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ePortfolios: Let Me Count the Ways

By Trent Batson   01/06/10

As an ePortfolio researcher, advocate, implementer, and executive director of the ePortfolio professional association, AAEEBL.org, I've heard many definitions of electronic portfolios. The problem is, "If it's everything, then it's nothing." So, how to characterize the words *portfolio* and *electronic portfolio* in today's context?

The best way to understand the portfolio concept is to identify why we educators suddenly have such a strong impulse to use electronic portfolios. Here are some practical reasons:

1. Students can produce many times the volume of work compared to 15 or 20 years ago.

2. Students can produce many different file types--video and audio and photos, and others.

3. Some of the work students do is integrally linked with other sites and other work.

4. Students and faculty engage in interactions through e-mail, blogs, wikis, chat, conferencing software, etc., and these interactions can be preserved and used as evidence of learning.

5. The amount of time students spend in alternative, co-curricular, and experiential activities is increasing and evidence can be collected from those activities as well.

In short, there's just a lot of stuff, the stuff is varied in form and content, and therefore it is hard to make sense of such a conglomeration. The first impulse is to gather it in a single place. In this case, portfolio is an organizing impulse. One would not have to have a reason beyond just needing a permanent place to collect student work to wish for a portfolio.

Other Reasons

However, we can find many other reasons why portfolios have become common or the desire for implementing portfolios is so widespread. At the top of the list is a general trend toward more student-centered education. Rather than the teacher doing so much of the work and therefore learning more than anyone else in the class, many teachers have found ways to transfer initiative and responsibility to students through problem-based learning, or participatory learning, or field study and so on. Once the student has more responsibility for her own learning momentum, she'll need a place to store cumulative work over time. Portfolios fill that role.

Also near the top of the list is the interest among assessment professionals to get a better picture of how students learn as a way to then adjust the curriculum, or as a way to generate reports for the institution. Portfolios can help assessment professionals gather data about individual students or cohorts of students. The data can then be used to generate reports

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throughout the year to fulfill the institutional research responsibilities of the institution.

Another factor is the interest in shifting from a product focus in learning--students performing by producing a piece of work--to instead focus more on the thinking and planning processes that precedes the product. Experts in any field know how to contextualize the work they do but novices, who may be able to produce the work, do not have that same context-setting thinking ability. Instead of working on the solution, for example, why not start with why the problem is important and asking if there are other ways to approach the problem? Portfolios, as a way to keep track of the various iterations in the context-building *process*, again address a need that has emerged in the last twenty or so years as we attempt to move away from an exclusive product-focus toward a process and product focus.

Finally, educators have long recognized that meta-cognition is perhaps the best way to describe what students must gain before they graduate from college. The ability to see different points of view, to stand back and look objectively at your own work or even your own self, to choose wisely what is not only good for you but for others affected by your choice, and therefore the ability to keep learning, is inescapably the key thinking ability that marks you as a college graduate. Meta-cognitive skills and habits can develop in any discipline, be it physics or writing, math, or philosophy. The collection of work in a portfolio offers opportunities for students to reflect on their own work over time, which is perhaps the most powerful and meaningful advantage of the portfolio for learning. When students are emotionally dissociated by time from their early work and can therefore judge that work objectively, they are taking a giant step toward developing meta-cognitive skills and habits.

Summing Up Portfolios

The impulse toward portfolio is strong, based in the reasons just mentioned:

1. Organizing disparate and plentiful student work artifacts

2. Providing a permanent place for students to store their work as education moves more toward active learning and integration of learning in one field with learning in another field

3. Providing better and broader evidence of learning for assessment purposes

4. Providing a means to track stages in the context-setting thinking process that occurs before beginning work on the product

5. Creating opportunities for students to develop meta-cognitive abilities and habits

Portfolios are therefore not a separate, stand-alone initiative, but instead are fully embedded in the learning trends of the day. Portfolios can be very useful when tied in with learning initiatives already in process on campus. If portfolios, instead, are considered a technology that then drives a separate process on campus, there is little chance of success and practically no justification for making such an effort.

Once we see that portfolios fit so well with trends in education, they seem simple to understand, logical, and natural.

