

E-portfolios Along the Lifelong Learning Cycle: Differences Between Use, Pedagogy and Context.

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Abstract

This short paper will discuss the initial evaluation findings of an on-going project utilising the use of e-portfolios at key stages of transition and professional development. The mid-point data will illustrate that e-portfolios offer different benefits within the lifelong learning cycle. There are differences in the pedagogical outcomes, the use of the e-portfolios and learner and mentor/supervisor engagement within different contexts, particularly between the educational and work spheres.

1. Introduction

The concept of using e-portfolios to support lifelong learning has been growing since the publication of 'Harnessing Technology' (2005) and The Dearing recommendations (1997). The development of personalized learning spaces, compulsory Personal Development Planning (PDP) modules on undergraduate courses and learner-centred pedagogies have resulted in the emergence of a variety of e-portfolio and 'e'-centred projects [1].

In a recent report Rob Ward and Helen Richardson stated, "most e-portfolio products have been developed for a particular age or stage of learning rather than to support lifelong learning." [2]. This short paper will examine some of the evaluation findings of one project, working with a range of users, The Enhancing Learner Progression Project (ELP). We will present and discuss the different outcomes measured as they relate to the organizational and stage of learning inhabited by the users. The evaluation data suggests that users at different stages are recording and experiencing different benefits and outcomes and viewing e-portfolios in different ways.

1.2. The Project

The ELP Project is a year-long project examining the use of e-portfolios at key stages of the 'Student Lifecycle Model' (Bradford University 2004). The users of e-portfolios discussed in this paper range from 6th form students applying to university (FE), to undergraduate nurses and to doctors in their initial years of training (PRHO's). All of the e-portfolios were developed in the University of Leeds VLE system, Bodington, and all allow students to submit entries to activities, assessment grids and to upload files. The log-books remain private until the user grants permission for their work to be viewed. All of the users of the e-portfolios receive feedback on the work they have submitted. The project commenced in July 2005 and mid-point evaluation has taken place through the use of on-line questionnaires, focus groups and informal feedback. Data was also collected from a group of doctors not using the e-portfolio.

The main differences recorded between these groups were:

- Engagement
- Feedback
- Pedagogical Outcomes

2. Engagement

Engaging with an e-portfolio or e-learning product is a vital pre-requisite for the success of e-assessment and ownership of learning. The building blocks of lifelong learning are cemented within learner ownership and control. Without positive engagement users will simply view the e-process as just another impersonal academic process to fulfill.

19 students were using the e-portfolio between two FE colleges in the local area. 10 students engaged with the e-tool and completed the process. Those that did not engage fully in the process listed their reasons as 'Not wanting to apply to Leeds University' and

'Decided not to pursue a career in Healthcare or Medicine'. Neither reason relates to the actual use of the e-portfolio tool but to other factors such as career and university choice. An additional 2 colleges had agreed to take part in the project but no students from these institutions engaged with the project. The staff in charge of these two cohorts did not believe in the usefulness of e-portfolios and subsequently did not support or promote the project amongst the student body. All of the engaged learners found the portfolio tool easy to use. The data from the trainee doctors illustrate that usage for the majority of PRHO's increases around the beginning and end of placements, when assessments need to be carried out and forms signed off. Out of 34 PRHO's 25 have used the e-portfolio but only 2 have recorded entries each month and used the e-portfolio as an on-going tool for reflection and recording learning. Equally as important are the numbers of supervisors who have engaged with the e-portfolio. Out of 34 supervisors 10 have used the e-tool with only 1 of these using it regularly.

The under- and post-graduate nurses were given a choice between completing the electronic or progress files the majority of students chose to complete the paper version citing time as the main reason for not completing the e-portfolio. Those that did take part (n=10) have been using the e-portfolio to upload reports and observations from their clinical placements for feedback and comments but their engagement with the entire e-portfolio tool has been mainly isolated to these sections. This is also noticeable, to a slightly lesser extent, in PRHO usage. The majority of the progress file remains unfilled with no linkages being made between the uploaded reports and skills audits. This seems to validate the view that e-portfolio users will be selective about which parts of the technology are of most use to them.[2]

2.2 Feedback

One of the recorded advantages of using e-portfolios is their use in the feedback process. Greenberg (2004) highlights the ability of e-portfolios to be able to act as communicators of remote feedback and to provide greater flexibility to users in this area.

The nursing students and those in college noted this aspect of the e-portfolio as being useful. One nursing student noted 'It's a great idea especially as you are able to get feedback from tutors and supervisors' and all of the supervisors and tutors involved with the course are using the e-portfolio to

post regular feedback to students. The students in colleges also highlighted the use of feedback as an important aspect of using the e-portfolio. 'The feedback from mentors was particularly useful' and it was noted that this feedback was successful in providing a link for the students between the HE and FE worlds.

