

E-Portfolios: the pretty and the ugly

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The benefits of e-Portfolio use in an academic setting are extensively presented within the literature (Barrett & Knezek, 2003; Challis, 2005; Strudler & Wetzel, 2005), with this tool gaining recognition in education (Bryant & Chittum, 2013; Shroff et al., 2014). It is said about e-Portfolios that they ‘have the potential for transforming curricula through the linking of practices-oriented learning and development of graduate attributes’ (Housego & Parker, 2009: 409). E-Portfolios are the electronic version of portfolios, vastly used historically in the realm of fine arts, music, etc. These can be defined as a ‘digitized collection of artefacts, including demonstrations, resources and accomplishments that represent an individual, group, organization, or institution’ (Lorenzo & Ittelson, 2005: 2).

E-Portfolios have been included in academic institutions as part of student development, or even as means of assessment (Lorenzo & Ittelson, 2005). Despite the advantages that come with e-Portfolios, there are some controversial ideas with regards to their use. Those ideas – the pretty and the ugly aspects of e-Portfolios, are the primary focus of this piece writing, allowing the reader to reflect upon this tool and its uses. As a first-time user of e-Portfolio, I would like to reflect on my personal journey with this tool, and to critically review my experience on the ProPIC project using e-Portfolios.

Advantages of using e-Portfolios are comprehensively documented in the literature with flexibility being one of its main assets (Bryant & Chittum, 2013). Students can document processes that allow them to observe, share and reflect on changes and gained knowledge that take place over time (Doig et al., 2006; Riedinger, 2006). Because several *artefacts* can be combined – at times from several disciplines, this allows for a holistic approach to skill and knowledge development, which is assumed to lead to deeper levels of understanding – authentic and deep learning experiences, and improved learning outcomes (O’Brien, 2006; Thibodeaux et al., 2017). There are other theoretical arguments in the literature that present further benefits of using e-Portfolios. These include for example improved reflection and learning outcomes; increased student engagement and integration of knowledge (Acosta & Liu, 2006; Doig et al., 2006; Hartnell-Young, 2006; Heinrich et al., 2007; Jenson, 2011; O’Brien, 2006; Peet et al., 2011; Riedinger, 2006; Sherman, 2006); a learner-centred approach; a reflective voice in the learning process (Thibodeaux et al., 2017). To take into consideration regarding the advantages of e-Portfolios, is that most of them are theoretical, and as Bryant and Chittum (2013) conclude in their review of the literature, more empirical research onto the benefits of e-Portfolio is necessary as the use of this tool continues to increase.

E-Portfolios also come with certain drawbacks. One of those is that the creation of a well-presented and well-informed e-Portfolio is a time-consuming process (Galanou, 2007) that requires knowledge beyond basic IT skills. It is time consuming in two fronts: firstly, as the individual needs to learn how to create and build an e-Portfolio; and secondly, in the understanding of the possibilities and tools offered. Moreover, it requires appropriate equipment to work with such as access to hardware (a computer, or tablet) – which also highlights accessibility as a potential disadvantage for individuals to whom this access is limited or non-existent. Regarding accessibility, it is worth noting the potential need for specialised assistance or training to initially learn how to build an e-Portfolio, and to understand how to use the tools available to the user (Butler, 2006). As a first-time user of e-Portfolio, I have been hesitant on what information would be more appropriate to include in my work, and in which way content should be organised. This highlights the need for specific instructions and guidance when it comes to creating and developing an e-Portfolio, potentially taking away from students’ creativity. Additionally, I would highlight the need for training onto the use of e-Portfolio features to partially tackle the time-consuming nature of this instrument – although, the learning process of those features is time-consuming on its own.

There are certain aspects of e-Portfolio I have found controversial as I developed my own skills with this tool. One of the first things I questioned was the advantage that had to do with openness and sharing knowledge and information (Tur & Ubrina, 2014). This openness can be viewed as an advantage – information is available to a wide(r) audience when it is online and free of charge, it fosters collaboration and empowers the learner; or as a disadvantage since it raises several questions. Firstly, it made me consider if publishing content on the web free of charge would continue to provide big data management corporations with information they can use. If e-Portfolio is used on a specific platform free of charge, who does the information the user published on that platform belong to? Another potential barrier of e-

Portfolios when it comes to openness is the fact that users can compare their work, potentially fostering a competitive environment. This is particularly hazardous when it comes to assessment practices, generating anxiety in students (ibid.: 16).

The last point I would like to raise is creativity. E-Portfolios provide a plethora of opportunities in the design and presentation of student's work, with tools to exploit this creativity widely available to those who can access a computer or tablet (Allen & Coleman, 2011). From my own experience using e-Portfolio, one of the main challenges was to learn how to use certain tools efficiently. For example, certain software such as photo or video editing tools. Not only learning how to use these tools is time-consuming, there is also specific software that the user has to purchase, which might pose an accessibility threat. Not necessarily everyone has access to the required hardware and software to make the most of e-Portfolio in a creative way, leading to an imbalance in opportunity and therefore, in the final work individuals might be able to produce.

There are other factors regarding creativity to take into account. Because there are so many tools available, the expectations in the quality and presentation of students' work might be high, which might, in turn, add pressure to the individual to produce content matching those expectations. This comes at the risk of the individual paying more attention to the way content is presented, than to the content itself. Amongst others, Allen and Coleman (2011) highlight that e-Portfolios are a great assessment tool because they provide many 'presentation options' (p. 63). I agree that e-Portfolios allow for a variety of ways of presenting content that can be more appealing to the reader or user. However, and as previously highlighted as a downside, this requires additional time to think about ways to present concepts or ideas, to learn how to use the necessary tools, and to prepare the actual presentation of the given content, potentially taking away from developing the content itself. This is not to say that e-Portfolios take away from individuals' creativity, but rather that the road to be able to fully exploit that creativity requires some time.

In closing, it could be said that e-Portfolios are here to stay. Nowadays, they are extensively used in educational settings, and serve as a tool that combine a series of skills and abilities that the learner has to acquire as a process to develop a final product. It is precisely to that process of learning to use e-Portfolios that this writing draws attention. To see the full benefits of the potential of e-Portfolios, it is imperative to consider equipment needs – including hardware and software; and training needs – that might vary amongst users and include time or additional teaching resources.

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