EPORTFOLIO IMPLEMENTATION CONSIDERATIONS AND BEST PRACTICES

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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. But, as with any software, numerous aspects need to be considered for a successful implementation.

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 (Lorenzo and Ittelson, 2005, July; Barrett, 2006). Many organizations and institutions have deployed ePortfolio tools and learning from their experience will help those new to ePortfolios maximize the benefits while mitigating the risks.

Implementation Considerations

Implementing an institutional approach for ePortfolios will enable success and identify areas of concern and policy development needs. To be effective, the utilization needs to be embedded into the plans and processes for teaching, learning and assessment. In an ideal implementation the ePortfolio would be treated as a central component to the learning and assessment process by users. Learners would be introduced to the concept and instructed on how to use the system. The curriculum would be designed to require learners to use the ePortfolio in completing their course work, establish individual development plans and be used for assessment of learning objectives. Learners would then be provided with staged advising sessions and peer feedback/collaboration which would evaluate their effective application of ePortfolios and they would be encouraged to include personal life experiences, awards, non-academic activities and other character/learning revealing artifacts.

It would be prudent that careful thought and consideration be given to various aspects of implementing an organization-wide technology solution before the actual implementation begins. With careful thought and planning, deploying an ePortfolio will significantly engage users in a lifelong learning tool. Deploying an ePortfolio product requires solutions and policies concerning:

- Sufficient technical infrastructure, support and scalability (i.e., amount of storage, support and long- term maintenance implications, archiving, transferability of ePortfolios, integrating ePortfolios into existing enterprise systems such as the SIS)

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- Adequate security and privacy protections (i.e., setting permissions to restrict or grant access, FERPA and/or equivalent/similar privacy legislation in other countries)
- Clear policies and guidelines about ownership, access and intellectual property
- Appropriate assessment and accountability processes (i.e., moving from paper transcripts to those that include ePortfolios, definition of legal record - shift from institutionally-based to lifelong learner-based records)
- Well-defined adoption and pedagogical strategies (i.e., strategy to help users develop the reflective skills needed to support an effective assessment of skills that address both process and product, strategy to help users develop ePortfolios that are useful in applying for jobs) (Paretti, 2004; Lorenzo and Ittelson, 2005, October)
- Beyond graduation considerations of ongoing access, use and storage (Droste, Jongeling, and van der Hoorn, 2008), establishment of policies for the cost and ongoing updates/maintenance
- Exportability of content
- Encouraging both faculty/teachers and student use of ePortfolios

Any portfolio system is an individual, user based system. The user is the "owner" of the portfolio and has management rights for the area. It is not an area that is institution, program or course based. There may be a conflict in how different faculty/teachers expect an individual student to use their portfolio space.

Therefore, there needs to be clearly outlined purpose(s) of the tool including whether it is to be used as:

- A space for personal records, reflections and achievement
- A place to develop and store a résumé and allow guest access
- An account of achievement (the saving of artifacts) throughout a course of study
- A place to record practical experiences
- A place to record the attainment of goals (professional goals, undergraduate competencies, other)
- A place for collaboration and social learning (not only peer-to-peer but also student-advisor and student-faculty mentoring relationships) or
- Any combination of these

Best Practices

Some of the most important practices surrounding ePortfolios are to have clear expectations and explanations for all parties, for users to know how the ePortfolios will be used, for faculty to know what institutional expectations are and, for technology divisions to know what will be required of them in maintaining systems.

The ePortfolio needs to be viewed as a high level tool for use throughout a course of study and possibly beyond. If it has a "life" after graduation, it could then be viewed as a vehicle to promote the concept of ongoing or lifelong learning. Those looking to adopt the technology need to consider its benefits over an extended period of time.

There are many successful examples of ePortfolio implementation to be emulated. Even though processes from seven years ago may be considered ancient in the world of technology, exemplary best practices are still resonant today.

