US vs European E-folio Design: Investigating a Dichotomy

David Whittier
Assistant Professor
Director, Instructional Materials Center
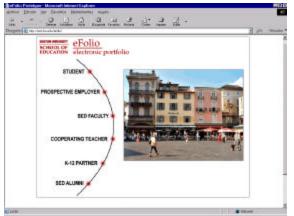School of Education Boston University USA
<whittier@bu.edu>

Sonia Lara
Assistant Professor
School of Humanities and Social Sciences
Department of Education. University of Navarra 31080 Pamplona. SPAIN
slara@unav.es

Introduction

An apparent dichotomy in designing and utilizing efolios is the one surrounding its use for personal and community development as opposed to the one surrounding its use for assessment, licensure, standardized testing, and other "high stakes" purposes. Napper and Barrett (2004) draw attention to this distinction by describing different approaches to efolio design in the US and Europe. The trend in Europe, they claim, is toward utilizing efolios for "life long learning, professional development, career planning, recording achievement, and community development," while the trend in the US, is toward assessment and accountability with an additional and somewhat tangential application in marketing for employment. The US trend, no doubt bolstered by the current emphasis on standardized testing, is especially noticeable in the name change of the SITE Topic area addressing this genre of resources from "Electronic Portfolios" to "Assessment and E-folios." Although design and use of efolios varies from institution to institution, this divide acknowledges the varying purposes of using an efolio resource for personal development and community sharing as opposed to using it at as vehicle for ensuring that a candidate for a license and/or a position has achieved prescribed standards. Using an efolio to demonstrate ones competency to an official who has power to approve or disapprove is very different from using it as an instrument for personal growth and collegial sharing. This paper describes a research effort to investigate this dichotomy of purpose to learn more about the degree to which the different purposes are exclusive as well as to understand better the advantages and disadvantages of the personal growth and community sharing model.

Proposal Background

Faculty and staff at the Boston University School of Education began in summer 2004 an efolio development project emphasizing its use for personal development and community sharing rather than assessment (http://emt.bu.edu/efolio/). This project grew out of the BU-SED PT3 grant (http://emt.bu.edu/pt3/) that focused on faculty development and which provided an opportunity to poll faculty on their interest in using an efolio for assessment. When faculty expressed their view that assessment procedures already in place were sufficient, the project was steered toward a structure that would support personal development and community sharing, an orientation that Napper and Barrett (2004) describe as more European in approach.

The home page of the Boston University SED efolio features the Piazza Riforma in Lugano, Switzerland site of the 2004 ED-MEDIA conference. While Diez (1994) has provided the *sonnet, mirror, and map* metaphors for portfolios, the piazza suggests the metaphor of a place where people are comfortable coming together to share their experiences of common interest (http://emt.bu.edu/efolio/index.htm).

Joining with faculty at the University of Navarra in Pamplona, Spain provided a base from which to investigate the claim that Europe is taking a somewhat different approach to efolios.

Are there different approaches to e-folios between US and Europe?

The EIfEL (European Institute for E-Learning) web site on electronic portfolios stated that, "An ePortfolio is a personal digital collection of information describing and illustrating a person's learning, career, experience and achievements. ePortfolios are privately owned and the owner has complete control over who has access to what and when" which indicates an orientation to the personal, if not community sharing. However, the second definition goes on to state that "ePortfolios contents and services can be shared with others in order to support Prior Learning Accreditation and Recognition (PLAR), complete or replace exams, reflect on one's learning or career, support continuing professional development, plan learning or search a job" (http://www.qwiki.info/projects/Europortfolio). The second definition appears to fall somewhat more on the assessment side of the distinction investigated here but it raises the question of whether high stakes assessment is exclusive of personal development and community sharing. Of course, efolios, or electronic portfolios may serve a wide variety of purposes and are by no means limited to the dichotomy investigated in this proposal. As Gibson points out, "the word 'portfolio' itself is used in a bewilderingly diverse number of ways, to represent a collection of work, a performance assessment, a learning and assessment management system, an archive of achievement, a personal or cultural story, an institutional requirement, a large scale assessment. What exactly do we mean by "electronic portfolios?" How, with so many viewpoints, can we think about the decisions and dilemmas inherent in the processes, artifacts and organizational options of e-portfolios?" (Gibson, 2004, p. 92). While an efolio may serve many masters, an underlying question for this research was whether or not trying to include in one space the apparent dichotomy identified here would introduce a degree of incoherency into any given system.

