

Designing the Future: The Benefits of ePortfolios and Blogging

A Review of the Literature

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Peep into any secondary classroom, and you will see many similarities. Teachers in “the power zone” introducing or reviewing concepts, students working at desks or tables, taking notes or completing worksheets, and unfortunately, minimal engagement, peer-to-peer interaction, and authentic learning are occurring. In many classrooms across our nation, our education systems have unintentionally placed our educators and students in an unproductive cycle of sitting and getting learning. In this instructional model, the teacher is the deliverer of information and knowledge, and the student is expected to absorb it very monolithically. These learning and instructional models lack creativity, innovation, and authentic learning opportunities, which don’t develop life-long learning competencies in our students. As educators, we must find ways to empower our students to take ownership and accountability for their learning by creating new models or tools for our students to use to enhance the skills they will need to be successful in the future.

As the world continues to evolve, the skills our students need to be successful and productive in today’s academic environments and tomorrow’s workforce are shifting toward technical competencies, collaboration, creativity, innovation, problem-solving, and critical thinking. These are skills acquired or sharpened during the creation and maintenance of an ePortfolio. The following research supports and proves my research question, “How do ePortfolios and blogging foster student development and growth.” After exploring the available literature, this review will examine how ePortfolios promote collaboration, reflection, and student-centered learning. The following literature review will discuss these factors in-depth and provide supporting research on how ePortfolios empower students to take ownership of their academic experience.

Review of the Literature

Definition of ePortfolios

Danielson and Abrutyn (1997) define ePortfolios as digital or online portfolios designed to showcase studies, track progress, display art, or a collection of evidence or artifacts. ePortfolios have been used in the medical field for decades, allowing medical practitioners worldwide to share their research, data, and results. ePortfolios are great tools for doctors and other scientists, as they are easily accessible instruments demonstrating their learning and professional achievements. ePortfolios are unique due to their collaborative and global nature. Since ePortfolios are digital resources, their contents can be shared worldwide within minutes, allowing others to review, share or learn from them no matter the restrictions or limitations of the area they inhabit. In the last few decades, collegiate educators, both undergraduate and graduate, have recognized the value of ePortfolios and implemented them into their curricula as techniques for tracking progress, fostering student accountability, establishing reflection skills, promoting student autonomy, and facilitating authentic learning. ePortfolios have even trickled down to the K-12 sector in more recent years. Students from elementary to high school have established their online identity and created ePortfolios designed to grow with them academically and personally.

Types of ePortfolios

According to Danielson and Abrutyn (1997), there are three types of portfolios: working, showcase, and assessment. Other researchers suggest that many ePortfolio types exist, such as course, teaching, or personal. Although each ePortfolio type serves a different purpose, they all have the same foundational function, an online collection of artifacts and evidence of learning, development, or growth (Hicks & Nino, 2021, 95)

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Working

According to the reviewed literature, working ePortfolios contain works in progress, track student learning over time, and continue throughout the year. They are created with the intention that the creator will continue to add to the ePortfolio and build upon their research and projects (Stony Brook University, 2020). The study also suggests that working ePortfolios are most used in learning environments where students are asked to establish a goal and walk their teacher or other consumers through their process of exploration and discovery. Students utilize their ePortfolio for a variety of reflective purposes. For instance, a student may wish to reflect on courses taken, past projects, internships, activities, or programs. Whether this reflection is positive or negative, it encourages the student to think critically and utilize analytical skills to develop a thorough understanding of an experience. Working ePortfolios also foster stellar revision and editing competencies in their creators. If you focus on the suffix, one can determine that *working* ePortfolios are active projects. They are buildable works that require the creator “to go through the process of evaluating, revising, presenting, and reflecting on their best work after considering audience, context, and purpose” (Di Silvestro & Nadir, 2021).

Showcase

Greg Port (2012) of All Saints’ College provides the following definition, “A showcase ePortfolio is a student-owned ePortfolio with a collection of artifacts designed to display the best of that individual student.” Showcase ePortfolios, by design, have a finish line, meaning that the ePortfolio is created and remains as is for the sake of presentation. Showcase ePortfolios are typically used for photographers, writers, musicians, or other performative artists. They are used to exhibit their best work for things like competitions, scholarships, or internships. They are presented to audiences that will decide on membership or induction into a group or society.

