EPORTFOLIOS:
THE CORNERSTONE OF PERSONAL LEARNING

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ePortfolios have generated much interest and discussion on their impact on education. ePortfolios are central teaching and learning channels that promote lifelong learning and educational advancement as a whole. This paper provides an overview of ePortfolios, their diverse uses and effect on education.

Since the early 1990s the term "electronic portfolio" has been described in a variety of ways (McGrath, Molder, Quon, Trapnell & Wilton, 2004). An ePortfolio differs from a conventional cumulative folder because it has a specific purpose, criteria for inclusion, knowledge acquisition and assessment criteria. An ePortfolio is a social learning application and the cornerstone for continued development of user-centric social learning tools.

ePortfolios:

- Reinforce the process of learning
- Embrace a user-centric approach and prompt students to take more responsibility for their learning
- Integrate with Learning Management Systems
- Enable students to receive feedback and assessment from peers and others
- Showcase student achievements to multiple audiences
- Provide a portable demonstration of users' acquisition of knowledge and skills
- Place personal learning in a social networking context

ePortfolios enable students to enhance their learning by giving them a better understanding of their skills, as well as where and how they need to improve in order to meet their academic and career goals (Lorenzo and Ittelson, 2005, October). The ePortfolio has emerged as an instrument that facilitates mobility, transparency and acknowledgement of the formal and informal learning developed throughout life (Oliveria, 2006). Furthermore, ePortfolios can seamlessly pair social networking and informal learning with traditional classroom education thus accelerating and expanding learning. Harnessing social learning enables institutions to be more responsive and learner-focused across the entire learning landscape. Students can be linked to an active network of their peers and mentors enabling learning beyond the boundaries of the classroom. Additionally, Web 2.0 standard interface components, such as a dashboard and tagging, help to alert, organize, empower and engage users. The ability to publish in a variety of media within the ePortfolio gives users ultimate control over their learning journey. ePortfolios can truly embrace the idea of a personal learning environment.

ePortfolios can be utilized by students, faculty and staff and by the administration of an institution. ePortfolios tend to have six major functions (Lorenzo and Ittelson, 2005, July; Kahn, 2001). They facilitate users to:

- Plan educational programs
- Document knowledge, skills, abilities and learning
- Track development
- Define, develop and embark on a career path
- Evaluate a course, program or institution
- Monitor and evaluate personal performance

Uses by Students

Student ePortfolios have a multitude of uses:

- Serve as a map of the learning journey from grade school to higher education continuing throughout their lifetime
- Assess communication skills (Paretti, 2004)
- Provide evidence for educational effectiveness
- Track student's progress towards course, department, program and/or institutional learning (knowledge management)
- Enable authentic and flexible classroom assessment (Barrett, 2006)
- Encourage enriched advising processes
- Widen participation and opportunities for students from minority, ethnic and lower socioeconomic groups to gain entry to higher education (Currant, 2006)
- Enable digital storytelling as a deep learning tool (Barrett, 2004)
- Provide career tracking and career development opportunities
- Link to their peers and mentors

- Reinforce personal identity
- Provide a completely learner-centric approach
- Share skills, qualities and achievements with multiple audiences
- Provide the ability to create, capture, reflect, share, assess and collaborate on learning experiences
- Enhance constructivist learning by encouraging and facilitating personal reflection and peer feedback

Uses by Faculty

Faculty ePortfolios are equally robust:

- Provide clear and concise evidence of the quality of their classroom teaching
- Organize a collection of complex, performance-based evidence that indicates one's growth, goals and current knowledge and skills needed to be competent in a role or area of expertise (Seldin, 1997)
- Store and present a résumé, a statement of teaching philosophy, reflective tools to demonstrate professional growth and materials which collectively suggest the scope and quality of a professor's teaching performance to support promotion and/or tenure
- Facilitate collaboration in curriculum development, teaching and research
- Collect and share professional development experiences
- Provide faculty with snapshots of student growth to better understand individual students and the broader process of teaching and learning (LaGuardia Community College/ CUNY, 2008)

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Uses by Institutions

Institutional uses of ePortfolios are multi-dimensional:

