

BENEFITS OF WEB-BASED OR ELECTRONIC PORTFOLIO ASSESSMENT IN ESL CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT

The effective implementation and use of electronic portfolios in educational institutions confirm their value as an essential teaching and learning instrument. An electronic portfolio is a digital documentation or collection of artifacts (audio/video clips, text, visuals, and coursework) that represent its owner, whether it is an individual, group, or organization. Personal reflection on one's work, achievement, or thoughts is a key component in many electronic portfolios. Some still question whether electronic portfolios are actually beneficial to the educational process. This piece of work overviews recent literature related to the use of electronic portfolios and examines the issues and challenges of effectively implementing and using electronic portfolios in educational institutions.

Keywords: artifacts; digital documentation; electronic portfolios; personal reflection

INTRODUCTION

For decades, many educators have been voicing their concerns about the disadvantages standardized achievement tests may cause to ELL learners. Standardized achievement tests, they argue, fail to include ELL learners, who may come from linguistically diverse backgrounds, in the norming group (Abedi, 2002, p. 232), to consider "... the match or mismatch between a student's cultural and school experiences..." (Navarrette & Gustke, 1996, p. 2), and to provide bias-free and fair test items (Green & Griffore, 1980, p. 240-48). Indeed, according to Law and Eckes (2007):

Tests rarely reveal students' strategies, attitudes, interests, or explicit understandings of processes; they reveal control over language and content matter. Because a student's performance on a test so often has nothing to do with his competence in the subject matter, we believe it is not a good idea to use tests as the sole measure of learning or the only resource for making educational decisions (p. 146).

These failure and discrepancy have led to the birth of alternative types of assessment methods that can facilitate these segments of learners and allow them to have more options to construct and demonstrate their aptitude. Among these alternative types of assessment, portfolios are ones that have been gaining popularity "... at the forefront of the movement..." because they are "... the most useful and revealing way of showing growth, mastery, and true pictures of where a student is functioning" (Law & Eckes, 2007, p. 226). A portfolio, according to Genesee and Upshur, can be defined as a purposeful collection of students' work that demonstrates to students and others in their efforts, progress, and achievements in given areas" (as cited in Brown, 1994, p. 418). The invasion of computer and internet into language classroom in this digital age, however, has also brought about changes and innovation in the face, use, and features of portfolio assessment as an educational tool. A new type of portfolio, called electronic portfolios, as a result, was born out of this. Park University defines an electronic portfolio as a "purposeful collection of student work designed to showcase a student's progress toward, and achievement of, course-specific learning objectives... [which] include students' self-reflection on their learning processes and experiences as well as instructors', mentors', and peers' comments on what students have submitted" (as cited in Lorenzo & Ittelson, 2015, p. 2).

DISCUSSION

Despite its relatively new introduction and integration in language classroom compared to other alternative assessment tools, electronic portfolios, also widely known as Web-based, technology-based, digital, or e-portfolios, have proved to be a valuable resource for both language teachers and ELL learners. Indeed, I believe

that, the use of electronic portfolios can offer positive impacts in language teaching and learning can offer positive impacts for several reasons.

First, the use of electronic portfolios in ESL classroom supports a lifelong learning and assessment. According to Cambridge, “Lifelong learning is an ongoing process of developing knowledge, skills, and strategies; putting capabilities and self-understanding into action over time; and thereby establishing an identity. To support lifelong learning, higher education needs to look beyond the content knowledge, practical techniques, and professional capabilities that have been its primary focus” (2010, p. ix). Electronic portfolios give solutions to address this conception of education goals. As stated by Candy, “active engagement in the e-portfolio approach to learning and teaching may be seen to progress lifelong learning activity through the reflective process” (as cited in McAllister et al., 2008, p. 247). In their electronic portfolios, learners can exhibit proofs of their years-long academic and professional progress and achievement and use them throughout their educational and professional journeys. All the evidence, most importantly, is conveniently accessible for long term use. Indeed, Batson suggested that this feature of electronic portfolios provides the learners an opportunity “... to easily show [their] prospective schools and employers their development and overall strengths in using English” (as cited in Grant, 2010, p. 21). Therefore, electronic portfolios promote an everlasting assessment, self-evaluation, and learning for ELLs because they can serve as a storage of the learner’s life experience, thoughts, and chronicles, which can be utilized both in the present and in the future.

