

Tracking the trends

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This year, some students completing secondary school in British Columbia will have developed a Graduation Portfolio containing evidence of their competencies in areas beyond the usual academic curriculum – their competencies in Arts and Design, Community Involvement and Responsibility, Education and Career Planning, Employability Skills, Information Technology, and Personal Health. Many of these portfolios will be in electronic format – ePortfolios. This system-wide initiative of the Ministry of Education acknowledges the fact that students need more than academic skills to make transitions to the worlds of work and active citizenship.¹ In Quebec, primary students in the English school boards build ePortfolios of their achievements and learning developments over their school years. This initiative, lead by the work of the Centre for the Study of Learning and Performance at Concordia University,² builds on the theories of authentic and ongoing assessment of learning, student involvement in assessment, and reflective learning. Beyond the K-12 school systems, the ePortfolio is making waves in the worlds of higher and adult education, training, career and human resources management, lifelong learning, learning management, digital media and eLearning. There are good reasons! This article examines its application in the K-12 setting with suggestions for supporting systematic implementation and achieving the potential benefits of ePortfolios.

POTENTIAL IMPACT ON TEACHING AND LEARNING

The ePortfolio represents opportunities and challenges for students and teachers:

- ⇒ new ways of teaching, assessing and managing student learning.
- ⇒ new ways of recording teaching experience and managing one's career.
- ⇒ new skills students, teachers and administrators.

Most educators are familiar with portfolio assessment, electronic assessment tools, reflective learning, digital communication tools, student information systems; the ePortfolio builds on and extends these concepts for students. Most adults are familiar with electronic resumes and the production of evidence for professional growth and career development; the ePortfolio, again, builds on and extends these concepts for educators.

DEFINING THE e'PORTFOLIO

¹ Information retrieved from http://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/edinfo/reading_room/portfolio.htm.

² Information available at <http://doe.concordia.ca/cslp/ICT-ePortfolio.php>

An ePortfolio is an electronic record of learning acquired from all learning environments – a digitally created and managed archive of acquired skills and knowledge. The term “learning” is used to mean a body of skills, knowledge and abilities acquired from any environment – inside and outside the classroom.

The formal definition of an ePortfolio is “a collection of authentic and diverse evidence, drawn from a larger archive representing what a person or organization has learned over time on which the person or organization has reflected, and designed for presentation to one or more audiences for a particular rhetorical purpose”³. The term “ePortfolio” is shorthand for both process and product. The product is both the digital archive and the presentation drawn from it. The ePortfolio development process includes identification, collection, selection, reflection and presentation of evidence of learning.

Historically, the ePortfolio has been used in many contexts:

- in primary and secondary education as a tool for demonstration of learning;
- in higher and post-secondary education for the assessment of learning;
- lifelong learning to enable continuous “reflective” learning and to inventory all types of learning;
- the workplace for the recognition of work experience and workplace training, for recruitment and targeted training, and for career advancement;
- eLearning for Learning Management Systems and Knowledge Management through both online tools and web-based services; and
- organizational and/ or economic development through asset mapping and quality assurance.

Basically, there are three types of ePortfolios – standards-based, showcase, and social networking.

K-12 APPLICATIONS

Many schools are now requiring students to generate and use ePortfolios. As in BC, ePortfolios may be used to demonstrate and showcase competencies outside the academic curriculum, for example, the competencies required for active citizenship. In other cases, students may create ePortfolios of their learning in academic programs to show progress and achievement in a course or program against stated learning outcomes. In many schools, students comment on each others work using social networking ePortfolio tools.

The ePortfolio has a range of applications in the K-12 setting. For teachers, it can be a tool for teaching skills, both ITC skills and reflective learning skills; assessing student's prior knowledge; alternative assessment, to supplement traditional assessment techniques; and learning management, assessing learning against curriculum outcomes. For students, it can be a demonstration of achievement and

³ As defined by the National Learning Infrastructure Initiative (2003).

change from learning inside and outside the classroom, the beginning of a lifelong learning record. For both, it is a communication tool and a practical application of important ICT and media skills.

TIPS FOR TEACHERS

If you are just being introduced to ePortfolios, here are some tips for you. First, brush up on your digital literacy and media skills. You'll need to be able to help students scan documents and help upload audio files, among other things. You'll need to know (at least a little) about blogging and vlogging (video logging). Second, carefully choose the ePortfolio tool you want to use. There are countless products on the market, in addition to open source tools. Different tools achieve different ends, so... Third, be clear about what you want to achieve. Is it demonstration of learning? Is it for assessment of learning? Fourth, students absolutely must be able to take their ePortfolios with them. Ensure that the system you use guarantees that students own their own materials. Encourage your students to include the KSA they acquire from their community and family activities. Help them find alternative ways to use their ePortfolios. Finally, it will be easiest to help students and maximize the advantages of ePortfolios if you, yourself, have experienced developing and using your own ePortfolio. You will be able to empathize with students as they create, find or request their own evidence of learning; and you will develop an appreciation for the challenges that are experienced while writing a reflective statement that identifies learning. You will have a record of your personal learning with documents and digital artifacts that can be used to showcase your skills and knowledge to employers when seeking a new position or a promotion. As with all good teaching, you will lead by modeling!

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