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Unlike working or assessment ePortfolios, showcase ePortfolios slant more to the creator's personality. They are representations of the creator and are used to establish an online identity and showcase the creator more intimately. Showcase ePortfolios are connected to who the creator is at heart and give way to voice, autonomy, and essence.

Assessment

Richards et al. (2014) depict assessment ePortfolios as tools to track student progress and foster student accountability. They are used in classrooms and professional environments to calculate growth, development, and knowledge acquisition. They require the creator to show what they know. As research and literature continue to grow, researchers can see how beneficial ePortfolios are in tracking milestones in learning.

Advantages of Using ePortfolios

Benander & Refaei (2016) report, “ePortfolios in the 21st century address the new necessity for students to communicate through digital rhetoric.” As the world continues to evolve, the skills our students need to be competitive in the global job market change. ePortfolios address the pedagogical and technological competencies our students need to be actual global citizens with the capacity to lead. ePortfolios target multiple facets such as but are not limited to, student-centered learning, deeper learning, reflection, autonomy, choice, voice, and agency. Other research suggests that ePortfolios “promote the longitudinal learning process” (Saarinen et al., 2021) by teaching students how to become life-long learners and engage in authentic learning through exploration and self-regulating learning. Current literature reveals that ePortfolios have several advantages; in particular, ePortfolios possess the ability to connect experiences and knowledge gained in the academic context with a variety of other contexts, including the workplace and community (Wuetherick & Dickinson, 2015)

Collaboration

Due to the global access to ePortfolios, collaboration is made easy. Learners and researchers worldwide can connect with anyone and share ideas, findings, and data. Regardless of the type of ePortfolio, collaboration and the sharing of ideas is critical to its maturation and sustainability (Di Silvestro & Nadir, 2021). Although not explicitly aligned with secondary education, the research suggests that collaborating and sharing ideas are effective for favorable outcomes (Karsten et al., 2015). Regarding student-owned ePortfolios, collaboration allows learners to engage in discourse that stimulates higher-order thinking and deeper understanding (Deal & Timma, 2018). In addition, collaboration enables community learning. It employs all those around to participate in authentic learning and student-centered instruction (Zhang et al., 2007, 204).

Blogging and Reflection

Reflection is a “critical consideration in the development of knowledge and beliefs,” and people learn best from reflecting on their experiences (McLeod et al., 2015). Teachers or other instructional personnel use a learner’s ability to reflect on work or experiences to determine understanding and mastery of a concept. Analyze and evaluate are positioned at the top of Bloom’s Taxonomy pyramid. When learners can analyze- compare and contrast, examine, or question the content, they are considered to have mastered the concept. The same applies to students who can argue, defend, or support their learning (Bloom, 1956)—reflective writing centers around students' capacity to synthesize and evaluate their findings. Reflecting on one’s learning is a fundamental skill for understanding and improvement. Reflective thinking involves higher-order thinking skills, requiring deep thinking and the ability to rationalize every decision (Khalid et al., 2015). The most used method of reflective writing related to ePortfolios is

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blogging. Blogs are an “online journal or informational website displaying information in reverse chronological order, with the latest posts appearing first, at the top. It is a platform where a writer or a group of writers share their views on an individual subject” (Minaev, 2023). Blogs open discussion and engagement to viewers worldwide. It also helps facilitate an online presence for the writer (Minaev, 2023). Blogging serves not only to engage in discourse but also to create a space for like-minded people to connect and share.

Student-Centered Learning

Fallowfield et al. (2019) report that ePortfolios are a “high-impact practice” that shifts the dynamic from teacher-led to student-led. ePortfolios align with Constructivism suggesting learners construct their ideas from their personal experiences. The research communicates that when using ePortfolios, the teacher transitions from a lecturer to a facilitator role. This allows the students to rely on their knowledge acquisition, resources, and learning community to develop ideas and complete tasks (Lewis, 2015, 116). By design, ePortfolios offer students autonomy, choice, and voice in their approach to their learning. They are in control of how they learn and how they decide to demonstrate their understanding. This approach creates higher levels of student accountability and develops self-regulated learning. It puts the student in the driver's seat and encourages them to take control of their learning experience (Harring & Luo, 2016).

