

Chapter 9

Implementing an Open Source ePortfolio in Higher Education: Lessons Learned Along the Way

Stein Brunvard

University of Michigan-Dearborn, USA

Gail R. Luera

University of Michigan-Dearborn, USA

Tiffany Marra

University of Michigan, USA

Melissa Peet

University of Michigan, USA

ABSTRACT

This article describes the identification of goals, selection of an Open Source Platform and the initial implementation stages of an Integrative Knowledge ePortfolio Process (which has both pedagogy and tools) at a midwestern University School of Education. Faculty and students are using the Integrative ePortfolio approach to reflect on, connect, and document their learning and accomplishments over time, and to create an Integrated Professional Teaching Portfolio that showcases their knowledge, skills and contributions to others. Lessons learned during the preliminary phase include the importance of garnering support of adopters, providing sufficient support in order for faculty and students to gain the skills necessary to produce meaningful and dynamic portfolios and transitioning from multiple ePortfolios to a uniform platform that works across programs. The insights gained from the experience will be helpful to other institutions that are interested in adopting Open Source Platform ePortfolios.

INTRODUCTION

Portfolios, in particular ePortfolios, have the potential to be powerful generative and trans-

formative pedagogical tools for students, faculty and institutions (Inoue, 2009; Lorenzo & Ittelson, 2005a). Students can use ePortfolios to represent their learning and reflect on the different artifacts they create and experiences they share throughout their coursework (Young, 2002). Faculty can use

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ePortfolios to evaluate the effectiveness of specific courses or entire programs of study in order to determine if standards are being taught or if changes to the curriculum need to be implemented (Lorenzo & Ittelson, 2005b) and institutions can use ePortfolios to facilitate the accreditation process. Free and open source software represents a promising opportunity for a large number of higher education institutions looking for an effective way to integrate ePortfolios into their learning experiences (Wheeler, 2004).

Since 2007 the School of Education (SOE) at the University of Michigan-Dearborn (UM-D) has been implementing an open-source ePortfolio system (OSP) that is unique in its reflective and integrative stance. Undergraduate students as well as university faculty have used the ePortfolio to uncover their tacit knowledge and create representations of their learning and professional growth as educators. The following chapter chronicles that process, shares insights and provides guidance to help inform other institutions that may be looking to adopt similar ePortfolio systems.

BACKGROUND

The University of Michigan-Dearborn is one of two regional campuses connected with the University of Michigan system. The Dearborn campus is in southeast Michigan and offers a wide range of degrees and academic programs to a population of nearly 9,000 graduate and undergraduate students. Of that population, roughly 2,200 undergraduates are working on teacher certification within the School of Education and another 1,000 graduate students are enrolled in various education related Masters and certification programs. In 2001, the SOE started to explore the use of ePortfolios with its students as a way to help them reflect on their learning and create representations of their knowledge that the school could use to demonstrate how the different state mandated standards were being met across the curriculum. This process of

exploration and implementation are described in greater detail later in the chapter but it is important to articulate the rationale for using ePortfolios before moving forward.

Review of Literature

ePortfolios facilitate reflective learning (Richardson & Ward, 2005) and provide an electronic forum with which reflections, experiences and artifacts can be shared with a wider audience as a way to demonstrate mastery of relevant concepts and strategies. However, throughout the literature, the term “ePortfolio” is ambiguous and often characterized as having multiple purposes and definitions. The following typology (adapted from Wolf & Dietz, 1998) is widely used to describe these purposes: (1) assessment management portfolios capture evidence of students’ learning for institutions; (2) learning development portfolios prompt students to reflect on and connect learning within courses and over time; and (3) self-expressive professional portfolios support learners in creatively documenting their knowledge, skills, identities and accomplishments for others. However useful, this typology is also problematic as most institutions use ePortfolios for several of these purposes (Barrett, 2000).

The diverse purposes of ePortfolios actually reflect fundamentally different approaches to learning and present clear challenges for institutions wishing to adopt these tools (Barrett, 2000; Jafari, 2004). For instance, the self-expressive portfolios reflect a learner-centered “constructivist” view of knowledge and identity development wherein, ideally, students select, reflect on, synthesize and creatively present a series of artifacts that demonstrate both formal and informal knowledge, skills and values (Cambridge, 2001; Peet, in press). This type of ePortfolio is commonly referred to as a “learning portfolio” (Annis & Jones, 1995) because of its use by students to track their growth and development through a specific course of study. A key element of this

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