Linking Individual Learning Plans to ePortfolios

Susan Crichton
University of Calgary, Canada

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the 1990s, educators working in alternative schools explored the use of individual learning plans as support for at risk students and reluctant, returning adult learners (Crichton, 2005; Crichton & Kinsel, 2002). These early learning plans were strictly paper based. Each student had her/his own cardboard folder that contained goal personal statements, benchmarks, course process, and personal information (e.g., interests, preferred learning styles). Samples of completed work were included in the folders so students could see their improvement/progress. By 1998, there was interest in exploring the potential of technology to improve the paper portfolios, noting improvements in multimedia authoring and Internet access. It was found that electronic learning plans, complete with collaborative journals, showed promise (Kinsel, 2004). This chapter suggests that ePortfolios that draw on content from personal eJournals extend those early learning plans both in concept and impact on learning.

BACKGROUND

In many ways, electronic journals and portfolios are a natural extension of individual learning plans as they encourage authentic ways for individuals to demonstrate his/her growing understanding of a content area and a developing sense of self through demonstrations of learning. Sparks (1999) suggests that rich and meaningful learning opportunities should provide a bridge to the future by helping students to learn how to learn, "… so they can keep up with the rapidly changing world" (p. 20). This is consistent with the early work of Goffmann (1959, p. 20) who states, "We come into this world as individuals, achieve character, and become persons." The development of a positive sense of self appears key to learner success, and it must be recognized that it is something that individuals must create for themselves.

Initially, the rationale for the development of an individual learning plan was predicated on the understanding that

… the development of a complex, multi-faceted sense of self can increase student achievement and self-confidence. Individualized learning links the personal and social identities of students with the academic curriculum, mapping a

pathway to activities appropriate to the needs and goals and the development of an increasingly complex sense of self (Crichton & Kinsel, 2002, p. 143).

The theoretical framework for the use of early paper-based learning plans was anchored in activity theory (Vygotsky, 1994), encouraging learners to think about what they want to do, how they learn best, what supports they need, and what their prior learning has afforded them. To engage this type of thinking, the natural evolution into electronic learning plans included an interactive, personal journal area where the learner and facilitator could communicate about experiences, successes, and failures, and generally document and reflect on the learning experience. This journaling area was designed to support the notion that learning must start at a personal level, and then gradually progress to the public and applied levels (Crichton & Kinsel, 2002).

In recent years, the literature (Barrett, 2003, 2005; Fox, Kidd, Painter, & Ritchie, 2006; Jafari & Kaufman, 2006) is rife with discussion about the value of portfolios (both paper and electronic) for educational purposes. Described by the National Learning Infrastructure Initiative as "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" (Barrett, 2005, p. 5), portfolios typically serve the purpose of assessment for learning, narrative of discovery, and tools for reflection. This, and the literature that follows, informed the initial design of the ePortfolio initiative shared in this chapter.

In general, the structure of ePortfolios varies. Throughout the literature, mention is made of a template as "a master or pattern from which similar things can be made" (Flanigan & Amirian, 2006, p. 111). Templates range from specific portfolio software to style pages in Dreamweaver that prevent ePortfolio development from being "… simply an exercise in Web design […suggesting the templates help to] … focus attention on developing the content of the ePortfolio" (Romance, Whitesell, Smith, & Louden, 2006, p. 534) without requiring advance experience/courses in HTML.

The literature suggests that portfolios can help faculty sustain and enhance the quality of pedagogy for preservice teachers by engaging them in conversation and reflection, and assessing those interactions in meaningful, authentic

ways. The ability to do this rests in the design of a portfolio experience that encourages risk taking, good questioning, and documenting the responses to those questions/experiences in manageable, sustainable, and meaningful ways (Black & Wiliam, 1998).

Commonly expressed in the literature, portfolios emphasize analysis and reflection by honoring the process not the product (Acosta & Liu, 2006). However, as Flannigan and Amirian (2006) note, "Documents, projects, and video that student felt represented their best works and abilities were collected as artifacts for the portfolios" (p. 105). This appears to place value on the quality of product over the process, which is consistent with the generally understood notion that portfolios are collections of quality work, and tends to come from the field of architecture and art, where portfolios are used as showcases of a body of work used by the architect or artist to gain work or additional study.

Implied in the literature is the potential to incorporate digital documentation as evidence for portfolio claims. Dahlberg, Moss, and Pence (1999) describe the importance of documentation for reflective practice, noting it "enables us to see how we ourselves understand and 'read' what is going on in practice; with this as a base, it is easier to see that our own descriptions as pedagogues are constructed descriptions. Hence, they become researchable and open for discussion and change" (p. 147). The documentation process also introduces students to authentic uses of technology to support information gathering and management as well as social networking, collaboration, and community building.