The feedback process within the PRHO portfolio has not operated remotely and none of the flexible features of the e-portfolio cited by Greenberg have been explored. Only 10 supervisors have accessed the e-portfolio independently from their PRHO's and 15 are accessing the e-portfolio with the trainee and completing the feedback process with the trainee present. This pattern of usage is primarily reserved for assessment periods suggesting that feedback is taking place but is not being recorded within the e-portfolio continuously. This pattern of usage links in with many comments made by the PRHO's concerning time and the availability of PC's on wards etc. The majority are recording feedback and making entries before or after work and being accompanied in this process by their supervisor when work schedules allow. The confidence of supervisors in using the e-portfolio alone is low and many supervisors have commented that a 'paper-based version would be a better idea'.

3. Pedagogical Outcomes

The pedagogical effects of e-tools are discussed in many publications [3]. The results from the evaluation do suggest that these outcomes are dependent on the context in which the e-portfolio is being used.

The students in FE recorded feeling that the e-portfolio had helped to increase their knowledge of subject specific requirements and students noted that 'having everything in one place made it easier to look back at what I'd done.' All stated that they understood the process of reflective thinking and how it related to their future career choices. The students also noted that the mentor support had been of importance when completing the e-portfolio. 'Receiving feedback on my entries particularly increased my confidence and knowledge of the area I wanted to apply to.' All of the students who completed the e-portfolio process have been invited to university interviews and 2 have received offers for highly competitive courses.

The PRHO's data was compared with a group of paper-based portfolio users undertaking the same work-related course. The data illustrates that 75% of

those who responded to the evaluation have been using the 'Reflective Practice' (n=8). All have used the PDP section, but this is compulsory for registration purposes. The Reflective section is not. Out of the 6 that have used the reflective practice section only 1 stated that they found it useful. When asked how they felt the e-portfolio helped them 3 of them felt that it helped them to track their competences only 1 of the users felt it had helped them increase their skills of reflection and 2 stated that it had helped them to identify their strengths and weaknesses and record their achievements. None of the users felt it had enabled them to organize their time.

The two sets of PRHO's, paper and e-users, were asked to rate their own skills in a number of areas and comparisons can be drawn from the results. The users of the e-portfolio tool felt they were better at organization, presenting evidence for assessment, planning their careers, defining goals and they believed that they had better skills of reflection. With 2 of the e-portfolio users classing themselves as 'excellent' at this skill. The e-portfolio users also rate themselves as being more able to cope with patients and being able to balance their work and studies. One E-portfolio user commented that 'it made me think about things I wouldn't normally think about' and another 'it's good to have everything in one place'. The PRHO's view themselves as better reflectors than the paper-based portfolio users but they do not link this personal development with the use of the e-portfolio.[5]

The nurse-users data contrasts with the data from the PRHO's. 50% of the users have been using the 'reflection and skills' section and the same 50% of the students found this to be the most useful part of the e-portfolio. When asked how the e-portfolio had helped them 50% stated that it had helped them to increase their skills of reflection and all of the students felt that their skills of reflection were ok or better.

4. Conclusions

Are users in an educational setting more likely to accept the pedagogical benefits of using an e-portfolio? Do factors in the work place inhibit the usage of e-portfolio's for professional development? The results would suggest that this could be the case but more in-depth evaluation needs to take place before definite conclusions can be drawn. A summary of the results extracted so far are listed in figure 1.

Stage	of	Reflection	Usage	Volume
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Learning			of e-tool used
Pre-18	Yes	Continuous	100%
Undergraduate	Yes	Continuous	<20%
Work	No	Assessment	<50%

educational supporters. Without their support, learner usage of the e-portfolio declines. From our results this has impacted on the use of the e-portfolio in a work-based setting. Users in work-based setting also seem less likely to attribute the development of reflective skills to the use of e-tools. Those in education recognize clearly this benefit of using the e-portfolio.

E-portfolio content has to be adapted to the context in which the tool is utilized but one model of e-portfolio could be utilized within the lifelong learning cycle. Other issues, mentioned above, arise as the use of the e-portfolio moves along this cycle. It is the process and people, their stage in the learning cycle and e-competences that are important, not the technology.

5. References

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- [5] Murray C, Pellow. A, Hennessy. S, Currant N, Higgison. C 'User Perspectives on the Pedagogical Differences Between Electronic and Paper Portfolios?' paper to be delivered April 2006.
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Table 1. Summary of outcomes, usage and volume
of e-portfolio usage”

The main issues drawn out of the evaluation focus
on the engagement and confidence of supervisors and