Chapter XXXVI

Twisting the Kaleidoscope: Making Sense of ePortfolios

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ABSTRACT

This exploratory study examines if student perceptions and ePortfolio products match faculty beliefs that ePortfolios are influential learning experiences. Multiple methods of data collection (survey about values and uses of ePortfolios, and content analysis of the quality of ePortfolios) are used to triangulate the results. Student ePortfolios are reviewed for level of difficulty, uniqueness, design, and depth of reflection. Multiple raters help ensure reliability. Bivariate analysis as descriptive statistics is used to determine if any relationship exists between ePortfolio rubric score and academic credits earned in computer technology courses. This research aims to inform the development process of ePortfolios across university campuses, and suggests that the investment of time and resources in this authentic assessment process is yielding some valuable results.

INTRODUCTION AND PROBLEM STATEMENT

Creativity is a lot like looking at the world through a kaleidoscope. You look at a set of elements, the same ones everyone else sees, but then reassemble those floating bits and pieces into an enticing new possibility. —Rosabeth Moss Kanter

Beginning in 1996, Seton Hall University embarked on a technology initiative that in-
cluded laptop computers for all undergraduate students and faculty, investing over $25 million to support teaching and learning with technology (Seton Hall University, 2002). In 1999, EDUCAUSE recognized Seton Hall University for superior campus networking. The same year the university was ranked 16th in a survey of Yahoo Internet Life’s “America’s Most Wired Colleges” among United States’ campuses, and first among Catholic universities based on the initiatives in the areas of hardware, academics, and services in technology. Simultaneously, faculty in the Educational Studies department participated in a three-year Preparing Tomorrow’s Teachers to Use Technology (PT3) Implementation grant sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Postsecondary Education. The project was locally named Project SHURE (Seton Hall University Revitalizing Education). The prime directive of this national initiative was to foster technology-enriched teacher education programs by focusing on practical faculty training. As a result of this grant, use of technology in course offerings has increased. Educational Studies faculty have continued to further investigate ways to use technology to foster students’ growth and development both as individuals and future teacher educators, as well as to offer opportunities to develop their reflective thinking skills. The idea for students to develop their own electronic portfolios (ePortfolios) that promoted their professional and technology proficiencies, packaged together with a focus on employment, was the result of this investigation. This preliminary study of ePortfolios has allowed us to learn more about our students’ through both our observations of their work, and self-perceptions of their electronic portfolio experiences through written survey responses. In the end, we have a renewed sense of the perceived value of this college experience, which has informed our own practice.

The authors view ePortfolios as living documents that allow for students’ growth and development over time, and use an adapted version of the Living-Systems design model for the development of Web-based products (Plass & Salisbury, 2002) in course work. Plass and Salisbury created this instructional design model with the view that the resulting system (or in the case of electronic portfolios, a product) is a living and adapting organism. Their view is that “since growing and sharing knowledge is, by definition, an ongoing and self-modifying process, the goal is to design and build a system that is adaptable to its environment—a living system” (Plass & Salisbury, 2002, p. 39). To further illustrate our view of electronic portfolios as living documents, we found a fitting analogy in Brewster’s 1816 invention, the kaleidoscope. Consisting of carefully placed mirrors that reflect off the contents contained within, this instrument produces an endless and ever-changing variety of colors and forms, which can be complex, unique, inspiring, and fascinating. A well-produced electronic portfolio, like the kaleidoscope, can be multi-faceted in design, absorbing to review, and possibly different each time reviewed, offering insight and depth into the teacher candidate’s proficiencies.

As proponents for the ePortfolio development process to be part of the teacher preparation curriculum, the authors believe that students who construct ePortfolios benefit from a unique experience that not only develops their reflective thinking and creative skills, but also enhances their learning in other meaningful ways. By exploring the results of an electronic survey with Seton Hall University’s College of Education and Human Services alumni (n=9) who volunteered to complete an ePortfolio in their coursework and conducting an analysis of the latent content of individuals’ ePortfolios, which can be found at the Web site http://education.shu.edu/portfolios/, the authors sought evidence to determine if survey results and