Main objectives of the proposal

To further understanding of the apparent dichotomy in designing and utilizing efolios between one focused on personal and community development and one focused on assessment, standardized testing, and other "high stakes" purposes, this paper:

1. Reports on the manner in which these two forces in efolio resources are present in selected efolios both in the US and Europe.
2. Describes the advantages and disadvantages of the personal development and community sharing approach.
3. Reports on the Boston University SED project emphasizing personal development and community sharing and not high stakes assessment as a case study while simultaneously reviewing the literature and actual products of selected European e-folio projects.

Tasks and Methodologies

The main goal of this research was to investigate the degree to which the different purposes of efolio for personal growth and community sharing or high stakes assessment are exclusive as well as to understand better the features of each model. Both literature review and online portfolio reviews focused on the identified purposes for e-folio use.

Review of e-folios

Attempts at developing a rubric for evaluating the degree to which an existing efolio resource is focused either on supporting personal growth and community sharing or high stakes assessment, or anywhere in between did not result in sufficient clarity in the limited time available for this paper. Given the difficulty of producing a clear rubric for the purposes of this paper, the research adopted a simple *process versus product* dichotomy. Portfolios concerned with standards and licensing or certification were described as following a product approach. The product approach described portfolios where products were posted online in electronic portfolios to provide evidence that a student had successfully achieved a standard leading to approval for licensure/certification. Portfolio requirements deemed to be product oriented were dominated by words such as "product, standards, assessment, accreditation, licensure, and certification." Barrett & Wilkerson (2004) describe this approach as the "positivist paradigm" and refer to it as the "portfolio as test."

An alternative to the positivist or *product* approach to electronic portfolios is the process or *constructivist* approach. In the constructivist approach, there is an emphasis on learners engaging in various educational processes through which they learn and grow. Reflection, self-assessment, mentoring, and collaboration are typically associated with this approach. Barrett & Wilkerson (2004) describe the differences between the approaches by stating that the "positivist approach is 'the floor below which they cannot fall.' The constructivist approach is where we hope our teacher candidates will go above the floor, showcasing the many ways that they are going beyond minimum requirements, to make their classrooms exciting places to learn." They also cite Paulson and Paulson (1991, 1994) as describing this approach as "Portfolio as Story." For the purposes of this paper, the positivist approach is referred to as a *product* oriented approach while the constructivist approach is referred to as a *process* oriented approach.

US Review

The portfolio guide for the master's program with Principal Licensure at the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs (UCCS) was viewed an example of the product approach to electronic portfolios (http://web.uccs.edu/education/academic/edleadership/edleadmaportfolio.html). At UCCS, the "Educational Leadership Portfolio Rubrics" reflects the product approach where learners individually provide products in their portfolios and an authority reviews those products as evidence that learners have or have not met performance indicators. The UCCS approach was notable in that it appeared to work in isolation, in an interaction between learner and evaluator. In this sense, the UCCS portfolio structure appeared to foster an "extrinsic" or standards based motivation. This structure appeared to encourage development of products that would populate the portfolio and meet the standards, and, as long as they were assessed by an evaluator to be "proficient" or "advanced," then the student would move on to the next requirement.

The iMET program at California State University, Sacramento (CSUS) was viewed as a process oriented approach to electronic portfolios. The program is described as a "combination face to face/online" Masters of Education in Educational Technology program. It "provides educators with the experience and community to help them become Educational Technology leaders" (http://imet.csus.edu/index.htm). Many of the public CSUS portfolios accessible on the Web were the result of "collaborative construction," and included process oriented progressive reflections by peers, authors, and faculty. For example, the assignment "Using Boolean Logic to Travel the World" by Gerald Hifner and Ryan Miller included a "Peer Review," a "Reflection" by the authors on the "Peer Review," a "Faculty Review" and a "Reflection of Faculty Review." This identified a process approach to the use of the electronic portfolio. The goals were building learning in each case, as opposed to meeting a common standard.

Other electronic portfolios reviewed reflected a mixed approach of both product oriented portfolios associated with standards and licensure as well as some process oriented portfolios associated with growth and reflection that would not easily fit into descriptions of performance indicators. However, portfolio structures reviewed at Johns Hopkins University, Indiana State University, and the Maryland Department of Education that had links to five other Maryland colleges were judged to be more product and standards oriented and that the use of process oriented activities such as reflection, were more or less tangential to the main, evaluative purposes of the portfolios.

