

Title: Digital identities in ePortfolios: the first-year experience in a higher educational institution

Work-in-progress paper

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Track 1: from ePortfolio to digital identity

Abstract

Introduction

ePortfolios have the potential to promote learning and encourage personal development and digital identity by supporting (a) the learning process, (b) the product of learning and (c) the transition of learners at various stages of the lifelong and life-wide journey – (Barrett & Carney 2005; Ward & Grant 2007; ISLE 2005). This presentation outlines a new study, which explores first-year learners' experience of using ePortfolios with the aim of providing grounded guidelines to support institutional implementation and assist effective student engagement, in order to develop digital identities.

Background

Early studies indicate that the learner response to ePortfolios in the first year of study has been mixed, with a notable lack of student engagement and ownership (Barrett 2005; Oradini and Saunders 2007; Pond 2007; Cosh 2007; Tosh et al. 2005). This response may reflect confusion regarding the different roles of an ePortfolio within the learning and teaching environment; however, there has been little in-depth, longitudinal research into the learner experience of such systems to date to substantiate this. During their programme of studies, our learners will develop, collect, collate, evaluate, and present a wide range of artefacts through their individual, private ePortfolio. Such a personal, protected webspace is extremely important and valuable to our learners and will be linked and evidenced from other data sources outwith the learner's ePortfolio, such as a student database.

Resources, reflecting learners' digital identities held outwith the education environment may be called upon, for example, personal resources in spaces such as YouTube and Beebo, reflecting learning and experiences developed through formal and non-formal opportunities (Beetham 2005; Siemens 2004; Funk 2004). In this way, through their studies, our learners are able to maximise the use of their personal data and start to develop their first professional digital identity in their lifelong and life-wide learning journey (Cambridge 2008).

Barriers to use may include accessibility, which focuses on assisting users with disabilities to perceive, understand, navigate, interact, and contribute when encountering web 2.0 systems (W3C 1994-2006). UK legislation such as the Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Act (2001) and the Quality Assurance Agency Code of Practice (1999) have significantly impacted on the learning and teaching environment in post-16 education. EPortfolios must be accessible for all learners at all HE institutions. The characteristics of potential ePortfolio users vary widely; users will have a range of different expectations, characteristics and abilities. The characteristics of younger students are likely to be different from those of more mature students (Trinder et al. 2008). Considering this issue across a range of user groups will provide an opportunity

to identify areas where ePortfolio excels at meeting the needs of a varied user group and areas where improvement may be required.

Accessibility issues also include physical access; there is likely to be disparity in the ways in which learners' access ePortfolios. Some users will have fast broadband connections to the Internet, some will have slower, dial-up connections, and others may not have an Internet connection. Likewise, computer equipment will vary. This research will explore these factors and their impact on students' perceptions of the ePortfolio.

Objectives

By exploring learners' experiences of using ePortfolios, we seek to develop a deeper understanding of how the ePortfolio is used to create digital identities, how usable and accessible the ePortfolio is, and what learners' expectations and perceptions of ePortfolio are. The study seeks to explore the changing perceptions and experiences of first year students over two academic years, focussing on the accessibility and usability of the ePortfolio. Key themes identified through a literature review will be presented together with early findings from cooperative user evaluations and interviews.

Early findings

Initial findings indicate learners like:

- the idea of having their personal materials and digital representation in one easily accessible location which links to information held within and outwith an institution's systems;
- the flexibility of their ePortfolio being available anywhere that they can connect to the Internet.

Initial barriers identified:

- a continued preference for paper in some cases;
- computer anxiety.

Aims

The aims of the presentation are to:

- present early findings about student response to using ePortfolios in the curriculum;
- address issues raised with regards to usability and accessibility;
- discuss some of the potential implications for educators when implementing an ePortfolio with first-year students to support them to develop their digital identities.

By the end of the presentation, participants will be able to provide colleagues with an outline of the research and discuss key issues which may impact on first-year learners' use of ePortfolios in developing their digital identities.