

Beyond the shoe box: Developing an ePortfolio for Leisure Sciences students



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This paper reports work-in-progress for an ECU Teaching and Learning grant project to create an electronic portfolio for Leisure Sciences students. It outlines the components of the project being undertaken and the processes that students will experience. The ePortfolio for Leisure Sciences students will be trialed in class during Semester 1, 2002 in a unit on leisure facility planning.

The ePortfolio is emerging as the latest tool in professional development, for documenting in-service achievements, career management and seeking employment. Considerable portfolio development has occurred in the field of education and the arts, and other disciplines are increasingly applying the portfolio as a professional tool. An ePortfolio for Leisure Sciences students will enhance the existing professional practice portfolio component of their academic program, building throughout each year of the course (and on into their career).

The ePortfolio consists of more than an electronic storehouse for a resume and copies of evidence such as scanned reference letters, photographs and video clips. It includes a self-learning process to help students identify gaps in their current portfolio. One feature of this process will be an interactive web site that will allow students to identify their existing skills, competencies and experiences. These capabilities may be compared to examples of job advertisements and corresponding job descriptions. In this way the students can identify if they need additional paid or voluntary work experience or additional skills to meet specific job requirements.

Introduction

This paper reports progress towards developing an ePortfolio for Leisure Sciences students. It is presented in two sections. First, the background to professional practice (fieldwork, practicum) is discussed, with the additional benefits of the introduction of a professional portfolio. This paper briefly outlines the creation of an electronic structure in which students collect evidence of their fieldwork experience and qualifications for reproduction in paper-based or electronic portfolio formats to meet unit requirements.

The second section examines various models of electronic portfolios as an alternative to the 'shoe box under the bed'. It reviews their content, advantages, and concerns. This section

concludes with a brief overview of software available for ePortfolio development, and finally outlines the prototype ePortfolio to be trialed with a group of Leisure Sciences students in 2002.

The ePortfolio framework is informed by the work of Barrett (1998, 1999, 2000, 2001). This project adopts Barrett's (2001, p. 5) definition of an electronic portfolio that focuses "on growth and development over time, implementation through selection, reflection and inspection of classwork, along with goal-setting and self-evaluation." However, in the early stages of this project, only the professional practice/practicum will be assessed in portfolio format.

Much of the research and development of portfolios for learning and assessment has occurred in higher education, especially in teacher education (e.g., Baltimore, Hickson, George & Crutchfield, 1996; Tanner, Longayroux, Beijaard & Verloop, 2000). The present project focuses on students preparing for professional careers in the diverse leisure industry. Due to the scope and variety for work and development opportunities in this industry, ranging from children's vacation care to elite sport events management, a portfolio application is most relevant. While the focus of this paper is Leisure Sciences students, the ePortfolio model is applicable to any other program that requires a portfolio approach to practicum or other assessment.

Professional practice in the Leisure Sciences Program

Benefits of student practice

The Leisure Sciences course at ECU has well established professional practice components throughout the course, culminating in a full industry unit in the final semester. The philosophy of professional practice is based on the notion of learning by doing, where theory and practice come together to enhance student learning and prepare graduates for the workplace (e.g., James & Colyer, 2001; Jewell, 1989; Ralston & Ellis, 1997). This strong practical emphasis of the Leisure Sciences course contributes to the high employment rate of ECU leisure graduates (90%, CEQ, 2001).

In 1998, the portfolio approach to student practicum was adopted to focus student energy and effort on work based learning outcomes, rather than students compiling a list of work experiences in the industry. The portfolio approach was based on Cooper's (1997) model of a paper-based evidence portfolio, presented in a binder or display book. The evidence of learning outcome achievements may consist of letters of reference, samples of work (e.g., brochures, reports), extracts from reflective journal, and similar hard copy material.

Changing circumstances have added other dimensions to student learning at ECU. The University developed a set of graduate attributes (key competencies or standards) shown Table 1, and faculties introduced generic skills (critical reading, thinking and writing). The current portfolio encourages and assists Leisure Sciences students to identify gaps in:

- (i) their existing skills and experience in relation to existing leisure industry jobs;
- (ii) their acquisition of graduate attributes, and
- (iii) their own interests.

