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Gabriella Reznowski
Washington State University

Brian McManus
Washington State University

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You *Can* Take It with You? Student Library Employees, ePortfolios, and “Eidentity” Construction

Gabriella Reznowski
Washington State University Libraries, USA

Brian McManus
Washington State University Libraries, USA

Abstract

ePortfolios have become an important tool for assessing and tracking employee development. In 2008, the Washington State University Libraries became involved in the institution’s ePortfolio initiative. Library supervisors hoped that as a dynamic online tool, the ePortfolio concept would provide an effective method for assessing the library’s body of student employees. Collaborating with the Center for Teaching and Learning (CTLT), the Center for Advising & Career Development (CACD), and Student Computing Services (SCS), the WSU Libraries explored the possibility of using ePortfolios to drive employee assessment. The Access Services unit, with the assistance of the Library Instruction, Library Systems, and the Humanities and Social Sciences units, piloted ePortfolios as an assessment tool that would engage student workers. As an electronic inventory of one’s professional and academic growth, ePortfolios present library supervisors with the opportunity to monitor and evaluate an employee’s progress over time.

Introduction

In the academic world, paper-based portfolios have been used as assessment tools since before the electronic age. The concept of the portfolio has evolved from an instrument for the compilation of works representative of one's best efforts, to a dynamic, multimedia environment for reflection and assessment. While portfolios are generally composed for “an audience of evaluators” (Anthony, 2008, p. 7), the advantages of the portfolio in measuring one's personal growth have also been examined in higher education in more recent years. In academic environments, the power of the ePortfolio in supporting reflective learning has driven its use over other evaluative mechanisms.

ePortfolios may be used toward various ends by different stakeholders; for example, English instructors may view the ePortfolio as a tool to assist students in developing “rhetorical awareness and a rhetorical repertoire via reflection” (Anthony, 2008, p. 9). Goodfellow and Lea (2007) describe ePortfolios as “repositories for digital material and content that users wish to collect and draw on in order to represent their educational and professional interests and achievements” (p. 127). Ittelson (2001) recognizes the multifaceted applications of the ePortfolio, as college students “use the portfolios for various reasons, from reflection and communication with instructors, to presenting their outstanding work and credentials to potential employers” (p. 44). As more institutions adopt ePortfolio projects, including several who have implemented campus-wide initiatives, technical issues and interoperability dominate the current literature.

Literature Review

The ePortfolio’s evolution from a nontraditional resume building tool, to a tool for reflective learning, has changed how ePortfolios are used in education. Research on ePortfolio practice is prevalent in the library literature, as ePortfolios have been implemented in a variety of library settings and toward diverse ends. Keller (2006) provides an informal discussion on the applications of professional ePortfolios by school library media specialists for an assortment of purposes, including professional evaluations and grant applications. Hallam and McAllister (2008) explore the implications of integrating an ePortfolio component into an LIS program in order to “establish meaningful links between the various coursework subjects and to introduce students to contemporary professional practice in information agencies”. Diller and Phelps (2008) provide observations on the use of ePortfolios by university librarians in informing authentic assessment of an information literacy program. Feedback from faculty librarians regarding the implementation of an ePortfolio system for annual review is considered, as Parker and Hillyer (2009) note that “reflections about how an activity has resulted in growth can be important for one's professional development” (p. 19). To date, the use of ePortfolios by library supervisors to facilitate the assessment of student employees has yet to be discussed in the literature.

The varied uses and applications of ePortfolios continue to expand, particularly as “educators are focusing on portfolio-based learning and portfolio-based evaluation.” (Fitch, Peet, Glover Reed, and Tolman, 2008, p.37). Ittelson (2001) discusses the use of the ePortfolio as a student-centered repository representing experience and skills. As a life-long learning portfolio, Ittelson further recognizes the possibilities for students in constructing an electronic identity (e-identity) and advocates the use of ePortfolios as an inter-institutional repository for official academic records, such as transcripts and degree certifications. Ring, Weaver and Jones (2008) assess a

university-wide ePortfolio requirement and examine the importance of engaging students in the process, acknowledging that “motivation and buy-in are critical to the success of any ePortfolio initiative” (p. 105). Skiba (2005) recognizes the multi-faceted application of ePortfolios as they both “contribute to student learning and allow multiple audiences, including faculty, administration, and potential employers, to assess that learning” (p. 246). The power of the ePortfolio as a tool that allows students to “participate actively in assessing their own learning, in single courses and across courses” (p. 247) is also highlighted.

