creative arts, PPD Coach is interdisciplinary in its lines of enquiry and exploration. If you would like to know more about the resource, its reception and/or possible use, please contact [a.james@fashion.arts.ac.uk](mailto:a.james@fashion.arts.ac.uk).



## News and Events:

If you have any news items or events that you wish to publicise in the next issue, please email Amy Marsden at [Amy@recordingachievement.org](mailto:Amy@recordingachievement.org) with the details

**The Ninth Residential Seminar of the Centre for Recording Achievement  
26th and 27th November 2009  
Chancellors Hotel and Conference Centre, Manchester**

Booking form and details available on [www.recordingachievement.org](http://www.recordingachievement.org)

The Centre for Recording Achievement in association with: the Inter/National Coalition for Electronic Portfolio Research, the National Action Research Network (NARN) & The Scottish PDP Forum

**The Second International Residential Seminar  
'Researching and Evaluating Personal Development Planning and e-Portfolio.'**

**National College for School Leadership, Nottingham, UK 26-29th April 2010**

For further information please contact Amy Marsden on 01942 826 761 or email [amy@recordingachievement.org](mailto:amy@recordingachievement.org)