Table 1 Graduate Attributes – ECU

Australia wide generic attributes

- Problem solving,
 - Critical thinking
 - Interpersonal understanding
 - Written communication
-

ECU generic attributes

Professional knowledge
Workplace experience and applied competencies
Communication
Enterprise, Initiative and Creativity
Teamwork
Problem Solving/ Decision Making
Use of Technology/Information Literacy
Awareness of Political, Social and Ethical issues
Internationalisation/Cross cultural awareness

The students use a step-by-step exercise to develop their learning outcomes (for a particular practice requirement), to help them recognise gaps in their own skills, knowledge and experience, and to distinguish between outcomes and objectives. This exercise is offered as a preparatory activity to the ePortfolio.

The classroom and beyond

Previously, when Leisure Sciences students graduated the academic Department of Leisure Sciences presented them with a ‘transcript’ of their practicum record: a list of placements and number of days completed. They were required to accumulate a minimum of 80 days by the end of their course. Some students accrued more than 200 days. The present portfolio structure of professional practice has overcome the competition to complete the greatest number of days of fieldwork. The portfolio focuses on the student’s professional development needs. The portfolio approach to practicum has also contributed substantially to students obtaining jobs. Anecdotal evidence suggests that organising an existing work record and education qualifications into a portfolio assists both graduates and potential employers.

In changing work environments, where the number of people in full time work will dwindle, part time and temporary work becomes more common (Kimeldorf, 1997, p. 14), with “variegated income” the norm (Handy, 1989, p. 44), individual portfolios may become the means by which job seekers demonstrate what they can bring to a job. Career portfolios will match this new way of working, with the advantages of demonstrating talents across a broad range of assignments (Kimeldorf, 2001). For the students, learning how to build a portfolio early in their careers has many benefits from self-assessment against University and industry standards (e.g., graduate attributes and job selection criteria), to setting personal learning outcomes, strategies and performance indicators (Cooper, 1997). The collection of materials derived from student practice becomes the basic resource file or storehouse from which a career portfolio is built (DeGraff & Jordan, 1996, p. 38).

The ePortfolio

More than a shoe box

The increased need for portable evidence to demonstrate knowledge and competencies means the 'shoe box' approach to storing professional practice and career material is no longer adequate. The electronic media offer opportunities to create a different type of portfolio. The ePortfolio is an electronic means of providing "a process and a place" (Shaklee, Barbour, Ambrose & Hansford, 1994, p. 2). The ePortfolio can be used for collation and flexible presentation of documents and other (non-print-based) evidence.

The underpinning philosophy of this project follows Clarke's (1995, p. 246) guidelines to focus attention on students' initial understanding of the *process* and its purpose; encouraging student ownership and individual expression; providing some structured aspects to balance the open-ended nature of portfolios; and evaluating portfolio process and students' responses. The strength of a portfolio (as assessment for professional practice) lies in its collaborative teamwork for students and teacher. It provides a common framework within which learning and achievement are discussed. It is a student-centred and empowering process (Baltimore et al., 1996, p. 115; McLaughlin et al., 1998). It is also a *place* (database) where evidence is organised and stored until required. The ePortfolio is also a *product* that is created by combining elements of stored materials for specific applications.