Those institutions that started their portfolio initiative by choosing a technology product and telling people to use it probably had been misled by technology hype suggesting that the technology itself can do things. A better approach is for a department or school or program to analyze how a portfolio can augment the kind of learning trends mentioned in this article that may already be in use in the program. Then, design the curriculum to use portfolios to best augment those trends. The portfolio approach is a transformative engine. Make it so.

The portfolio technology the program chooses--from paper to a full-spectrum ePortfolio product--should be chosen once the curriculum re-design has been completed.

The Definition

A portfolio, we can now see, is best defined as a method that augments learning trends of today and also helps academia deal with the overwhelming quantity and variety of work artifacts today. A portfolio is one of the most important learning tools or methods of this century. But, it stands out from all other learning tools or methods by having the power, with the right planning, to transform an entire institution into an *au currant* institution, as has happened on a number of campuses.

It is very important to understand portfolios in this way. Much of the buzz has been about products, much of the effort around portfolios has been trying to bend an ePortfolio technology chosen too impulsively to the needs on campus, and much of the emotion around portfolios today has to do with the technology and not the concept. It is easy to be critical of the difficulties educators have experienced in trying to use ePortfolio technologies but, in concept, it would be sophistry to argue against the heightened need for a portfolio in this age. Portfolios have been around for a thousand years. Our challenge now is how to re-think portfolios in digital form so they can continue to augment learning as they have always done.

Let's separate the concept from the technology long enough to catch our breath, understand the essential nature of portfolio, and therefore develop more reasonable plans about using portfolios.

A Closing Thought

This article was intended to present a broad view of portfolio to help us understand the value of portfolio. Therefore, I haven't attempted to describe the many ways that portfolios are used-- from a learning record for employment purposes, to assessment management, to story-telling, to creation of a specific genre, or to learning and advisement purposes--all these uses leading to the claim "if it's everything, it's nothing."

The same could be said for a car--used as a taxicab, as a way to transport children to soccer practice, as a way to go faster than anyone else on a track, as a means to commute to work, as a place to live if you are homeless, as a status symbol, as a way to conquer mountain dirt roads, and so on. But, essentially, the car is a means to increase human mobility. At this conceptual level, we all understand what a car is. The same is true for a portfolio-- if you start with all the uses, you are stymied in trying to find a definition, an essence. But at the conceptual level, portfolios are, in essence, a method to improve learning that is appropriate in this digital age.

A bout the Author

Trent Batson, Ph.D. has served as an English professor, director of academic computing, and has been an IT leader since the mid -1980s. He is currently executive director of The Association for Authentic, Experiential and Evidence-Based Learning (AAEEBL, www.aaeebl.org), a new professional association for the ePortfolio community. He is the former Chair of the Board of the Open Source Portfolio Initiative, and Senior Contributing Editor for Campus Technology's Web 2.0 e-newsletter. trentbatson@mac.com

Comments

Thu, Jan 7, 2010 Kelly Walsh White Plains, NY
Great article, providing solid insight into why ePortfolios have become an important, impactful tool for today's students. I researched tools to allow students to create and maintain their own ePortfolio using a free Internet based tool, and settled on Google Sites as the way to go. Here's a blog post that discusses this: http://www.emergingedtech.com/2009/10/using-google-sites -to-create-e-portfolios-for-students/

Thu, Jan 7, 2010 Ray Tolley Gateshead, UK
Trent, A comprehensive article! Thanks, but I suspect that your thinking is coloured by the mess that many HE institutions have got themselves into. (I am sure that you are aware that mainstream education, well certainly in the UK, is much better more concious of the benefits of the VLE without running to 'Cloud Computing'.) You mention the need to store all of a student's artefacts in one place - surely that 'one place' should be the institution's VLE along with associated MIS and assessment tools? Where this IS the case, the e-Portfolio then becomes the learner owned Self-Representation of the individual through their selected artefacts along with the more personal information that more fully describes the individual. Secondly (where are the paragraph markers?) I would put modern 'liberated' pedagogy as the driving force for e-Portfolios at the top of your list. Things like pride of ownership, individual presentational styles, learning styles, personal interests, chosen mentors, informal learning etc are all part of the pedagogy which teachers should be encouraging. All of these pedagogical skills are enabled or enhanced through the e-Portfolio in ways that the formal VLE cannot deliver.
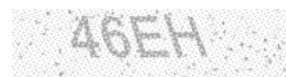
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