The research findings presented in this chapter challenge some of the notions presented in the literature while supporting others. This chapter will report on the integration of eJournals within an ePortfolio environment to encourage the development of a community of practice among student teachers, partner teachers, and university instructors. Building from research into the use of learning plans, this chapter extends the current thinking of ePortfolios, stressing the importance of an eJournal as a personal repository from which to draw meaningful portfolio items. Continuous developments in social software allow BLOGs to be an essential tool to build and sustain a community of practice.

The relevance of this topic rests in the link between journaling and portfolio development as well as the integration of technology for authentic purposes; a core competency for full participation in the 21st century.

LINK BETWEEN LEARNING PLANS AND EDOL

The link between learning plans and eJournals and portfolios rests in the potential they offer to help participants bridge their ability to learn how to learn (Sparks, 1999), and to critically reflect on that ongoing learning. An example of

this type of reflective learning within a university setting is the eDOL (the electronic documentation of learning) project, a core component of the Teacher Preparation program at the University of Calgary. All pre-service teachers (n=800) maintain an eJournal and a series of ePortfolios.

During the two-year pilot study, five core points surfaced from the research:

1. The introduction of ePortfolios alone, without a journal option, placed a premium on the quality of products. Students were not prepared to place works-in-process or examples of challenging work in their portfolios. Because the students felt the word "portfolio" suggested best work, it appeared to limit ongoing discussions of challenges or frustrations that are essential for rich learning.
    *   To remedy this situation, the project shifted from being about ePortfolios alone to focusing on eDOL (electronic documentation of learning). This shift has helped the three participant groups (student teachers along with their university instructors and partner teachers) to interact and share course content, journals, and experiences, thereby, honoring process as well as product.
2. Students needed an electronic journal that they could access anytime/anyplace. Access such as this allowed the students to write in their schools, at home, and basically anywhere there was Internet access. In addition, their partner teachers and university instructors would have the same access options. Because of this ease of access, the eJournal has become a rich archive from which the students could pull portfolio items at specific times in the program.
    *   The login procedures and administrative controls keep the eJournals secure. This is very important as confidential/personal information is shared there, along with images from schools and classrooms.
    *   Maintaining the integrity of the DRUPAL content on a university secure server has been paramount. This has required working closely with the university's information services department to verify user accounts, ensure each module added to the core DRUPAL site is secure, and backup the content in a secure and timely manner.
3. Digital documentation aimed at capturing issues of pedagogy and school environments was essential as a basis for reflection and social interaction as it provides evidence of specific events and contexts. The use of pedagogical documentation truly supports an emphasis on inquiry and reflection. Many forms of digital data can be recorded and placed in the students' journals. Examples include photographs of blackboard illus-

Related Content

Examining User Switch between Mobile Stores: A Push-Pull-Mooring Perspective
Tao Zhou (2016). *Information Resources Management Journal (pp. 1-13).*
www.irma-international.org/article/examining-user-switch-between-mobile-stores/146559

Protecting Organizational Information Resources
Michael D. Wyboand Detmar W. Straub Jr. (1989). *Information Resources Management Journal (pp. 1-16).*
www.irma-international.org/article/protecting-organizational-information-resources/50920

Survey on Prioritizing Test Cases in Various Levels of the Software Development Life Cycle
Gayatri Nayakand Mitrabinda Ray (2021). *International Journal of Information Technology Project Management (pp. 1-28).*
www.irma-international.org/article/survey-on-prioritizing-test-cases-in-various-levels-of-the-software-development-life-cycle/269422

Modelling Fault Detection Using SRGM in Agile Environment and Ranking of Models
Abhishek Srivastava, P. K. Kapur, Deepti Mehrotraand Rana Majumdar (2019). *Journal of Cases on Information Technology (pp. 1-20).*
www.irma-international.org/article/modelling-fault-detection-using-srgm-in-agile-environment-and-ranking-of-models/223172

Predicting the Efficiency and Success Rate of Programming Courses in MOOC Using Machine Learning Approach for Future Employment in the IT Industry
Shivangi Gupta, A. Sai Sabithaand Sunil Kumar Chowdhary (2021). *Journal of Information Technology Research (pp. 30-47).*
www.irma-international.org/article/predicting-the-efficiency-and-success-rate-of-programming-courses-in-mooc-using-machine-learning-approach-for-future-employment-in-the-it-industry/274277