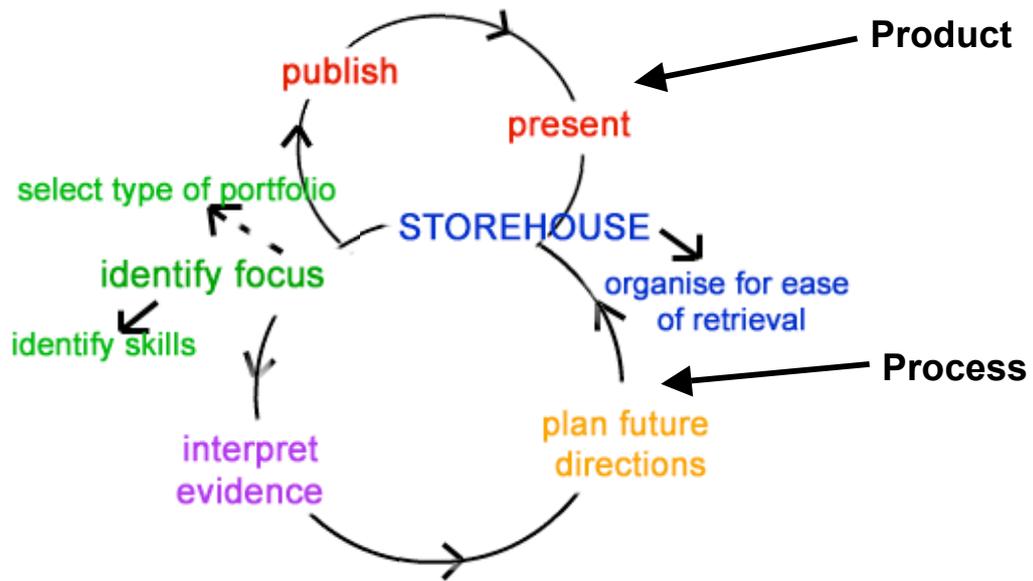
The ePortfolio is more than an electronic storehouse for a resume and copies of hard evidence, such as scanned letters, photographs and even video clips. It includes a self-directed learning activity for students by which they can identify gaps in their current knowledge, skills and competencies against job requirements (using advertisements and job descriptions). Students write their learning outcomes, with objectives and strategies for achieving them. These additional features reflect Barrett's (2000) view that a portfolio is a process, representing critical thinking, reflection and goal setting for ongoing professional development.

An ePortfolio offers the possibility to:

- create a systematic store (database) of all relevant artefacts (evidence) for easy access, selection and presentation in portfolios with a specific purpose (e.g., student assessment, job application or promotion);
- develop highly creative, visual and authentic artefacts through the technology
- (e.g., PowerPoint presentations, video clips of performance and products)
- store large amounts of relevant information that are easy to update, reflect upon and improve;
- access easily to transfer parts of the portfolio in a fast and efficient manner.

Figure 1 shows the structure of the ePortfolio processes. At the *process* level the portfolio author knows the focus of the portfolio, identifies the criteria, interprets the artefacts (evidence) in the resource file (database), makes notes for future action, and completes the desired task (publish portfolio, development or maintenance). The *product* loop represents the production of the ePortfolio using multimedia options for presentation.

Figure 1. The ePortfolio as process and product.



The steps to an ePortfolio

The students were briefed on the professional practice requirements for the unit (e.g., developing learning outcomes and completing a 5-day placement at a leisure facility). Most of the students were familiar with the general form of professional practice from a previous unit. The option of presenting the portfolio in an electronic form was explained, with students introduced to the processes, including preparation of word documents, scanning hard copies of references and certificates, and creating links between documents. All students received a disk containing the ePortfolio framework, developed from the paper based professional practice guide (after Cooper, 1997) issued with the unit materials in week one. Two specified training days were held to support student efforts to convert existing materials (such as resume, references etc.) into electronic form. Students had the option of submitting a hard copy portfolio or electronic portfolio on disk or by email. At the end of the semester an evaluation will be conducted to explore student reactions to the ePortfolio approach.

Cautions

While ePortfolios have great advantages there are some contentious issues that arise from the growing popularity of electronic portfolios, especially web based portfolios. Recent world wide web developments allow students to display web-based portfolios 'to the world'. Open access creates possibilities of plagiarism and misrepresentation by and of students (Wheeler, 1996; Wolfe, 1999). Public display of student work may not be as motivating as some suggest and may lead to problems of privacy. Security and confidentiality are also issues for web based portfolios that are not openly published, especially for reflective portfolios. Other disadvantages may include high costs of compilation and assessment, or the creation of a useless paper chase (Wheeler, 1996).

A disadvantage of university stored ePortfolios is the huge electronic storage space required, especially as increasing numbers of students develop their ePortfolios. A web page can be set up for student access to activities, samples and information to develop an ePortfolio.