As complex digital learning environments, Goodfellow and Lea (2007) see a three-fold purpose to the ePortfolio: As a receptacle for samples of one's work, as a reflective log, and as a report to reflect a learner's educational history. The latter application of the e-portfolio is “the one which has perhaps done the most to drive e-portfolio developments at an institutional level, as it resonates most with the contemporary culture of performativity and accountability in education” (p. 129).

Background

In 2008, the Washington State University Libraries became involved in the institution's ePortfolio initiative. ePortfolios were originally promoted by the university's Center for Teaching and Learning and Technology (CTLT). In 2007, the Center developed an ePortfolio contest which became a catalyst for the promotion and institutionalization of the ePortfolio concept. The contest encouraged students and faculty from a wide mix of departments to harness the power of the ePortfolio in fostering collaboration and creative problem-solving. The contest produced a variety of ePortfolio styles and applications, as some served mainly as reflective logs, while others became platforms for the display of cross-campus and community endeavors. CTLT has also worked with faculty in incorporating the ePortfolio concept into student assignments, and in promoting ePortfolios to students as a dynamic tool for tracking their growth. Acknowledging the “job search aspects of the ePortfolio” (Anthony 2008, p. 9), the Center for Advising & Career Development (CACD) also embraced the ePortfolio concept as a means to assist students in marketing their talents to potential employers. As ePortfolios become further integrated into the campus culture, WSU students have the option of extending access to the university's online ePortfolio system for three years post-graduation, with the ability to request further access beyond this period as well.

An “ePortfolio” can be described as a collection of representative works, (in a traditional sense), on which one reflects, shares, and develops in nontraditional ways. As ePortfolios are multimedia in nature, incorporated materials are referred to as “artifacts”; these can include photos, audio, video, sketches, and writing, selected by the user. An interesting aspect of the ePortfolio is the potential for the incorporation of

personal information, through artifacts that provide insights into the intersections of one's personal, academic and career interests. While Facebook is conducive to newsy updates, and fleeting reactions to statements by “friends”, the ePortfolio provides students with the opportunity to participate in a professionalized version of a social networking environment; one that also allows them to showcase their best professional work.

Rationale and Conceptualization

The WSU Libraries recognized the potential of the ePortfolio in fostering connections between a student's library employment, their educational endeavors, and their post-graduate aspirations. Eportfolios have been embraced in the corporate world, as Goodfellow and Lea (2007) explain:” Employers and organizations that have developed specifications for the skills and competences that they want their employees or trainees to acquire are pushing the use of e-portfolios to manage the recording and evidencing of these and other competencies and qualifications acquired throughout a career” (p. 129). As student employees occupy high turnover positions, it was hoped that the ePortfolio project would promote learner ownership and engagement, as students made connections between their library work, coursework, academic goals and professional goals. The library's ePortfolio initiative was conceived in order to assist students in connecting day-to-day work tasks with real world employment scenarios. The ePortfolio project provided students the opportunity to navigate a tool that balances employability, accountability, and assessment, with self-expression and personal identity.

Students were able to upload files and record reflections related to their academic, campus work, and personal interests. Although students had the freedom to personalize their ePortfolios, the WSU Libraries stipulated that assessment documents related to library employment to be included as artifacts in the ePortfolio system. The ePortfolio software allows students to designate public and private areas by creating permissions specific to the individual portfolio artifacts. A student can set permissions so that a potential employer has one view of their ePortfolio, and a supervisor another, thereby controlling who has access to the evidence collected. While students had the option of also granting permissions to other areas of their ePortfolios, library supervisors were given full access to all documents related to employee assessment and reflection.

To promote employee accountability and allow for the ePortfolio to be used in assessment, library supervisors stipulated that the following elements be incorporated and accessible by the Access Services supervisors:

- Student's reflection questionnaire
- Assessment template
- Current resume
- Link to the WSU Libraries Homepage
- Link to student's major department website
- Current position description
- An appropriate personal photo

The assessment template was developed by the WSU Libraries with the assistance of the Center for Teaching and Learning (CTLT) and examined all aspects of a student employee's responsibilities. The reflection questionnaire, also developed in consultation with CTLT, was designed to facilitate reflection of the past year's employment, including growth, challenges and accomplishments. As the Access Services department includes over 50 student employees, the inclusion of a personal photo would assist library supervisors in identifying a student, particularly for post-employment references.

One of the initial concerns supervisors had regarding the project was related to the problem of developing the ePortfolios on a specific software program, when students were likely encounter other platforms post-graduation. While the instructional workshops were software specific, it is likely that the document sharing and permission granting concepts specific to a particular ePortfolio software will be transferable to other programs. As Anthony (2008) states: "Because the software is definitely going to change, students do not need to know how to use specific software; they need to know how to learn how to use software (and how to interrogate its ideological assumptions)" (p. 9).

