

E-PORTFOLIOS AS NEW LEARNING SPACES? PORTFOLIOS, PARADIGMS, AND PEDAGOGY

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The advent of new technologies often confuses societies. Presciently, and somewhat accurately, the communications guru Marshall McLuhan noted many years ago the tendency of enthusiastic adopters to unfairly elevate new technologies to God-like stature and then roundly condemn them when they failed to fulfill the expectations placed on them. Televisions in classrooms were touted to put teachers out of business; rockets were going to relocate our civilization to the moon; more recently, “Ginger,” the Segway scooter, would revolutionize urban transportation.

In the educational world, Web-based computer conferencing – online or e-learning – first intrigued early adopters with its technological potential. Educational technologists and educational media devotees who spearheaded the literature raised capacity, delivery, and technology issues. As the field leveled to a generalized understanding of what online learning actually comprised – a Web-based platform, curriculum, good pedagogy and the creation of learning communities – educators refocused their concerns on how to teach well and how to best serve learners.

E-portfolios have generated much the same type of response. Do they indeed have the potential to “alter education at its very core,” as Batson (2002, p. 4) suggests? This paper takes the position that while e-portfolios may provide an attractive and useful vehicle for the presentation of learners’ knowledge or skills, they do not contribute to or alter the critical processes of “collection, selection, reflection and projection” that constitute meaningful portfolio work. Specifically, using as a backdrop the portfolio process at Canada’s only distance and open university, Athabasca University, this paper will:

- Differentiate learning portfolios from other more generic portfolio genres;
- Describe the rigorous process that supports portfolio development as a learning activity at AU;
- Situate and describe the nature of e-portfolios as an educational tool.

Defining and differentiating portfolios: An overview

There are many types of portfolios. Generally, the rising interest in “portfolios as expression” can be understood as a reflection of our fascination with exploration of the self, perhaps one of many trends influenced by a combination, in the Western world, of the babyboomers’ dominance of social facts and the recent emergence of a strongly technological society. Blogs, wikis, chatrooms, even cellphones – each innovative communication device has contributed to our ability, and in turn, our desire, to express ourselves in tangible and public ways.

Personal portfolios, like blogs, provide opportunities for their owners to manifest their aspirations, accomplishments, thoughts, queries and musings to the external world. Personal portfolios are increasingly viewed as necessary tools to capture the essence of self, in much the same way that artists demonstrate their worldview through creative portfolios. Many educational programs ask that their students create a portfolio during their period of study so that the portfolio can serve as a record of accomplishment, a snapshot of that particular experience – a statement of growth, maturity, participation, and citizenship. In some instances, these types of portfolios are initiated by educational institutions with the intention that young learners should continue to keep them current, thus allowing the document to serve as a “portfolio for life.”

Similarly, many workplaces encourage employees to develop a performance portfolio. This type of portfolio highlights employees’ skills and accomplishments and is used as evidence of promotion-worthiness. Applicants seeking new positions may take along a portfolio to demonstrate their suitability for the job. Immigrants seeking credentialization in their country of choice may depend on a performance portfolio to highlight their accomplishments as they seek entry into their chosen culture through education or the workplace.

Portfolio use, and PLAR, at Athabasca University

Athabasca University uses a learning portfolio as the primary method of implementing prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR). The educational, or learning portfolio, that is described in this paper

contains work that a learner has collected, reflected, selected, and presented to show growth and change over time ...a critical component of an educational portfolio is the learner’s reflection on the individual pieces of work (often called “artifacts”) as well as an overall reflection on the story that the portfolio tells. (Barrett & Carney, 2005).

While the preparation of some types of portfolios may provide generic material for Athabasca’s learning portfolio, most of Athabasca University’s portfolio material must be assembled for the exact purpose of attaining credit at the institution. A part of the portfolio-building process requires applicants to research their program and the course outcomes that it comprises. From this rigorous structure that is defined by educational requirements comes a very targeted and precise document. More importantly, AU’s portfolio first of all encourages reflective learning activity in its participants, and secondly, reveals evidence of that learning to the content experts who will eventually assess the portfolio.

Prior learning assessment and recognition is itself an arm of the larger umbrella term, *recognizing prior learning* (RPL). Under the aegis of the latter is contained, in addition to PLAR, the related (but different) processes of credit transfer and qualification recognition. Both of these processes involve recognizing formal learning that applicants have achieved elsewhere and are now seeking to bring forward, for credit, into their current studies, say, in this case, at Athabasca University. In most Canadian institutions, including Athabasca, these types of evaluations are conducted by trained evaluators who usually reside in the offices of the university’s registrar.