At the Boston University School of Education (BU-SED), attempts to build a process oriented approach to the use of electronic portfolios was somewhat thwarted by the tools and instruments readily available to build electronic portfolios. For example, not wanting to build an electronic portfolio system from scratch, BU-SED adopted OSPI software (Open Source Portfolio Initiative - http://www.theospi.org/) and further, contracted "r-smart" (http://www.rsmart.com/) to help get started in the using the software. These two organizations bring many resources in manageable forms to small institutions with limited resources such as BU-SED. However, the

structures they offer to date generally funnel the user into a product-oriented approach. The tools to support a "piazza" metaphor, for example, are few and the motivation to use it for professional development appears to be lacking. As Barrett and Wilkerson report, "teacher candidates usually view portfolios as something they have to produce to get out of the program, and many indicated they would not continue the process after they leave the program" (McCoy & Barrett, 2004, cited in Barrett and Wilkerson, 2004). That said, previews of new versions of OSPI and Fsmart "quick starts" show promise of providing for more process-oriented approaches, especially through the inclusion of SAKAI tools (http://www.sakaiproject.org/about.html).

European review

Kneale (2002) explains the project "Personal Development Portfolio (PDP)" at University of Leeds, UK (www.leeds.ac.uk/pdp/). This project follows the indications of the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education. She states that the PDP is reflection on action and for action, not in action. She reports that the structure of PDP is not the same in each of the five schools at the University of Leeds, but they offer more and less the same elements. These include an introduction to skills and reflections; a student prepared summary assessment of their university skills, instruction on how to reflect with examples, pages for structured personal reflection at the end of each semester, and a section for end–of–year summary of skills with advice on planning a vitae.

Driessen Tartwijk, and Vermunt (2003) describe the use of portfolio at the Faculty of Medicine, Maastricht University, the Netherlands (www.fdg.unimaas.nl/bib/curriculum2001/). This University has introduced portfolio use in the first year of their curriculum. The reasons for doing this were: to stimulate reflection, to create a mentoring system in which student could receive pastoral care during their studies, to give students more responsibility for their learning and assessment, and to make the portfolio part of the assessment system, forcing students to review and integrate all assessment feedback. All judged to be process oriented activities.

The portfolio is structured around four professional roles of the doctor, based on a Dutch national competence profile for doctors: one's role as (a) medical expert; (b) researcher, (c) healthcare worker; and (d) person. The structure of the portfolio is as follows: curriculum vitae; role as medical expert; role as researcher; role as healthcare worker; role as person; general (summary of strengths and weaknesses analysis; report of progress interview and/or of exit interview); advice; annexes.

Driessen et al conclude that the key elements for a portfolio are:
- Supportive academic mentor system to coach the student;
- Clear portfolio structure allowing students to determine content and form of the portfolio;
- Organization of the portfolio around student self reflection;
- Early and unambiguous portfolio introduction;
- Assessment procedure that does not hamper reflection.

The focus of Hogeschool van Amsterdam, Fysiotherapie (The Netherlands) has been to center the curricula in developing professional competencies of their students based in the ECTS[1] (Nieweg, 2004). This change encompassed three fundamental elements: (1) a fully competency-based program; (2) a learning environment designed to enable the development of these professional competencies; and (3) an extensive procedure of self-assessment, preceding each of the (five) summative assessments. The developing of portfolio is part of self-assessment of students, when they create evidence of competency they can go to summative assessment.

The students are required to compile a portfolio with: a collection of examples of a student's performance, only accessible to that student; evaluation of and reflection upon this performance, accessible to that student and to those to whom they choose to provide access; proof of a student's acquired competency-level accessible for the assessors; and a future showcase.

Dysthe and Engelsen (2004) reviewed two different universities from Norway following a model of analysis for portfolio processes. Phase 1 comprises activities and processes resulting in a variety of objects (written, oral, visual, practical), which are collected in a working portfolio. Phase 2 is connected with students selecting documentation for their Presentation Portfolio. Phase 3 is centre-stage in summative assessment, which covers a very short period of time compared to phase 1.

The main features of the European portfolios reviewed are:

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[1] ECTS: European Credit Transfer System. Following the Declaration of Bologna, all european universities will use the same format for credits enabling students to transfer courses elsewhere by 2010 (http://www.crue.org/decbolognaingles.htm).

