

Professional Self-Development Mediated by ePortfolio: Reflections of an ESL Practitioner

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This reflective Perspectives article will give readers some insight into the professional self-development experiences of an English as a second language (ESL) practitioner after she recognized a significant shift in learning and teaching paradigms resulting from instructional tools available on the World Wide Web. It also attempts to describe the learning moments of an ESL practitioner in her role as a creator, curator, user, and implementer of an electronic portfolio, or eportfolio, as she experienced her own personal growth during her professional self-development.

Cet article réfléchi de Perspectives donnera aux lectrices et aux lecteurs un aperçu des expériences d'auto-perfectionnement professionnel d'une enseignante d'anglais langue seconde (ESL) ayant constaté un changement de paradigme important dans les domaines de l'apprentissage et de l'enseignement depuis la disponibilité d'outils pédagogiques sur le World Wide Web. Il tente également de décrire les moments d'apprentissage d'une enseignante d'anglais langue seconde dans son rôle de créatrice, conservatrice, utilisatrice, et applicatrice d'un portfolio électronique, ou portfolio Web, à mesure qu'elle prenait conscience de sa croissance personnelle dans le cadre de son auto-perfectionnement professionnel.

KEYWORDS: eportfolios, professional self-development

In a world of abundant information and great demands on professionals in all fields, professional self-development may be viewed as unnecessary as many now rely on informal learning to carry out the daily demands to be innovative at work. This type of learning is readily available to both English as a second language (ESL) instructors and students, and often comes in the form of an online resource (e.g., YouTube videos). As such, there is often an emphasis on surface learning, rather than on deep learning once the activity that relies on that resource is carried out. In addition, surface knowledge compels the knowledge holder to opt for fast dissemination of the information, for it may not be readily available at a later occasion. Consequently, both the knowledge provider and the knowledge receiver engage in surface learning rather than in the deep learning (Ramsden, 1992). As an emerging pedagogy, the electronic portfolio, or eportfolio, however, facilitates deep learning, enables ongoing anytime-anywhere interaction, and fosters active learning, learner engagement, and the process of reflection (Watson, Kuh, Rhodes, Light, & Chen, 2016).

Electronic Portfolio

The eportfolio idea, adopted in writing and composition in the 1980s, first gained prominence in the education field in the mid-1990s in a paper-based format (Batson, 2018; Danielson & Abrutyn, 1997). Since then, the eportfolio has undergone many descriptions, due in part to the many ways eportfolios have been applied within a course, a program, or an institution. Literature on eportfolios is rich in definitions, attributable in part to the “surprising variety of uses academics are discovering for portfolio technology” in campuses around the world (Batson, 2010, para. 1).

Although placed among technology-enabled learning tools, eportfolios are less about the technology itself and more about “the ways the eportfolio technology is used and the significance of those uses” (Batson, 2015, para. 1-2). As posited by Barrett (2010), “an ePortfolio is not a specific software package, but more a combination of process (a series of activities) and product (the end result of the ePortfolio process)” (What Is an ePortfolio? Section, para. 2). I view this technology-enabled emerging pedagogy as being collocated with a modified curriculum, and, as such, necessitating a broader definition. Therefore, I define an eportfolio as a technology-enabled learning tool that fosters the development of reflection, and as an emerging pedagogy that, as suggested by Batson (2015), reaches beyond the curriculum to deepen learning, facilitate reflection, and promote collaboration and interaction. The eportfolio experiences I have had, both as a creator (learner) and as an implementer (educator), have enabled both my learners and myself (during my graduate studies) to gain new skills, which include the following: using the technology to learn; learning to use the technology; creating online artefacts; and choosing appropriate text, images, and audio-files.

As a creator, during the development of my first eportfolio, I embarked on an introspective, reflective journey regarding my own learning. I began to see the benefits of implementing the eportfolio pedagogy in my ESL practice, despite some of the challenges I was experiencing with the technology. As an implementer, I became more aware of the eportfolio development process of my students, and how it seemed to trigger reflection on their learning to date. As my students interacted with their eportfolios, they seemed to be not only learning on their own, but also immersing themselves at a deeper cognitive level. It was then that I understood how lecturing with technology differed from teaching with it; in that, the latter entails learner engagement, as enabled by the eportfolio pedagogy. As posited by Ramsden (1992), teaching and lecturing ought to be viewed differently. In our profession, we strive to teach ESL students rather than lecture them, and the eportfolio, as an emerging pedagogy, has facilitated that in my practice. In addition, as a technology-enabled learning tool, the eportfolio has made it possible for me to observe the behaviour and attitudes of my learners throughout the development of their projects.