Second, electronic portfolios help ELLs to keep up with the development in technological advance and improve their mastery of computer use in learning. For ELLs who are already familiar with the use of technology in their daily life, electronic portfolios is not an unconventional work and does not require too much effort. For these computer-literate ELLs, then, electronic portfolios are only an extension of their regular routines with computers. Through electronic portfolios, learners are able to show not only their mastery of English skills, but also their ability to use the skills in computer-related areas. They are used to using a range of electronic devices for various purposes. For instance, they are used to using Skype for calling their families back home, Twitter and Facebook for social-networking, and blogs for sharing their

ideas. As a matter of fact, they are often required to utilize computers for academic purposes such as typing and turning in homework assignments, attending online courses, and simply browsing. Babae (as cited in Babae & Tikoduadua, 2013, p. 52) reinforced that “such social media including Facebook, websites, and blogs are part of learners’ everyday lives; and connections between daily experiences and learning processes aids learning.” Understandably, they will most likely appreciate the chance to also utilize their skills in using technology to demonstrate their language aptitude. For ELLs who are not ‘tech-savvy’, electronic portfolios can help them develop their computer literacy, especially for academic purpose. In any case, ELLs, whose English proficiency is usually assessed by means of standardized achievement tests, can now use an alternative way to show their aptitude while at the same time learning to utilize such media as images, sounds, or videos as supporting elements. The teachers, then, are able to not only read but also to see, watch, and listen to samples of students’ work. In this case, e-portfolios can function as “... a more holistic assessment of the student experience... allowing them to define their experience as a whole” (Cambridge, 2012, p. 106). Indeed, this process of producing multi-faceted portfolios by utilizing multimedia and web-based technology “... facilitates students to learn and apply computer-related technology. In other words, students’ computer literacy is enhanced through e-portfolio, hence improving their competitiveness...” (Chan & Kennis, 2013, p. 98). Commenting on how electronic portfolio helped her students increase their computer literacy, one instructor remarked, “The kids like using computers, so it’s great in terms of computer skills. The kids had to download pictures and they had to make attachments and stuff, so it’s great in terms of computer technology” (Meyer, Wade, & Abrami, 2013, p. 273). Another instructor reported how electronic portfolios enabled the incorporation of technology teaching in her course, stating: “I think their technology competencies were more of the goal than the actual writing competency, because we do a lot of writing also in class. So the kids are able to learn how to attach files, learn how to save files, learn how to go and search for things...” (p. 273).

Third, electronic portfolios have a higher level of practicality than conventional paper-based portfolios. Electronic portfolios seize less time and effort

from both learners and teachers. They also can be easily reproduced and accessed because they can be retrieved anytime and anywhere. Jaen affirmed that electronic portfolios' "... practicality is what makes it so appealing; user-friendly websites are easy to maintain and CDs are easy to copy, change, carry or mail. Digital files make it easy to share information with fellow designers... and school administrators" (2012, p. 112). All items of the learners' progress and accomplishment, such as writing samples, study projects, published articles, achievements and awards are electronically stored in various digital formats on a website, hard drives, Zip disks, or CD-ROM and thus, are available for long term needs and have very minimal risks of loss. They can continually and conveniently access, review, adjust, modify, and display their portfolios whenever needed no matter where they are in the world without having to bring along a heavy folder (Grant, 2010, p. 20). Also, the artifacts of their learning progress and achievement can be constantly loaded 24 hours per day, 7 days using multiple devices from their personal computers or mobile devices. Even for teachers, electronic portfolios can be highly practical. As affirmed by Ng (2015), when utilized as a tool to assess learners' performance, electronic portfolios allow teachers "... to monitor students' mastery of a core curriculum area over time... [and] enhance the assessment process by enabling the student to demonstrate academic achievements and research skills through a number of completed digital assignments and tasks that showcase the students' abilities in an e-portfolio" (p. 119). In other words, they can get access to the comprehensive artifacts of their students' work easily.

