

Chapter 6

Using Free Source ePortfolios to Empower ESL Teachers in Collaborative Peer Reflection

Adrian Ting

Hong Kong Institute of Education, Hong Kong

Phillip David Jones

Hong Kong Institute of Education, Hong Kong

ABSTRACT

This chapter reviews literature in the domain of collaborative peer reflection and the concept of voice for English teachers and puts forward three stages that need to be followed when selecting a suitable free source technology to create ePortfolio networks that are sensitive to the local environment. This is achieved by comparing twelve free source technologies against ten separate criteria to aid the reader in selecting a free source technology for ePortfolio use. The chapter then goes on to put forward five stages for facilitating collaborative peer reflection and the dissemination of ePortfolio use. This is presented together with sound advice that is applicable worldwide to ensure that success at each stage is achieved. The authors also draw attention to the future direction of research in this field.

OVERVIEW

With the realization of the importance that ePortfolios play in the development of professionals clashing with the current global financial crisis, a need has arisen for systems that are readily available and affordable that can meet this new demand.

Globally, with many educational systems being government maintained, they are historically slow to react to changes and new needs as they arrive. This chapter accepts the challenge in the conclusion of

Jones (2008) that for language teacher development, a school or government responsibility need be no greater than “*providing teachers with a webfolio and that this responsibility will soon be usurped by free source technologies such as MSN, MySpace, Facebook and Xanga*” (p. 58). Therefore, this chapter is founded on the premise that the use of free source technologies is the solution to the problem of inadequate infrastructure within educational settings and can provide solutions that promote collaborative reflection that are generalizable for teacher educators across the world.

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In this chapter, we define free source technologies as all technologies that are available to the user free of charge. Examples would include the majority of networking sites such as Facebook and MySpace but would also include software and programs that are available as free downloads. Further, we define readily available technologies are technologies that are expected to be readily available to most users but which at some point in the products history will have had some financial compensation attached. A good example of this would be Microsoft word. Almost all users will already have access to this software but at some point it will probably have been purchased even if it was purchased as part of a package when the hardware was initially bought.

As free source technologies are seen as providing an internationally generalized solution, it raises the question of which free source technologies educators should select, at either the organizational, national or international level. To address this issue, the first part of this chapter reviews collaboration in the process of reflection and reports upon an analysis of readily available and free source technologies that have the potential to create ePortfolios that can be used as learning tools to promote collaborative reflection. For this analysis, a total of 12 free source technologies were subjected to comparative analysis against 10 criteria that are essential for the facilitation of collaborative reflection.

The second part of this chapter then reports upon a case study that details the use of a free source technology to create ePortfolios with English language teachers in Hong Kong. The case study considers the concept of a community of teachers all supporting one another on the world wide web by using free source technologies. More specifically the case study examines the issue of voice - gaining the floor, speaking acceptably and being heard by others (Bailey, 1996) in collaborative reflection which can often be a debilitating

factor for non native speakers of English when engaging in collaborative reflection in English.

Finally, this chapter provides recommendations for those who wish to exploit free source technologies for the creation of collaborative ePortfolios and assists readers in selecting a free source technology which is most suited for their context. This allows the reader to overcome educational bureaucracies that, although well intentioned, are not always able to provide adequate technological solutions. In turn, this enables the reader to join a global community of reflective practitioners.

Collaborative Reflection for ESL Teacher Development

Teachers have always been encouraged to be reflective in their practice, and therefore the use of portfolios for reflection is of high importance (Lyons, 1998). Biggs (2003) emphasizes the importance of reflective practice. He believes that being reflective is a learning cycle for teachers who should always strive to update and improve their current teaching practice. In regards to collaborative reflection, Vygotsky (1978) takes us further with his belief that all human learning takes place through interacting with other people. His Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) theory advocates that social interaction is most beneficial to learners as it allows peer learning between people with lower and higher ability to take place. These theories provide a peer learning cum collaborative framework for our studies. There is further support for this from Bailey (1996). However, Bailey adds to this within an ESL context, as English language teachers that are non-native speakers of English can find it difficult to fulfill his three criteria for voice, that being gaining the floor, speaking acceptably and being heard by others. ePortfolios allow ESL teachers to fulfill these three criteria for the purposes of collaborative peer reflection through the medium of asynchronous communication.

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