Chapter XXXIV

Tracking Capability Using Web–Based ePortfolios in UK Schools

Will Wharfe
TAG Learning Ltd., UK

Karim Derrick
TAG Learning Ltd., UK

ABSTRACT

MAPS, the Managed Assessment Portfolio System (see http://www.maps-ict.com), is a Web-based ePortfolio system that was developed to help both teachers and learners, initially with a focus of helping to raise standards in the teaching and learning of information and communications technology in the UK. MAPS has since developed into a system covering all stages and subjects of school education, and is now being used in further education contexts. This chapter plots the progress of MAPS from an initial sketch idea to its present form: supporting over 57,000 student portfolios. The authors then draw out a number of lessons learned from such extensive use. The chapter finishes with a look at forthcoming ePortfolio issues and consideration of the requirements of lifelong learning ePortfolios.

BACKGROUND: FIRST STEPS

We had just started the process of building online portfolios for teachers as part of the TagTeacherNet portal (http://www.tagteacher.net) when we were contacted in August 2001 by Dave Thomson and Jane Finch from Worcestershire LEA (http://www.worcestershire.gov.uk). They had been researching the use of ePortfolios, and they also had heard good reports of a product previously produced by our company (TAG Learning) called Portfolio Builder. They wanted to know if they could use Portfolio Builder.

After some research, we discovered that Portfolio Builder had been a portfolio system
Tracking Capability Using Web-Based ePortfolios in UK Schools

built before we joined TAG Learning. It had been built in Hyperstudio (see http://www.hyperstudio.com) primarily for stand-alone computers, although it was networkable. A cross-curricular system designed for primary schools, Portfolio Builder was very much a learner-centred system. In Portfolio Builder, it was up to the learner to record and describe his/her progress, and the learner was given a framework for describing moments of significant achievement. The framework prompted the learner to review his/her progress at regular intervals during a project and to reflect on that progress after project completion: what worked, what did not, what would they do next time? Portfolio Builder was put together by Tony Wheeler, one of the founding members at TAG Learning, and John Potter of the Newham Local Education Authority. Having reviewed an archived version of Portfolio Builder, we talked to Tony about the thinking and research behind Portfolio Builder.

Tony Wheeler’s approach to ePortfolios was influenced by his work for the Assessment of Performance Unit (APU), which was at the time part of the UK government’s Education Department, or Department for Education and Science as it was then known. The APU no longer exists, but in the 1980s it was responsible for monitoring school performance by carrying out random sampling; however, before samples could be taken, valid assessment tasks had to be designed. Around 1989-1990, having worked its way through most other subjects, the APU started looking at ways of monitoring standards for teaching and learning in design and technology. Tony Wheeler, together with Professor Richard Kimbell and his team based at Goldsmith’s College in Greenwich, had the task of designing a test mechanism that would establish the level of design and technology capability in a sample of 10,000 15-year-olds.

We quizzed Tony about his work for the APU, and later for the Technology Education Research Unit (TERU), which was—and still is—run by Professor Richard Kimbell at Goldsmith’s (see http://www.goldsmiths.ac.uk/departments/design/). During this time, one question kept emerging: How do you best assess a pupil’s capability? The challenge that Tony and others had faced in previous projects was that it is very hard for a teacher to make a valid assessment of a student’s capability by just looking at their work if the work itself did not shed enough light on why and how the student did what he/she did. In many coursework portfolios, all that is placed in the portfolio is the work.

The research by the APU and later TERU (Kimble, 1997) showed that it really was very difficult to make a valid assessment of a student using the work alone. They found that if the student was required to make notes, recording the decisions they made, for example, at the beginning (Planning), middle (Reviewing), and end (Evaluation) of a project, then there was much more evidence for the teacher to use to assess the student’s progress compared with just assessing the work. The commentary was in effect a process diary for each project. Then, taking a series of projects together, along with a series of associated commentaries, you have what could perhaps be called a progress diary to chart the student’s overall progress, or “distance travelled.”

Thus the Portfolio Builder system gave the student the opportunity to write and record comments throughout a project. The system was initially successful and was installed in educational authorities including Newham in East London. However, for reasons that really lay outside of this chapter—the demise of the Acorn computer platform in the UK, for example—the Portfolio Builder project came to an end.

Years later, because of Jane Finch and Dave Thomson’s enquiry, we were encouraged to take the time to reinvestigate Portfolio