Fourthly, electronic portfolios provide a uniform assessment method. As maintained by Ayres et al., some types of electronic portfolios "... allow a uniform implementation across an entire institution" (2009, p. 149). When implemented as an institution-, faculty-, or school- wide assessment, electronic portfolios will enable the school to assess the teaching and learning outcome across levels on the same criteria in a unified way. Additionally, "administrators can easily see where students left off in a previous level, without having to compare several different means of assessment" (Grant, 2010, p. 22). While it may be true that school-wide adoption of e-portfolio assessment method will require significant investment, it can surely pay off. According to Chalk and Wire (as cited in Polly & Persichite, 2012), school-wide

electronic portfolio system “provide[s] the ability to aggregate at different levels of the organization,” (p. 276) meaning that data mining at various learning stages is a possibility. In addition, as Strudler and Wetzel affirm, it allows teachers or the faculty to synchronize course products with certain institutional standards in a region (p. 277). These features will be most likely tempting to school committees and stakeholders. Schools adopting this system, thus, have taken a step forward toward community learning by promoting and constructing virtual learning community.

Next, there are numerous websites available for creating, managing, and viewing e-portfolios, and many of them offer a variety of convenient features that teachers can select to meet the needs of their specific course and students. Some of these websites even provide service to develop “e-portfolios [that] were more personal, planned, and educational without any type of commercial concerns compared to regular websites” (Alawdat, 2013, p. 343). Blog, DoYouBuzz, PathBrite, Flavors.me, OPRResume, Shown’d, Weebly, and Portfolio Gen are among e-portfolio website providers that offer service free of charge. Teachers only need to direct their learners to one of them to arrange their personal, professional and academic works. In case they prefer a more personalized e-portfolios that they can modify the way they want, there are also such e-portfolio service as Facebook based e-portfolios, Pebble Pad based e-portfolios, and wiki-based electronic portfolios (Babae and Tikoduadua, 2013, p. 51), which allow more freedom for their users to organize their exteriors.

Finally, research has shown that using e-portfolios as an assessment tool can encourage learner’s autonomy in learning. In organizing e-portfolios, learners will be in charge of creating and organizing their materials for a particular purpose, assessing their own work, and making a reflection on their own learning experiences and progress (Goldsmith, as cited in Yastibas & Cepik, 2015, p. 516). They can control every phase in developing their e-portfolios, from selecting the content to evaluating their own learning outcome. As a result, they can present their e-portfolios in a more personalized way and will be more motivated to study. According to Gonzalez, the whole process of being in charge of their own e-portfolios promotes learning autonomy because learners play the role of the directors of their own learning (as cited in Yastibas & Cepik, 2015, p. 516). In an

investigation on the impact of weblog-based e-portfolio assessment on the improvement of syntactic component of writing among Iranian intermediate EFL learners, Motallebzadeh and Babae (as cited in Babae & Tikoduadua, 2013, p. 51) also confirmed that learners participating in the e-portfolio based learning were more involved in self-monitoring their own learning by writing more reflective writing logs. Further, in a study to analyze students' perceptions of using E-Portfolio Assessment Management System (EAMS) to support their learning and assessment conducted by Tubaishat (2014), a student participant commented:

My e-portfolio helps me monitor my progress towards achieving goals in my degree program: This question was designed to learn about the student's impression from the use of the e-assessment tool to help them monitor their progress towards achieving their learning goals in their degree program. About 65 percent of the students either agreed or strongly agreed to that statement, 25 percent were undecided whether their e-assessment tool helped them monitor their progress towards achieve their goals. Around 10 percent disagreed or strongly disagree to that statement (p. 376).

CONCLUSION

In short, changes in the learning environment have enhanced classroom practices and have impacted teachers' approach in evaluating and assessing learners' work. Internet and computer have offered new way for teachers to expose students to the wider world, opening ways for learners to acquire information and expand their knowledge. E-portfolios, in this case, can be used effectively and efficiently in assessment because of the numerous advantages learners can greatly benefit from them.

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