- Enable institutions to increase transparency for evaluation and benchmarking
- Allow institutions to respond to calls for greater accountability, outcomes-based accreditation, and the transportability of credits (McGrath, Molder, Quon, Trapnell & Wilton, 2004; IUPUI, 2000)
- Collect and analyze Business Intelligence
- Aggregate individual effort at the course, department and instructional level
- Contribute to the development of a more permanent role in the lives of students (i.e., education is not viewed as a fixed term relationship, but rather a life-long relationship) (Siemens, 2004)

Uses in Higher Education

Higher education in particular can use ePortfolios to help users analyze patterns in their learning based on learning outcomes and performance criteria. ePortfolios link innovative pedagogy with digital technology and new thinking about assessment (LaGuardia Community College/CUNY, 2012). Assessment ePortfolios are being adopted at a growing number of colleges and universities worldwide as both highly individualized self-assessments and as evidence of student accomplishment and self-reflection linked to standards and learning outcomes (Lorenzo and Ittelson, 2005, October). ePortfolios enable the solicitation of feedback, comments and assessment with rubrics on any item. Grades, competencies and learning objectives add to the formal assessment component of ePortfolios.

Additional benefits include assisting users in making connections between their learning experiences, which may include both formal and informal learning, providing the metacognitive elements needed to assist learners in planning future learning needs based on previous successes and failures and, providing the users with personal control of their learning history (Siemens, 2004). Learning can be enhanced and users can develop strong critical thinking skills. Users can be linked to institution and program goals such as ethics, social responsibility and communication skills. And, constructivist learning can be enhanced by encouraging and facilitating personal reflection and peer feedback. A common requirement for professional degrees is for graduates to be able to demonstrate competency in a range of skills before they can be accredited for employment (i.e., teaching, engineering). An ePortfolio can easily be used to capture authentic and verified evidence to fulfill such professional accreditation requirements.

ePortfolios can also be used as an exit requirement where users create and defend their ePortfolio which contains digital artifacts that demonstrate competencies related to their discipline – this could actually replace the Masters' thesis. Furthermore, the entire advising process and individual educational planning process can be enriched by using ePortfolios.

Uses in K–12

Portfolios have a history of use within the K–12 community, but have not necessarily been widely adopted. Through technology, the application of ePortfolios is facilitated easily for a wide variety of K–12 uses. Most easily ePortfolios have been used in the K–12 space as a collaboration tool for joint projects or written assignments that require outside editing. This minimal use extends the network of reviewers, but is not harnessing the full potential or portability of the product.

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A key to learning is promoting comfort and interaction among students and faculty to collaborate on learning (Palloff and Pratt, 1999). Providing a mechanism where students feel comfortable illustrating performance of their acquisition of knowledge and skills through a variety of mediums empowers them to be creative in their illustrations. Not only can students archive, request feedback and publish their academic endeavors to anyone in the world, they can be accessed on the value of these presentations and use them as validation to employers, colleges and others interested in gauging student success. The reflective nature of the learning process is encouraged through ePortfolio with teachers and students encouraging and exemplifying that interaction. Additionally, students have portable, illustrative documentation of their academic abilities to use when matriculating between school levels or to new schools. Counselors and student placement specialists have more than grades and test results when placing students in appropriate classes. Personal educational plans can be proscribed and fulfilled through portfolios presentations. Furthermore, teachers can document their professional development plans with student work and assessments, highlighting their strengths and accomplishments in improving student success.

Conclusion

Today's user demands a personalized learning experience that extends beyond traditional boundaries to include social networks of peers, evaluators and even external experts. ePortfolios are being adopted at a growing number of schools, school districts, colleges and universities worldwide as both highly individualized self-assessments and as evidence of student accomplishment and self-reflection linked to standards and learning outcomes (Lorenzo and Ittelson, 2005, October). They also provide a program assessment process where teachers and faculty can examine and improve classes and programs based on student achievement of those learning objectives and standards.

Advocates of ePortfolios claim they are the biggest software evolution in education since the creation of learning management systems. According to Love, McKean and Gathercoal (2004), ePortfolios may have the most significant effect on education since the introduction of formal schooling. ePortfolios have become a primary tool for students, faculty and staff to document their accomplishments and move forward in their lifelong pursuit of learning by reflecting on those accomplishments. ePortfolios such as the one offered by Desire2Learn clearly demonstrate such educational advancement. www.Desire2Learn.com/ePortfolio

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