- Negotiated, authentic assignments. The key question for teachers to ask initially is: what kind of practice do we want students to document in the portfolio? Asking students to reproduce information or to solve problems where there are right and wrong answers make uninteresting portfolio assignments in a teacher education context.
- Reflection and self-assessment as vital elements of professional identity building
- Student participation in summative assessment: An underrated learning potential?

Alha (2004) from University of Oulu, Faculty of Technology (Finland) reports on the experience with five chemistry courses using portfolio as a new method of assessment, in order to improve the student reflection. The portfolios were required to contain three kinds of components: answers to portfolio questions where the questions are open–ended and cannot be responded to with a single right answer; reports of design exercises; and student's reflections on his/her learning process. Alha concludes that the portfolio is a good way to assess students and to obtain feedback from them.

Discussion

Most instances of electronic portfolios reviewed for this paper did, on balance, fall into a "product" oriented approach or a "process" oriented approach to electronic portfolio design and use. The majority in the US were judged to fall into the product camp, and the majority in Europe were judged to fall into the process camp, but there was still a, imprecise, messy mix present.

Part of the messy mix is that the practice of constructivist or "process" oriented approaches certainly do exist in the US such as those found at California State University at Sacramento and most clearly product oriented portfolios did provide some opportunity for reflection. Also the experience at Boston University suggests that the process-oriented approaches may find new life in evolving software available through SAKAI. Nevertheless, the influence and tradition of standards were found to be stronger and more prevalent in the US than in Europe. For example, products populating teaching portfolios are increasingly used as one of several ways to assess experienced teachers who seek National Board certification or equivalent recognition as a master teacher (www.nbpts.org/candidates/portfolios.cfm).

Another part of the messy mix was the finding that many European instances did use products, it was just that the "product" assessed is the "the process of learning" of students, such as what was found at Hogeschool van Amsterdand (The Netherlands), Universities from Norway, UK Open University and University of Oulu (Finland). Some universities, like University of Leeds, University of Mastrich (The Netherlands) and Hogeschool van Amsterdand (The Netherlands), are following some external recommendations about the criteria of assessment from the QAA, Dutch National Competencies (TEEP, 2002) and Declaration of Bologna respectively, but this external criteria did not eliminate assessment focused on the "process of learning." There is not a tradition in Europe of standards assessment as there is in the US. The philosophy behind European way of assessment may be identified in this quotation "if you want to change the student's learning, change the methods of assessment" (Brown et al., 1997, cited in Alha, 2004). Most European portfolios reviewed for this research appear to adopt or recommend the use of this kind of assessment as a way of improving learning *and* reflection in students.

In spite of this apparent dichotomy Zeichner and Wray, (2001) concluded that "without a clearer sense of the specific quality of reflection associated with portfolio use, the quality of the teaching assessment will be greatly limited." This suggests that process oriented reflection may be subject to standardization, and hence become more of a product. The European portfolios displayed instances of integrated product and process, but the demonstrated understanding of "product" was not the same as that associated with standards testing found in the US.

Although extremely limited in scope, and blocked by security in many instances, this research also observed another descriptive trend: there were virtually no instances of portfolio activity *after* a student had completed a program, suggesting that continuing to use a university-based portfolio for lifelong learning and professional development is more imagined than real. For most users, it appeared that university-based portfolios are convenient tools to store their products, meet their requirements, present themselves for employment, and then to move on. Even the CSUS portfolios, so effective at employing collegial, reflective process in learning during their master's degree course work and requirements, provided no evidence of continued use beyond program completion. While evidence of continued use of a portfolio after a degree program is completed was not found, there is evidence of users developing the *habit* of using it and carrying that forward into new professional contexts. For example, Zeichner and Wray (2001) report that "beyond the portfolio construction experience, claims have also been made about habits of reflection and analysis continuing on well after the initial experience of constructing a portfolio" (p.614).

In summary, this investigation found:

- The forces of positivist, standards, and assessment "product" oriented approaches to electronic portfolios were found to be more prevalent in the US;
- The forces of "process" oriented activities such as reflection, responding to open-ended questions, self assessment, and mentoring were found to be more common in Europe;
- Findings indicate that there is indeed a dichotomy in the two geographically defined approaches;
- There were no instances of portfolio activity *after* a student had completed a program, but there are reports about its influence and especially of developing the habit of reflection and sharing in professional practice.

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