PLAR, on the other hand, involves a process of assessment rather than equivalency or transfer. PLAR purports to allow learners to demonstrate the value and relevance of their prior experiential learning to the credential they are seeking. Their experiential learning may have occurred in any number of places. Most commonly, applicants draw upon valuable learning that has occurred

over many years in their workplaces; but they might equally draw on learning that has occurred from experiences in their personal lives, from their travels, from occasions of self-study, from informal, happenstance learning, from volunteer experiences or from training workshops or seminars. PLAR applicants are encouraged and mentored in their efforts to mine all sources of experiential learning in order to bring forth detailed and thorough presentations of their learned skills and knowledge. The demonstrated skills and knowledge must fit into their program of study at AU in order to be applied to their program.

The skills and knowledge that applicants claim to have must also be triangulated in a number of ways. A lengthy and detailed personal narrative should outline learners' understanding of the value of their past learning while also showing the relationship of their past learning to current endeavors and to future plans. A resume, a goal statement, and an educational and career narrative also serve to locate and validate both learners' accomplishments and their understanding of their accomplishments. Finally, their learning claims are validated externally by letters of attestation that are written on their behalf by individuals who are legitimately able to confirm the accomplishments that have been described in the portfolio. These are usually supervisors and superiors from the workplace, although they may also be community referees or long-standing acquaintances who can in some verifiable way attest to the truth of the learning claims. "Documentors," or attestors, as they are called, may also contribute other tangible forms of evidence, as may the applicants themselves. These types of evidence might take the form of project reports, letters of commendation, performance appraisals, or samples of curriculum development, web site development, and so on.

Taken together, then, applicants' learning portfolios should speak quite directly and clearly to the skills and knowledge that they feel they can bring forward to their AU program of learning. Two important facts arise from the role of the portfolio within Athabasca University's strategies for learning. The first is that the learning portfolio developed for Athabasca will not likely be able to be used again in another situation. The second fact reflects the more important aspect of the learning portfolio – that constructing the portfolio is actually a learning activity. It should represent an evolution rather than a tally. It should be a construction, not a counting. The importance of these two facts is outlined below.

Portfolios as paradigmatic: Journey versus destination

"A portfolio whose purpose is to foster learning and document growth over time is based upon a constructivist model" (Barrett & Carney, 2005). In this view, which is also the writers' view, the portfolio process allows learners to begin at a point of their own choosing and to select and reflect upon learning that is important to them. Their learning challenge is to integrate that knowledge into the knowledge asked of them by the institution. Following this view, portfolio development would be analogized as a journey, complete with all the meandering, false starts, corners, surprises, and difficulties that any journey holds.

A more positivist view of the portfolio's role in learning understands the portfolio as an instrument or a conduit to accreditation at the educational institution for which it is designed. Using this reasoning, the portfolio would be analogous to a gate or a portal; in other words, the portfolio serves as a destination.

Following in the narrative tradition, a number of metaphors have been put forth to capture the portfolio's "power for learning" (Diez, 1994, p. 26). Some examples are portfolio as story, as laboratory, as poetry, as mirror, as map, as celebration, and of course as journey. These

metaphorical descriptions of portfolios attempt to capture the constructivist nature of this particular paradigm by emphasizing the notions of reflection, re-visitation, re-storying, and learners' ownership of the final product.

The pedagogy of e-portfolios

The theories, contradictions, and arguments that surround discussions of paper portfolios appear to amplify in discussions of e-portfolios. I submit two reasons for this: one, the discussion of "things 'e'" is a discussion with higher stakes; it is therefore a more emotional exchange. Electronics are flashier, shinier, and generally cost more money than chalk or paper. Secondly, those advocating for "things 'e'" often tend to be early adopters and have assumed a pioneer stance. There is more to gain, and more to lose. As with the discussions of online pedagogies, however, the underlying game is the same (Kanuka & Conrad, 2003). Electronic or paper-based, the portfolio that Athabasca University wants to see in order to grant course credit to its learners must demonstrate the same kind of attentive detailing of university-level learning and must relate that learning to the portfolio applicant's program at AU.