"Edentity" Defined

Increasingly, employers are using electronic tools to research a potential employee's background, personality, and skills. Job applicants can assume that an employer will "Google" their name, and potential employees have little control over the information available about them over the Web. The ePortfolio provides the student with an alternative online environment for marketing their skills and accomplishments. This controlled record of their lifelong learning can assist a student employee in crafting a marketable online identity. An "Edentity" is basically an electronic amalgamation of one's social, professional, personal, and academic history and growth. Personal web pages, resumes posted online, discussion posts, blogs, past publications, etc., can all contribute to one's Edentity. WSU's Center for Teaching and Learning (CTLT) has had to grapple with educating students on the implications of placing personal information on the web, and in promoting the ePortfolio as a tool that holds specific advantages over social networking software, such as Facebook. Similar to Facebook

however, the more an ePortfolio is used and accessed by the student, the more relevant it becomes as a record of growth, reflection and discovery. As such, in the WSU Libraries ePortfolio initiative, students were encouraged to use the ePortfolio to highlight aspects of their personality that would appeal to potential employers, as Ring, Weaver and Jones (2008) state: “From the students' perspective the ability to personalize their ePortfolio contributes to their motivation to “work” on it throughout the year as well as their engagement in the process” (p. 104).

The Web 2.0 functionality of ePortfolios is both familiar and appealing to “Google” generation students. Within the digital portfolio construct is the ability to share a long-term learning experience, to give others permission to analyze and measure one's progress, and to provide feedback. The networking power of the ePortfolio lies in the incorporation of Web 2.0 features, such as blogs and the selection of updated, related web content via RSS feeders. As Kent (2008) states: “Web 2.0 empowers users, it's about people, relationships, networks, and continual change.” Through Web 2.0 functionality, ePortfolios likewise operate on the concept of empowering students through relationship building, fostering campus networks, adaptability, and reflective learning.

Implementation through Collaboration

In order to implement the eportfolio software for student employee assessment, a cross campus, interdepartmental support team was identified. The WSU Libraries collaborated with the Center for Teaching, Learning and Technology (CTLT), the Center for Advising & Career Development (CACD) and Student Computing Services (SCS). CTLT had long promoted ePortfolio use on the WSU campus, and CTLT staff had the best grasp of ePortfolio applications. CTLT staff communicated the purpose of the ePortfolio concept to Access Services supervisors during the initial project planning. The ePortfolio initiative also involved library faculty from Library Instruction, Library Systems, and the Humanities and Social Sciences units who had previous experience in working with ePortfolios. Initial workshops were held in library computer classrooms to demonstrate the ePortfolio software, explain the benefits of the ePortfolio as a reflective learning tool, and to examine the role of the ePortfolio as a tool for marketing employability. Staff from the Center for Advising & Career Development (CACD) attended the initial workshops to answer questions regarding their collaboration with businesses and corporations who use ePortfolios for employee assessment. CACD also guided students in promoting their work experiences to potential employers and, conversely, in promoting student ePortfolios to employers as a tool for evaluating an applicant's skills and abilities. Student Computing Services (SCS) played a supportive role in providing technical assistance to the libraries throughout the implementation of the project, and to ensure that student ePortfolios would be properly archived for future use. CTLT modeled a

typical ePortfolio workshop on which library supervisors could base student employee ePortfolio instruction. The role of the WSU Libraries was to provide orientations to library student employees, assess student employee performance through the ePortfolio system, and to encourage students to make connections between their different campus interactions. The collaboration of the WSU Libraries with CTLT, CACD and SCS fostered the successful promotion and implementation of the ePortfolio library project. In fact, cross-campus, interdepartmental collaboration and input was the key to the project's success.

In consultation with CTLT, the WSU Libraries developed an assessment cycle to facilitate the implementation of the ePortfolios for student employee evaluations. The steps that the WSU Libraries followed in implementing the Assessment Cycle were as follows (see figure 1):

1. Student employees answered 23 questions related to how they view their work environment and how they feel they fit into this environment.
2. Employees were asked to 'reflect' on their progress toward becoming more adept at their position's core competencies.
3. The student's reflection and assessment were reviewed by the Access Services supervisor.
4. The supervisor and student met to discuss their differences of opinion and to set new goals, as well as to develop a strategy for meeting their current goals.

