

To 'E' Or Not To 'E'

Electronic Portfolios in the Adult ESL Classroom

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Abstract

This literature review examines the advantages and obstacles of incorporating an e-portfolio as a means of alternative assessment in the adult and higher education ESL classroom. Some of the factors for the successful use of an e-portfolio include: adequate access to and training with technology, appropriate class size and course length, and realistic expectations for students, teachers and administrators regarding course level and goals. While e-portfolios are an excellent means of alternative assessment, the above factors should be considered carefully before making the decision to use electronic rather than traditional paper-based portfolios. Several resources for research and practical application are also included.

Introduction

Since the early nineties, portfolios have been used as a means of alternative assessment across varied subjects in education. Institutions began utilizing both working and showcase portfolios as requirements for certification, and essentially graduation. However, it is only within the last decade that the use of *electronic* portfolios has started to emerge as an acceptable, and sometimes preferred, method of assessment in the ESL classroom. As the presence of computers in the classroom has increased, the popularity of electronic portfolios has also increased. Teachers recognize that this type of assessment allows for the demonstration of competency and accomplishment in a unique way (Godwin-Jones, 2008). After carefully reviewing some of the literature on this topic, I will attempt to answer three questions: 1) What implications does the use of an electronic portfolio have for the student, teacher, and institution? 2) When is the use of electronic portfolio assessment appropriate? and 3) What are some available resources for teachers and institutions looking to add e-portfolio assessment to their curriculum? Before answering the above questions, it is important to describe some of the basics of the structure of an electronic, or e-portfolio.

What is An Electronic Portfolio?

A definition provided by the Northwest Evaluation Association describes the tradi-

tional paper-based portfolio as, “a purposeful collection of student work that exhibits the student’s efforts, progress and achievements. The collection must include student participation in selecting contents, the criteria for selection, the criteria for judging merit, and evidence of student reflection” (Paulson, Paulson, & Meyer, 1991, p. 60). However, this definition must be adjusted in order to allow for the dynamics of an e-portfolio. According to Anna Maria Lankes, an e-portfolio would contain the same information as the traditional paper-based portfolio, but a major difference would be that it could also include text, graphics, audio, video, and animation. The most significant difference is that instead of being stored as a hard copy, it would be stored electronically; either in a web-based format, or on a digital storage device such as a thumb drive or CD-ROM (Lankes, 1995).

While many believe an e-portfolio to be an electronic demonstration of the student’s accomplishment, this is not the only type of e-portfolio. According to the literature, there are two different types of e-portfolios: ‘working’ and ‘showcase’. In a working portfolio, students are expected to contribute and edit the contents throughout the course; here the focus is more on process (Moya O’Malley, 1994, p. 13). In a ‘showcase’ portfolio, students only include their best work; here the focus is more on product. While both types fulfill the requirements for an e-portfolio, the question of which to use becomes an issue of



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purpose. If the purpose of the e-portfolio is to demonstrate proficiency, a 'showcase' e-portfolio may be the best option. However, if the purpose is more to document and demonstrate progress, a 'working' portfolio may be the better choice. The purpose of the e-portfolio plays an important role in deciding which type to use, but it is also important to consider how the use of an e-portfolio will work for individual students.

Implications for The Student

For the modern student, the idea of an e-portfolio may not be a far stretch from their already computer moderated lives. Many college students and adult learners use computers on a daily basis to communicate with friends back home, pay bills, play games, and contribute to blogs and social networking sites. In this case, the student is already familiar with using the computer to create documents, upload images, and edit materials electronically. In the case of this type of student, an e-portfolio may be a natural extension of their demonstration of capable communication in a second language (English). It is logical to expect that these computer literate students may greatly appreciate the use of e-portfolios because it allows them to easily show prospective schools and employers their development and overall strengths in using English (Batson, 2002). They can show their portfolio no matter where they are in the world without having to bring along a cumbersome binder; like the traditional portfolio.

For these students, the focus may be more of a 'showcase' type of portfolio, which highlights their strengths, and shows not only the level of their English language skills, but also their ability to synthesize their accomplishments into a computer format; using English to do so. Traditionally, these students are used to taking standardized tests in order to demonstrate their proficiency in English; they want one quantitative score to show that they have mastered the language. While this single score may be an acceptable way to demonstrate proficiency to some, others may prefer a more informative way to demonstrate their overall competence. Using a 'showcase' formatted e-portfolio still allows them to demonstrate proficiency, but in a more dy-

namic format. Instead of a single score, they can visually show potential institutions and employers specific samples of their writing, let them listen to demonstrations of their speech, read reflections on their own performance and development, and see examples of their involvement in the target culture through photographs and video. All in all, a portfolio is a much more holistic representation of a student's abilities than what is ascertained from a single test score (Moya & O'Malley, 1994).