Theoretical Underpinnings

In my attempt to better understand the development of these behaviours, and their role in the development of eportfolios, I compiled information on aspects of the domains outlined by Huitt and Cain (2005; affective, cognitive, and conative) to find a possible alignment with some of the critical competencies presented by Gardiner (1994). As posited by Huitt (1999), student success in the 21st century involves the development of knowledge, attitudes, and skills associated with conation, which includes self-regulated learning skills (Huitt & Cain, 2005, p. 2). Moreover, as the emphasis of recent literature continues to be on cognitive research, there is a need for studies that, as suggested by Tomei (2005), further explore the affective domain and the importance of its dimensions (emotions, feelings, attitudes, and beliefs) on the effective application of technology. In my pursuit of additional knowledge, I set out to learn more about how elements related to the affective domain, in addition to the cognitive elements, would connect to the eportfolio development process. This area is important because educational institutions in the 21st century aim to graduate professionals who are able not only to state what they have learned, but also to internalize a certain value related to the learning that has taken place (Lynch, Russell, Evans, & Sutterer, 2009).

Students are now expected to express attitudes (as professionals) that reflect some of the internalized values related to their learning (as students). This value system seems to be the philosophy underpinning the eportfolio as a terminal (or capstone) project, and it appears to be present in the community of learners during the eportfolio project development. Questions that emerged during my pursuit of deeper learning necessitated that I continue my own professional self-development to learn more about reflection (what it is, how it happens, when it happens, and what elements trigger it) and its interconnectedness with the cognitive, affective, and conative domains. As I understand, the “what” aspect of learning is dealt with in the cognitive domain, the “how” is unveiled in the affective domain, and the “why” is related to the conative aspects (Huitt & Cain, 2005), which seem to align with the critical competencies (Gardiner, 1994). The eportfolio projects seem to be underpinned by, as described by Huitt and Cain (2005), the cognitive domain (what I am learning), the affective domain (how I feel about what I am learning), and the conative domain (why I am learning this). As I have observed, the students are able to engage in meaningful reflection once these three aspects begin to work in tandem. From my perspective, I wanted to continue studying to learn more about the alignment of the elements in the domains and some of the critical competencies (e.g., respecting differences, adapting to principles) as outlined by Gardiner (1994). Since then, I have engaged in further studies. I continue to rely both on the literature and also on additional observations to help me unveil, and possibly address, challenges that the learners may encounter. My curiosity about this phenomenon is a result of my having experienced a gradual eportfolio evolution, as mentioned earlier, initially as a user (student) and, afterward, as an implementer (instructor).

Application of Innovation for Professional Development Purposes

During the early 2000s and up to the mid-2010s, many of our classrooms were entirely brick-and-mortar, and they possessed neither Internet connection, nor any type of computer equipment. While I was enthusiastic about introducing an innovative learning concept to my learners, I was also cognizant that the various tools available for the eportfolio were just that—tools—and that “learning with the tools is more nuanced” (Richardson, 2010, p. x).

In 2011, I attempted to introduce the idea of learning at a distance to a group of adult ESL learners to satiate my initial enthusiasm to apply in my teaching what I was learning in my courses (Zuba Prokopetz, 2018). After my first eportfolio experience, I began to view this learning tool as a locus for personal and professional growth, and, in 2013, I introduced the innovation to my ESL learners. For these students, some of whom had to first engage in learning the technology before learning *with* it, language was the primary reason for attending classes. As such, the activities were all language-related, and included the four language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing), which met the requirements for skill-building activities, and made it possible for reflective thoughts on their learning to date. Because this was an after-class learning activity, the learners interacted with their eportfolios at a place and time of their choice, and many chose to communicate daily with me and with each other during this extracurricular educational activity. The technology used in my first attempt to implement an eportfolio for learning purposes in my ESL class was *LiveBinders*. The rationale behind it was three-fold. I had just completed a research paper on this technology. I also knew how to use it, but, most important, the online binder reminded the students of their own portfolio, a binder where they inserted artefacts in the specific pages for each skill.

During my observations of my first attempt as an eportfolio implementer, I noticed intense and ongoing interactions among this culture-sharing group of learners, who invested time and effort in their online tasks outside the classroom environment. It was apparent that the learners seemed to be gradually taking ownership of their own learning, which consequently led to enhanced language learning among the students who chose to fully participate. In addition, there was a perceived desire by the students to both share stories and articulate what seemed to be happening, how it was happening, and why they were making specific choices during their eportfolio development process. These students opted to participate in active learning practices that “typically demand that students devote considerable time and effort to purposeful tasks; most require daily decisions that deepen students’ investment in the activity” (Kuh, 2008, p. 14).