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The following list of best practices was developed by the University of Wisconsin, Madison in 2002 after reviewing the practices being utilized by numerous institutions. Of course, as with all best practices, each institution will take the most applicable of these and apply them to their unique situation:

- Agreement at the institutional level on the definition and purposes of ePortfolios as well as a shared vision of what role(s) ePortfolios can play at an institution
- Connection of ePortfolios in schools and colleges to some guiding educational goals and framework
- Faculty involvement to identify the educational goals that provide a framework for ePortfolios and in designing the templates
- Academic and Career Advisor involvement in creating the ePortfolio elements and processes. Advisor involvement in creating the ePortfolio elements and processes will be key as ePortfolios can be a resource to assist advisors. If one of the main purposes is to assist users in their path through the institution and into the work world, it is important to have advisors involved in the definition of an ePortfolio initiative
- Generic but flexible format(s) designed for ePortfolios that colleges, schools and departments can adapt to their learning goals and culture
- Introduction of users to ePortfolios as they enter the institution. The earlier they are introduced and used, the more effective they can be in improving learning. The earlier ePortfolios are introduced the more users can implement them along the way to shape, guide and document their learning. ePortfolios introduced early in an educational career can be viewed as a formative evaluation of a user's educational career
- An ePortfolio initiative should be capitalized on as a means to teach users the technology and communication skills they need to be effective in today's learning and work environments

- Support for users in all phases of ePortfolio development
- Build scaffolding for each type of ePortfolio use (you may need to build forms, design templates, activities, rubrics, content that shows process flow, etc); this design effort really pays off
- Leverage the institution's Learning Management System
- Feedback mechanisms built into the ePortfolio process to users. Depending on purpose, feedback can be provided by peers, faculty, academic and career advisors, or potential employers

Other best practices guidelines include (Bergman, 2002; Davis, 2002):

- Instill ownership; build ePortfolios into recognition programs and culture
- Incorporate assessment stakeholders in all phases and components of your efforts
- Rely on faculty volunteers, don't force anyone to participate and involve the institution's most respected faculty members from the outset
- Provide room for individual differences
- Appreciation of where the ePortfolio fits into the user's online ecosystem (i.e., it is not a Facebook, it will not replace other social networking applications)

Furthermore,

- Familiarize users with programmatic learning outcomes
- Share the rubric that will be used in ePortfolio assessment
- Define institution policy of acceptable use of ePortfolios
- Establish program, school and institution expectations and accountability measures of use

- Provide users with models of ePortfolios that illustrate different ways of meeting programmatic outcomes, satisfy rubric criteria and portray the development of lifelong learning
- Facilitate a seamless transfer of information via ePortfolio with coordination among educational levels of the purpose of use (Dorste, Jongeling, and van der Hoorn, 2008)
- Emulate and require reflection by instructors and leadership through ePortfolio use
- Teach users that ongoing, rigorous reflection is a crucial part of the process of creating ePortfolios that are dynamic, not static, websites
- Create a process of user input into practice and continuous improvement of ePortfolio use

- Instill ownership
- Provide for user differences
- Provide support, examples, feedback and reflection to users
- Familiarize users with learning outcomes, rubrics and acceptable use
- Enable continuous improvement and growth as your model evolves
- Determine policies for lifelong learning after a user graduates and leaves the institution

Conclusion

Knowing the aspects that need to be considered and the accepted best practices enables one to critically evaluate the implementation, support and maintenance of an ePortfolio tool. Awareness provides for better planning and communication as students, faculty and the institution adopt an ePortfolio. As with any tool, hard work is an essential ingredient in learning how to use it productively and creatively.

Therefore, to summarize, before your institution begins their ePortfolio implementation, consider these overarching aspects:

- Be sure all stakeholders are in agreement regarding the definition, uses, goals, objectives and purpose of the ePortfolio
- Be sure the format is flexible, introduced early in a user's academic career and is capitalized on as a means to prepare the user for their future learning and/or working environment

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