On the other hand, some adult ESL students may benefit more from the 'working' e-portfolio. Many adult students are more concerned with seeing how much they have improved over time, rather than the final outcome. The working portfolio seems to be a better means of assessing achievement, rather than proficiency. Currently, I teach an advanced level class of adult ESL students who have no desire whatsoever to take a standardized test or apply to an institution, and in this case, the working e-portfolio would be a much better means of motivation for individual students. Students who contribute to a working e-portfolio are able to see how they have improved over the term of a single course, a class level, or an overall ESL program (if the entire institution participates in the e-portfolio process). Furthermore, this type of portfolio allows learners to take more responsibility for documenting and assessing their language abilities (Godwin-Jones, 2008). Because both the teacher and student can comment and make suggestions for improvement, the student feels that the teacher genuinely cares about the student's progress, and the teacher feels that the student is taking an active role in his/her learning and development.

Implications for The Teacher

The use of the e-portfolio has many positive implications for the ESL teacher. Not only does it allow the teacher to make more individualized suggestions for student improvement, it is a 'biased for best' means of assessment (Brown, 2003, p. 33). The students feel they are given the opportunity to improve on their work as they learn, and the teacher is able to see how quickly and to what extent

they are improving. Because the e-portfolio is a back and forth editing process between the teacher and student, there is documentation of the progress electronically, in which case the teacher can quickly and easily access samples of student work in order to make adjustments to the curriculum or provide feedback to individual students.

On a simpler level, the e-portfolio is a cheap and convenient means of portfolio assessment. When collecting student work to evaluate, the teacher can simply collect the stored data, or access the e-portfolios online. In the case of online access, many websites are offering free e-portfolio templates that teachers can use, as well as the option to tailor e-portfolio requirements to the needs of a particular course, or even a specific student (Barrett, 2000).¹

Implications for The Institution

On an institutional level, e-portfolios have several advantages to the traditional paper based portfolios. Not only do they save space and money, but they are easy to file and retrieve as necessary (Kahtani, 1999).² Another advantage of instituting a school-wide e-portfolio system as a means of assessment is that all students are assessed on the same criteria at each level. For example, instead of having some students who are assessed by portfolio, some by poster session, and some by standardized test, all students demonstrate their proficiency in a unified way. Administrators can easily see where students left off in a previous level, without having to compare several different means of assessment. Moya and O-Malley list five other advantages to the implementation of a school-wide e-portfolio assessment system. First, the portfolio process can be tailored to informational needs, as well as instructional goals and objectives, thereby increasing the validity of the school's curriculum and instructional procedures. Second, because e-portfolio assessment is ongoing, the information can be used formatively, rather than summatively, as in traditional standardized tests, thereby allowing the institution to know as soon as possible if there needs to be changes in the curriculum. Third, linguistic, cultural, and educational diversity can be taken into consideration in assessments

because e-portfolios can be individualized, as opposed to standardized tests. Fourth, higher level skills, such as analysis and integration of sub-skills can be assessed, unlike in standardized multiple choice and matching tests. Finally, e-portfolios provide systematic documentation of student progress that can be used for entrance and exit purposes (1994). A student entering the school who can demonstrate strengths and weaknesses through the combination of an e-portfolio as well as a standardized test score, may be more accurately placed within the school's proficiency levels.

When is The Use of Electronic Portfolio Assessment Appropriate?

Now that the positive implications of e-portfolio assessment have been addressed, it is important for teachers and administrators to decide when it is most useful to incorporate this increasingly popular form of assessment into their classroom or institution. It may seem obvious, but a big factor in the decision to use e-portfolio assessment is the availability of technology, as well as the technological competency of both the teacher and the students. Schools that do not have regular internet access, nor enough computers for at least a classroom of students, will not benefit from this type of assessment. In addition, teachers who are not technologically competent themselves will have difficulty explaining to students how to create their e-portfolios, let alone access and provide feedback on contributions. Students who are not technologically competent will have difficulty with the process as well, and may become quickly discouraged (Kahtani, 1999). They may see the e-portfolio as more of a demonstration of their computer proficiency rather than their language proficiency, and therefore not use it as effectively as it was intended.