Similarly, as with paper-based portfolios,

the e-portfolio is (or should be) part of a student-owned, student-centred approach to learning which makes it possible for students to actively engage in their learning rather than just be the recipients of information. This is consistent with constructivist theory, which argues students actively construct their own knowledge rather than simply receive it from instructors, authors or other sources. (Tosh et al, p. 90, citing Jonassen 1991)

There are some clear benefits to using e-portfolios. Wade, Abrami, and Schlater (2005) point out that e-portfolios permit a better system of cataloguing and organizing of materials and therefore provide assessors with a better illustration of the learner's growth and development. Multimedia materials can be more nimbly integrated; such integration in itself not only better displays learners' technology skills but provides opportunities to develop those skills. Using the concept of "one container access" (p. 35) makes learners' work more accessible. Electronic access to materials would theoretically span distances more easily and could contribute to a faster process overall, although mode of presentation constitutes only one factor, among many, in the complex assessment process.

There is no doubt that, especially in fields that value computer, technology, multimedia or design skills, learners' use of e-portfolios could provide not only a more engaging demonstration of skills but also a more technically correct demonstration of skills. However, Tosh et al's (2005) contention that e-portfolios offer opportunity for learner control and promote deep learning should be true of any good portfolio process and should be no less true of the traditional paper-based portfolio. Tosh's assumption, based on the adult education premise that learners engage more successfully when they have control (Ramsden, 2003), skirts the deeper cognitive issues of how learners connect, or feel ownership of, their learning. Do today's learners feel more connection to electronic portfolios? As shown by the controversy that has surrounded print-based journals and e-journals, some will; some won't.

E-portfolios and competing assessment paradigms

At Athabasca University, issues around paper-based and e-portfolios may play out most importantly in the competing discourse on assessment. Barrett (2005) refers to “high stakes” assessments as those resulting in credit allocation to applicants. “Low stakes” assessments, on the other hand, involve occasions of formative instruction or application. E-portfolios could provide order and a high degree of efficiency to high stakes assessment situations that value the presentation of standardized information in the demonstration of competencies (Abrami & Barrett, 2005).

Can e-portfolios fairly represent learners’ high stakes assessments, however, when they must also serve as learning tools that value the journey of exploration and are intended to foster learners’ growth? This model stresses the notion of “authentic” assessment where the assessment process is a part of the teaching and learning process and should serve to further engage the learner in his or her learning exploration. “Miller and Legg (1993) see portfolio assessment as “a specific form of authentic or performance assessment that attempts to measure higher order thinking skills including the ability to communicate clearly, to make judgements, and to demonstrate specific competencies (Abrami & Barrett, 2005, p. 5).

Ideally, advocates of learning portfolios, whether paper-based or electronic, should strive to support the concept of learners’ “portfolio as story” while adhering to the rigors and accountability of high stakes assessment for the purpose of credit allocation. At Athabasca University, the introduction of another layer of technology in e-portfolio usage gives rise to new concerns for assessors, where they often tend to be older academic faculty. As is often the case, these assessors may be less comfortable using technology for assessment purposes. Will assessors searching for an individual’s “story” feel less attuned to the applicant who submits an electronic portfolio? Likewise, if as Barrett (1999) suggests, “the e-portfolio draws on two bodies of literature, multimedia development (decide, design, develop, evaluate) and portfolio development (collection, selection, reflection, projection),” will an emphasis on design potentially lessen an assessor’s attention to content?

Conclusion

“There is nothing so slippery as a thought...the process of externalization is a process for stabilization.... It gives students a chance to hold on to their thinking” (Eisner, 1998, p. 27). Using a constructivist, reflective paradigm to promote the strengths of portfolios as learning tools provides learners the opportunity to gather, order, and stabilize occasions of experiential learning that might otherwise elude them. When learners’ experiential learning has been captured through the portfolio mechanism, content experts at Athabasca University can determine, through careful assessment, whether or not the demonstration of learning meets the criteria for awarding credit.

In his guide to living in our communications-rich world, Daniel Pink outlined six aptitudes that he feels will be essential for success, describing them as the abilities that have “always comprised part of what it means to be human” (p. 67). The aptitudes he lists – design, story (not just argument), symphony (not just focus), empathy (not just logic), play, and meaning (not just accumulation) – are the hallmarks of critical, insightful thinking. They are also the skills required for the production of a successful learning portfolio. The venue for learners’ demonstration of learning may be paper-based or electronic. Although many factors can affect learners’ choice of venue, the journey of discovery that precedes the product should not differ substantially. The role of e-portfolios in Athabasca’s future, as with paper-based portfolios in the past, should serve to

support the fundamental activity of students' learning through meaningful engagement with and critical reflection on their learning histories.

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