Chapter XVI
Using ePortfolios to Enhance Reflective Learning and Development

Bob Doig
University of Dundee, UK

Barbara Illsley
University of Dundee, UK

Joseph McLuckie
University of Dundee, UK

Richard Parsons
University of Dundee, UK

ABSTRACT

This chapter argues that it is essential that ePortfolio development is driven by pedagogical considerations, thus ensuring the effective use of these technologies to support learning. Drawing on experience of implementing ePortfolios in an institutional context, the chapter considers how best to meet the needs of learners within a system of effective eLearning support and emphasises the key role of developing reflective writing skills if the ePortfolio is to be an effective way of learning. Creating and deploying key learning activities that effectively use ePortfolios is now a much greater constraint to the correct use of ePortfolios in learning than the technical design or capabilities of ePortfolio software.

INTRODUCTION

Professional programs within the higher education sector in the United Kingdom have used portfolios for many years, both to support learning and to provide evidence of attainment of specified professional standards. Portfolios have provided a vehicle for the collection, selection, reflection, and direction of learning (Danielson & Abrutyn, 1997). This description of purpose
fits well with the concept of the reflective practitioner (Schon, 1984) and its development into the reflective professional (Light & Cox, 2001). It also links well to the concept of meta-learning: “being aware of and taking control of one’s own learning” (Biggs, 1985, in Jackson, 2004). Within education, for example, the portfolio is seen as an effective vehicle to capture the complexities of learning, teaching, and learning to teach.

The teacher is capable of reflection leading to self-knowledge, the metacognitive awareness that distinguishes craftsman from architect, bookkeeper from auditor. A professional is capable not only of practicing and understanding his craft, but of communicating the reasons for professional decisions and actions to others. (Shulman & Sykes, 1983)

In other professions, such as architecture or surveying, the portfolio provides the vehicle for undertaking and recording the initial experience in the workplace, a key requirement for full membership of the professional body.

The debate surrounding the use of portfolios has widened beyond professional disciplines, however, with the emergence of the concept of personal development planning (PDP), which is defined as “a structured and supported process undertaken by an individual to reflect on their own learning performance, and/or achievement and to plan for their personal, educational and career development” (Jackson, 2001). First recommended in the United Kingdom Dearing Report (NCIHE, 1997), higher education institutions are expected to have institutionally determined policies to support PDP in place by the 2005/2006 academic session. While the PDP movement reflects a number of factors, such as a focus on quality assurance and a concern with enhancing student employability, significantly it assumes a shift towards student-centred learning, and the emergence of the autonomous learner (O’Connell, 2003).

REFLECTIVE LEARNING

From a review of the academic literature, it is evident that there is a growing emphasis on reflective learning and practice in higher education, mainly but not exclusively associated with the education of professionals. Reflection is generally accepted to be an active and deliberative, cognitive process which, according to Reid (1993), involves “reviewing an experience of practice in order to describe, analyse, evaluate and so inform learning about practice.” Moon (2004) distinguishes between a common-sense view of reflection and an academic one, with the latter involving a clearly stated purpose and an outcome “specified in terms of learning, action or clarification.”

A number of authors have explored the concept of depth in reflection, resulting in the development of frameworks that distinguish between surface and deep approaches and help facilitate assessment (Van Manen, 1977; Hatton & Smith, 1995; Moon 1999). Reflection is largely absent from the surface levels, being characterised by simple recording of events, and it is most significant for approaches associated with deep learning, as the learner develops an ability to engage in a process of ‘framing and reframing’ their conceptions of knowledge. Deeper levels of reflection are most likely to result in quality learning outcomes.

IDENTIFICATION OF THE NEEDS OF LEARNERS

The needs of learners within higher education are rapidly changing. Traditional modes of learning, based on face-to-face contact in small groups, are
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