Furthermore, like any portfolio assessment, time is a big factor (Barrett, 2000). In the case of e-portfolio assessment, it is especially important to consider the time factor in relation to the length of the course, the number of students, and the overall goals of the teacher and student. If the course is only a month long, there will most likely not be enough time for the student to create the

portfolio, let alone have enough material to contribute and edit. If the class has a large number of students, the teacher will not be able to devote the appropriate amount of time to individual feedback, which negates the purpose of the e-portfolio assessment (Godwin-Jones, 2008). Moreover, if the course is a lower level course, the goals of the students and teacher may be more focused on basic communication skills, rather than a demonstration of fluency, which may be more effectively done without the incorporation of an e-portfolio assessment.

In short, the successful integration of an e-portfolio will require a number of factors. First, the institution must have regular access to technology as well as technologically competent administrators, teachers, and students. Second, the course length must be long enough to allow for material to be created and portfolios to be developed. Finally, the class size and level must allow for both the teacher and students to feel that they are meeting the goals of the course thoroughly and efficiently by including e-portfolio assessment.

Conclusion

In conclusion, while it is clear that there are many advantages to including e-portfolio assessment, there are also several obstacles. The use of an e-portfolio is only appropriate when it can enhance, not hinder the learning process. Teachers and institutions need to decide if the incorporation of an e-portfolio really is the best choice for their students, teachers, and institution. If not, although the glamour of technology is attractive, opting for the traditional, paper-based portfolio may be a better fit until the technology and resources are available.

While the literature has shown that the popularity of e-portfolio assessment is growing on an institutional level, I am still curious as to how many teachers are really taking advantage of this great means of alternative assessment. It appears that e-portfolios allow all parties (i.e. administrators, teachers, and students) to demonstrate growth and achievement in an organized, synthesized, and dynamic way, but I have yet to see them executed successfully in my own teaching experience. It seems that unless teachers have the

optimal environment, the e-portfolio really cannot be as easily incorporated into individual classroom assessment as one might hope. I am sure as the widespread use of technology in the classroom increases, this will change, and I am interested to see how popular this type of assessment becomes. As a new ESL teacher myself, I would like to begin to incorporate e-portfolio assessment into my own classroom as the advantages clearly seem to outweigh the obstacles. The resources listed below may help those looking to do the same begin the process.

Online Resources

There are numerous websites for creating, managing, and viewing e-portfolios. Several are listed below, and their potential for use in the ESL classroom is described.

1. New Mexico Regional Technology Assistance Program Site
<http://reta.nmsu.edu/Lessons/digital/index.html>
This site gives step-by-step instructions for teachers on how to begin using e-portfolios for assessment in the classroom. While it is not ESL specific, it gives a good outline for how to set up stations so that students can do the majority of the work in setting up the portfolio. It also has several links for how to set up clip art, save documents, and load things online. Overall, this site was very informative, and the links to other sites were even more helpful.
2. Helen C. Barrett's Electronic Portfolio site
<http://electronicportfolios.com/portfolios.html>
This site is a compilation of Dr. Helen Barrett's research and presentations on e-portfolio assessment. While there are many useful articles and PDF files of her presentations, the most useful part for teachers is the 'Resources and Links' link on the top of the page. After you click on the link, you can find links to other sites to view examples as well as a list of commercial and non-commercial (free!) e-portfolio websites. Again, this site is not ESL specific, but does have several links for examples of e-portfolios in language learning classrooms.

3. Pupil Pages Sample

<http://www.pupilpages.com/Students/Default.aspx?studentId=173>

This page is an example of an e-portfolio made by a student. The student has chosen some of his or her best work over a period of time to include, and there is space for the teacher to leave comments. While this site is not free, it gives a good example of what a potential e-portfolio could look like.

4. Epsilon Services

<http://www.epsilon.com/LandingSite/index.aspx#>

This site is a free hosting site for teaching professionals wanting to utilize e-portfolios. The only catch is that to use it for free you must have an “.edu” e-mail address. If you are teaching at the university level, it is most likely that this will not be a problem for students; however, students at private language schools, or those in the k-12 system will most likely be unable to utilize this site.

5. Edu 2.0

www.edu20.org

I used this site as a student myself, and found it quite useful because it is solely designed for educational purposes, has a portfolio component, and is most importantly, free. The teacher can create a virtual classroom so that students can join online classes. Then students are free to create their own portfolios where they can add documents and pictures. The teacher can then comment on and assess the students' work. One of the best features of this site is that it allows students to view and comment on each other's work if that is a part of the desired assessment.

6. Google Sites

www.google.com/sites

While this site is not specifically designed for e-portfolios, it allows the users to create a website that can incorporate pretty much anything they want. Students can choose from pre-designed templates and customize their sites as they choose. They can upload documents, images, presentations, etc. Besides being free, one of the best features of this site is that the owners have the option to 'share' their site with others, so that teachers can access student work without it being displayed publicly.

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