However, students are encouraged to store their own electronic versions on disk and on their own computers.

Another disadvantage could be the different purposes of portfolios. Students may see portfolios as personal marketing tools, whereas faculties see portfolios as assessment tools. This confusion of purpose can create dissonance.

The use of portfolios as assessment tools raises many issues and contrary views about their effectiveness as evaluation tools (e.g., Burns, 1999; Centra, 1994; Seldin, 1991). Gwa-Dong et al. (2001, p. 20) warned that teachers must diligently strive to observe student portfolios and comprehend student learning processes to guide students to develop their portfolios. Other issues of portfolios as assessment tools are not discussed in this paper.

At this stage of this project, assessment is less a concern than instilling the importance of the process and encouraging students to use multi media platforms and software options that enhance, rather than add pressure to, the development of the ePortfolio. This project encapsulates two of the major aspects of portfolio development:

1. defining a portfolio, and
2. presenting relevant artefacts (evidence) effectively in an electronic format.

Multimedia development of the ePortfolio

The many electronic tools that are available for creating an electronic portfolio make the task appear daunting. However, the task becomes less arduous if the author remembers that the value added by creating an electronic portfolio should exceed the efforts expended. Student competency levels with electronic technology will vary greatly. Therefore, this project uses technology conservatively to keep the processes simple, heeding Barrett's (1998, p. 2) advice "when learning new tools, use familiar tasks; and when learning new tasks, use familiar tools".

Storing an ePortfolio

One key aim of this ePortfolio project is to provide a framework where student professional practice materials can be linked with career portfolio materials. This storehouse will hold electronic evidence to demonstrate a student's skills, attributes and competencies. Existing materials then form the basis for students to enhance their career choices, job-seeking skills and knowledge by reviewing comparing and updating their portfolio materials.

Many technologies can be used to store ePortfolio artefacts during the developmental stages. Due to lack of storage space on the university servers, security of storage and who should store the artefacts (student or university), digital file formats will be used. Artefacts will be developed using word processing or other commonly used software, and stored in electronic folders on the student's personal hard drive, a zip drive or a CD-Rom. Although portfolio multimedia elements can include images, sounds, video, text, and mixed media, in this first project students will only be encouraged to develop text and images.

Publishing the ePortfolio

At the presentation/publication stage the choice of software tools should allow students to create hypertext links between the learning outcomes and artefacts. Two types of electronic portfolio software can achieve this: proprietary software custom-designed for this purpose and tool software adapted by the portfolio developer. Although there are some very good

commercial electronic portfolio programs available on the market, these often reflect the developer's style or are constrained by the limits of the software structure. Barrett (2000) found that many electronic portfolio developers want the freedom to create their own portfolio structure using appropriate off-the-shelf software. For this project, tool software is used and supported by two products: Macromedia Dreamweaver and Adobe Acrobat PDF files. In 2002 the University adopted Blackboard as the platform for web delivery of teaching programs. This format will be explored as a base for the ePortfolio project.

Editing the evidence requires a deep understanding of the purpose of the portfolio, reflecting on the quality of artefacts and designing for the most effective presentation. The reflection process would ideally include the comments of lecturers/supervisors. This stage also provides an ideal opportunity for students to work as a team to improve the ePortfolio content and presentation. Through the practice of 'editing the evidence' students should develop the ability to select from their storehouse items for specific purposes (for example, addressing selection criteria for an employment position). Consolidating the reflection process at this time has the potential to aid career development. This is a future direction for the Leisure Sciences ePortfolio project.

Conclusion

This paper, as a report of work-in-progress, is incomplete in many ways. However, the discussion outlined the background to the importance of student professional practice in the Leisure Sciences course at ECU. It also described the adoption of the portfolio approach to assist students to plan and record their professional experience.

The shift to develop an ePortfolio for Leisure Sciences students was suggested by a discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of an ePortfolio system and the structure of a portfolio to enhance learning. The paper concluded with a review of existing multimedia resources suitable for use with electronic portfolios.

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