The students appreciated the convenience of being able to connect with their peers, instructor, and tasks anytime and anywhere. They also discovered an element of creativity and artistry when they were completing their *homework*, as some students often referred to their eportfolio tasks; they created

slides that included visuals, text, and audio-files to further demonstrate their learning. The availability of online resources enabled the students to explore their learning space and infuse new ideas into their eportfolio tasks (in all four language skills). Unlike the three-ring binder, which did not include exemplars of listening and speaking, the eportfolio enabled the learners to both listen to online instructional resources, and record audio-files, which became artefacts in the eportfolio collection of pages. This process of artefact selection proved to be an important part of the process for my ESL learners, as well as for me during my participation in my own eportfolio development in my graduate studies (2011-2013). During my initial experiences, I perceived an evolution of my own learning processes in addition to a deepening of my learning (Richardson, 2010). I also became more aware of the alignment of my experiences with eportfolio pedagogy during my attempt to view the process of learning with innovation from the perspective of the students themselves.

It was while observing the eportfolio development experiences of my ESL students that I decided to pursue further studies to learn more about the process of reflection afforded by eportfolios. This experience, and others that followed, proved to be so impactful as to necessitate that I engage, as suggested by Jacobs (2008), in moments of reflection that would honour the centrality of my voice (Introduction, para. 3). These meaningful learning moments compelled me to pursue a more disciplined form of inquiry to help me gain better insights into the experiences different groups of students would have with their eportfolios. Because I had observed ESL students (2011-2018), and college educators (2013-2016), in their eportfolio attempts, I turned my focus to an online community of graduate students (2015-2018) participating in their eportfolios as a final program requirement. As I have continued my observations, I have begun to gain further insights into what students perceive, recognize, and understand during their sorting of their learning environment–eportfolios with a collection of pages replete with artefacts, thoughts, images, and text. I am also better equipped to identify some of the challenges eportfolio creators face throughout the development of their projects.

Possible Challenges in ePortfolio Implementation

During my observations, I perceived possible barriers in eportfolio implementation, such as proper support for students, educators, and administrators. In addition, there seemed to be a level of discomfort with the technology among users and implementers of the tool. The results of a survey conducted in a graduate program showed that both students and faculty reported being challenged using basic computer skills (Chambers & Wickerman, 2007). However, Shepherd and Bolliger (2011) argued that evidence suggests that even during the challenging times of an eportfolio implementation project, students tend to demonstrate the ability to help one another in the development process of their peers. Some challenges, which were identified in

the late 1990s (Danielson & Abrutyn, 1997), continue to be present nowadays among students, educators, and administrators, and include some of the following areas: logistics (concerning content selection, content documentation, standardization, storage); maintenance (allocating time for upkeep); and measurement (deciding how to avoid conflicts between instruction and assessment).

The allocation of time for eportfolio development, and its inclusion as a learning tool in our professional practice, are still areas of concern in eportfolio implementation; however, these areas are beyond the scope of my current observations and require further investigation. My stance is that there are various factors that may influence the decision of students, faculty, and administration in eportfolio adoption, and maintenance is one of them. Logistics, however, continues to be a concern to both eportfolio creators and implementers, as I have had a chance to experience during the past 5 years. Content selection and the creation of a collection of pages seem to be difficult for students, as this part of the process requires time, effort, deep thinking, and decision-making—in other words, a higher level of cognition.

In my ESL classes, the collection of pages initially consisted of tasks in the four language skill areas (listening, speaking, reading, writing), in addition to a page for instructor feedback and a final one for student reflection. The eportfolio technology I used at the time was *LiveBinders*, and the learning activity was extracurricular for the students. In my classes with college educators, the eportfolio was the last project in the final course of a certificate program, and the course participants used different kinds of Web tools for their projects. Because a portfolio in an electronic format was not part of the program itself, it did not include a collection of pages per se. Most students only included an introduction, an artefact (e.g., a before-and-after lesson plan), and a reflective post on the learning that had happened as a result of the 11 courses in the program.

