

Professional e-portfolios from the students' perspective ...

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Abstract:

One of the strengths of e-portfolios is the ease with which artefacts can be used for several different purposes. This paper will report on a pilot project involving undergraduates studying in a professional program. Students used a hosted e-portfolio tool to develop an accreditation portfolio and a career portfolio. The focus of the paper will be on the students' perceptions of this tool, an area that has received little attention in the research literature.

1 Introduction

In recent years, several universities have begun to make e-portfolios available to their students. This educational tool allows student to conveniently manage and present artefacts such as projects, assignments, class presentations, transcripts, and certificates. With their multimedia capabilities e-portfolios also allow students to document their out of class experiences such as volunteer work, summer jobs, and internships. Students can include digital photographs, evaluations from supervisors, video demonstrations of their employment-related tasks, and so on. With their extensive storage and retrieval facilities, specialized e-portfolio systems are able to document learning in ways that were simply too cumbersome to manage with paper-based portfolios. However, e-portfolios can be much more than mere digital repositories. Reflective activities and feedback can easily be incorporated into the design so that the e-portfolio is also a pedagogical tool. By reflecting on their work, and incorporating feedback from instructors and peers, students can demonstrate cognitive growth.

Although portfolios, both paper-based and electronic, have been used in a wide variety of applications in education for many years, it is difficult to give a general description of an e-portfolio because this depends greatly on how the tool is used. Some authors [1] noted that in 2005 a "rapid screening of the recent literature" produced 49 different nomenclatures to describe particular types of e-portfolios. In fact, one of the strengths of e-portfolios is the ease with which artefacts can be re-used for several different purposes. The same e-portfolio can be the base to fulfil requirements for one course, a complete program, for professional accreditation, for continuing professional development and so on. Thus although the names may vary from institution to institution, there is usually the concept of a *working portfolio* [2]. This portfolio is an on-going systematic collection of selected work in courses that provides the foundation for other types of portfolios that are used to provide evidence of learning or accomplishment; for example showcase portfolios, portfolios used to obtain professional accreditation, and so on.

This paper will report on a pilot project involving undergraduates studying in a professional Health Sciences program. A Canadian university has decided to investigate the possibility of

using an institution wide e-portfolio tool. In order to meet the pedagogical, technological, institutional and career features as identified by the e-portfolio committee, composed of representatives of the various faculties and service centres, it was decided to sample a hosted e-portfolio service, a self-hosted e-portfolio system, and an e-portfolio developed with open source software.

In this case, students used a hosted e-portfolio tool to develop an accreditation portfolio and a career portfolio. The tool iWebfolio was chosen because it met most of the previously identified criteria for university wide use. In terms of the Health Science students, iWebfolio was attractive for its external reviewers' features as the students were being evaluated against published Professional standards. The reviewers' features were also useful for developing a career portfolio. In addition, templates provided direction for students in preparing their career portfolio.

The focus of the paper will be on the students' perceptions of this tool, an area that has received little attention in the research literature [3].

2 Concerns and challenges

Although one of the strengths of e-portfolios is the ease with which a portfolio can be created for multiple purposes and multiple audiences, this can create tension when a portfolio is used both for learning and high-stakes assessment such as in pre-service teacher education and the health sciences. Students may downplay any mistakes or problems fearing that this will be used against them when applying for credentialing. In fact, this is not a technical problem as it is very easy to limit access to the various artefacts in the e-portfolio; nevertheless this is a concern of students [4] and the use of portfolios for both formative and summative purposes has been identified as a potential problem [5] in the literature. In addition, security of personal information, and authenticity for credentialing (e.g. a facility for preventing further changes to certain artefacts or data to ensure authenticity) have been identified as technological concerns [4].

Reflective statements are an important component of portfolios [2] but not all students know how to write these types of statements. Thus the issue needs to be addressed in class or with prompts and templates within the e-portfolio and followed up with feedback. In addition, self-reporting of learning competencies can pose problems with regard to their reliability [1].

3 Preliminary results

Despite training sessions and a facilitator who was available most hours, several students did not find the tool easy to use. As in other studies [6] preliminary results indicate the need to provide training in the use of IT for students.

Surprisingly none of the students knew anything about e-portfolios before being involved in the project. In general, they found that the e-portfolio tool was useful for assembling documents in preparation for their job search. However, only half of them thought that it would be useful in obtaining a job. Some students displayed a lack of knowledge about the e-portfolio tool, for example stating that it is too difficult to customize the e-portfolio according to the job and that they therefore had to keep their portfolio general. Other students felt that employers would not be interested in looking at an e-portfolio. This is certainly an area that needs to be researched.

On the other hand, some students felt that the tool was going to be helpful in their job search, and that “everyone should do one”. This also concurs with other authors [7] who note that in terms of e-portfolio use, students are most interested in the ways in which e-portfolios can enhance their C.V.’s both before and after graduation.

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