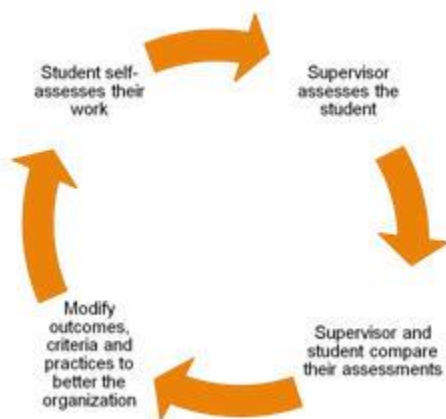


Figure 1. The Assessment Cycle

Although student employees were required to include certain portfolio elements in order to facilitate library employee assessment, further customization allowed students to envision other applications for their individual portfolios. Through the ePortfolios, students were able to reflect on their life and career goals, communicate their individual career-oriented philosophies, and share projects and assignments related to coursework (see Figure 2).



Figure 2. A student library employee's ePortfolio homepage

Discussion and Future Considerations

ePortfolios are not without their drawbacks, as ePortfolio initiatives are dependent on user training and buy-in. Before an ePortfolio is conceived, one should reflect on the purpose and motivation behind the development of the ePortfolio; as with traditional paper portfolios, ePortfolios can serve different ends. There have been instances where teaching faculty have incorporated an ePortfolio component into coursework without a full understanding of the ePortfolio concept. Improper implementation of ePortfolios likely does a disservice to the students who are then not fully introduced to the strength of the ePortfolio as a multifaceted tool for growth and reflection. As Batson (2009) cautions, “ePortfolios are not a dumping ground, but a place for processing a flow of artifacts.” Faculty who use the ePortfolio as an online space to warehouse student work would be better to use another storage method, as a large portion of the ePortfolio's power is in the opportunities it presents for reflection, growth, personal development summative feedback, and assessment. Skiba (2005) recognizes that in order for successful implementation, a “portfolio culture” must develop, where “students are no longer mere recipients of information; rather, they construct meaning from information and transform it to knowledge” (p. 247).

Future implementations of the ePortfolio concept for student library assessment will require continued workshops in order to train future student employees in the use of the software. Although student library employees occupy high-turnover positions, returning student employees can assist in providing training and support to new hires. Library supervisors witnessed that students who had quickly mastered the software were supportive of those who were still struggling with technical issues related to ePortfolio development. By fostering a team-based, collaborative atmosphere, the

social networking aspects of the ePortfolios can transfer to real-world relationship building. As implemented, the ePortfolio project provided both student co-workers and library supervisors with an authentic and more rounded view of a fellow employee's interests, abilities and aspirations. The ability for students to personalize their ePortfolios, and in effect, “tell their stories” contributed to student buy-in by fostering a sense of ownership over the process. In order to promote reflection of their academic growth, student employees were also encouraged to upload artifacts related to their coursework, such as term papers and projects. A holistic approach to implementing ePortfolios for student employee assessment, one that permitted the incorporation of other aspects of campus life, positioned the ePortfolio as a multifaceted tool for student employee development.

Not only do ePortfolios allow students to highlight both their professional and academic progression and growth, but they also give students the opportunity to collaborate with peers as they share their challenges and accomplishments. In the WSU Libraries ePortfolio project, supervisors were able to view student ePortfolio content and collaborate on analyzing how that content did or did not depict an accurate picture of a student’s workplace progress. The digital portfolio concept made this collaboration easy, since both parties were able to view and modify their shared content in one place. The ePortfolio project as implemented allows student library employees to participate in the assessment process in a way that is reflective of their individual personality, abilities and interests. Similar to popular social networking programs, the student ePortfolios are easily revisable and allow students to construct a dynamic “Eidentity” while interfacing and marketing technology skills, work experience, academic experience, and life experience to potential employers.

Conclusion

ePortfolios offer advantages to both library unit supervisors and student employees. For student employees, ePortfolios provide a dynamic tool for marketing skills gained during their library employment, and indeed their academic career. For supervisors, ePortfolios not only provide an effective assessment tool, but also a way to archive a student’s work history so that it can be effectively referred to in the future. Since ePortfolios can be personalized in a “Facebook”-like manner, students may feel a stronger sense of ownership and motivation toward this approach, versus traditional assessment methods. Personalization also allows students to use the ePortfolio as a multipurpose tool: for assessment, skill marketing, demonstrating growth, and campus networking. By offering storage and access options through the academic institution, a ePortfolio provides the permanency needed to be used as a tool for lifelong learning. The experience at the WSU Libraries demonstrates that ePortfolios are powerful assessment tools that not only allow students to market technology skills, work,

academic, and life experience, but also introduce students to a process of reflection and growth that can be further developed post-graduation.

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