Nowadays, my ESL students still find challenges in the creation of pages for their collection, which often includes information on their program of studies, reflection on their learning journey, and artefacts that align with some of the program competencies. The initial difficulty during the creation of the collection of pages sometimes owes to the fact that students often change their minds regarding what to include. Moreover, communication skills may also pose challenges for some students, as Ternan (2018) suggests; she further explains that those students who feel inadequate in their own communication skills may become frustrated as they attempt to develop their projects. Having observed the eportfolio development process of three different groups of students (adult ESL learners, college educators, and graduate students), I understand the value of Ternan's assertion. Moreover, communication is the very essence of our ESL classes, and our students are often self-conscious about their abilities.

In addition to language skills, some students also face challenges with the technology itself. There seems to be some frustration on the part of the students as they interact with the eportfolio platform for the first time; however, as I observed, this frustration seemed to generate an intrinsic need to spend more time learning about it. As I experienced, there also appeared to be an alignment of the various pieces that worked in tandem toward facilitating not only the learning and reflective process, but also the articulating of the learning. During my observations, I perceived a certain interconnectedness of the eportfolio development process with various constructs: technology (what to apply), pedagogy (what to learn), and reflection (what to think).

The eportfolio, as both a technology-mediated learning tool and an emerging pedagogy, fosters reflection, but having the ability to reflect requires time and effort. This fundamental thinking ability is presenting itself as a necessity in this ever-changing world, as Batson (2018) argues; however, learning how to reflect, he adds, does not seem to be very compatible with the current structure and practice of higher education. As students participate in the development of their collection of pages in their learning community, they seem to engage in some form of reflective thinking. As I had undergone a similar development process during my participation in an eportfolio as a terminal project, I recognized some commonality between the experiences of the students and my own. I noticed that as my ESL students used the technology to learn, a challenge in and of itself, they engaged in an ongoing process of thinking about their learning, a process I had undergone myself when I developed my first eportfolio. At this point in my professional self-development journey, I was finally able to step back, and view the eportfolio as a powerful pedagogical concept that underpinned online learning, facilitated the development of reflection, and contributed to self-knowledge.

Recommendations

As our students are undoubtedly the most important stakeholders in an eportfolio development process, we, as educators, must recognize that “pedagogy *must* lead the technology” (Light, Chen, & Ittelson, 2012, p. 148). Therefore, it is important for us to be cognizant of the ways the technology may at times help—and at other times hinder—the eportfolio development process, as we attempt to include innovation in our practice. In my own trajectory with the eportfolio, first in my studies and afterward in my practice, I engaged in deep thinking about my professional self-development experience at every stage. My reflective journey during the process as both a creator (learner) and also an implementer (educator) enabled me to perceive levels of learning that seemed to go from factual to metacognitive, as outlined by Marzano and Kendall (2007) in their new taxonomy. I recognized the importance of time as the learners moved up the levels of knowledge acquisition. I noticed that as the students grappled with the technology (factual knowledge), they

began to conceptualize the requirements of the project (conceptual knowledge). Through dialogues (with self and peers), some students attempted to explicate what they were experiencing as they strategized ways to complete the task at hand (procedural knowledge). These students seemed to reach a level of self-awareness by immersing themselves in deeper thinking about their learning (metacognitive knowledge). Some students, however, seemed to be unable to provide an analysis of their learning or an evaluation of their perceived value of the experience. This observation reflects the behaviours and attitudes of students in all the groups I had the opportunity to observe. It seemed to me that those students who chose to participate and interact were among the ones who reached the upper levels of the taxonomy for learning, teaching, and assessment (Anderson et al., 2013). Therefore, when we implement eportfolios, we must ensure that the students have the time required for peer-interaction and the opportunity for ongoing discussion; in consequence, we will experience their articulation of learning experiences throughout the development process. Jarrott and Grambrel (2011) have further suggested that educational institutions considering eportfolios should not only start small, but also rely on the expertise of technologists. In addition, proper implementation necessitates that both students and faculty be better informed about the benefits of eportfolios on both personal and professional levels. As Eynon and Gambino (2017) have emphasized, broad understanding of the eportfolio practice, further research, and additional student evidence of eportfolio use is needed to help practitioners overcome some of the barriers they may face.

Conclusion

I conclude my reflective *Perspectives* article with the thoughts I had on the day I submitted my first eportfolio as a terminal project. As a learner who had just completed a journey of self-development on a personal, academic, and professional level, I realized that learning fulfilled me intellectually and helped me strive to excel in all my endeavours. During the creation of my eportfolio, the curation of the artefacts, and the reflection on my learning, I realized how energizing learning had the potential to be. Since then, I have not only experienced a shift in my own learning and teaching but have also been better equipped to enable my learners to experience their own as well.

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