Barriers to Implementing

A few common barriers to ePortfolio implementation are digital literacy, software, and maintaining motivation. Students who do not possess strong digital competencies struggle with creating their ePortfolios resulting in a lack of motivation to continue or complete tasks. Students who need help with the technical side of ePortfolios also typically struggle on the creative side due to burnout (McDermott-Dalton, 2021, 1219). Another barrier reported in the literature was

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privacy issues (p. 1218). Although ePortfolios are mainly used by higher education students, more and more K-12 students are starting to create ePortfolios resulting in significant privacy issues for minors. ePortfolios, at large, are an online representation of the creator, so when elements like photos, names, and other identifying details are restricted, it becomes challenging to create the online identity necessary to produce a true ePortfolio (Deal & Timma, 2018, 51).

Student buy-in and institutional support are also substantial barriers. Fallowfield et al. (2019) report that institutions or instructors may be apprehensive about adopting a campus-wide ePortfolio rollout due lack of perceived value to the students, program, or organization. It is vital to a successful rollout that instructors and institutions understand the necessary elements required; time, flexibility, productive and constructive feedback, clear expectations, multiple platform options, and high engagement between instructor and student (p. 113-114). Paulson & Campbell (2018) cite that student buy-in and introducing a new assessment tool also complicate ePortfolio implementation. Students were reluctant to create ePortfolios because they had yet to confirm a professional path or decide what to do post-graduation. Additionally, tenured professors were hesitant because they already have technologies and assessment tools they were comfortable with and did not want to adopt anything new (p. 10).

Summary

The research presented in this paper supports the idea that ePortfolios effectively enhance student reflection and authentic learning across multiple content areas and disciplines (Posey et al., 2015). Implementing ePortfolios expands student reach beyond the classroom, partly to worldwide access to other ePortfolios. ePortfolios allow creators to connect quickly and intimately with other researchers and developers, establishing a global network to enrich areas of study or profession. ePs also introduce students to interpersonal and interprofessional

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collaboration that fosters worldwide networking and sharing (Karsten et al., 2015). The research also reinforces that ePortfolios facilitate greater accountability, student autonomy, and choice. ePs are personal and represent their developer's true nature and essence (Di Silvestro & Nadir, 2021). When we allow students to take control of their learning experience, they are shifted into a student-centered instructional model that develops a capacity for life-long learning, exploration, and resourcefulness (McLeod et al., 2015). Higher education students and professionals have been using and benefiting from ePs for the last several decades. They are developing skills aligned with the needs of our ever-evolving society and workforce (Lewis, 2015). Students enrolled in programs, courses, or institutions implementing ePortfolio development are more likely to gain the skills needed to compete in the global workforce due to their critical thinking, problem-solving, and collaboration competencies (Richards et al., 2014).

This Review and the Field of Education

While this literature review provides minimal insight into the benefits of ePortfolios in middle school graphic design classrooms, it supports the idea that ePortfolios are beneficial in any academic or professional environment. Our world is evolving; unfortunately, the current education systems are antiquated and counterproductive for our students. Instead of developing critical thinkers who can lead, our education systems are creating task rabbits who can execute a checklist or memorize information but can't create or think outside the box. Due to our checklist approach to instruction, our students lack vision, voice, and choice regarding their educational experience. Their creativity is stifled due to standardized testing and one-dimensional approaches to assessment and higher-order learning. Students of the 21st century should be equipped with technical and collaborative competencies that prepare them to be competitive in the global market. Critical thinking, problem-solving, and interpersonal communication are vital to their

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success in higher education and the workforce. Educators should have the agency to foster creativity, fluidity, and student-centered learning in their classrooms if they plan to develop transformative leaders. I hope ePortfolio implementation continues growing and finds itself in more middle and elementary classrooms. The sooner we introduce these skills to our learners, the better prepared they will be to enter higher education institutions or the workforce.

Strengths and Weaknesses of this Body of Literature

The strengths of this literature review are the vast number of peer-reviewed journals that support the suggestion that ePortfolios and blogging are practical tools for measuring student growth, development, and information acquisition. This review continues to perpetuate the effectiveness and benefits of ePortfolios in academic and professional environments. It also reiterates the importance of collaboration, networking, and reflection as necessary 21st-century competencies.

Finding articles and journals that prove this instructional tool is beneficial in both academic and professional settings was easy; however, a weakness of this literature review is that although the information provided aligns with ePortfolios and their success after implementation, it lacks the specifics of implementation in middle school classrooms. Unfortunately, ePs are primarily used in higher education and medical environments, and information on their performance and success rate in middle schools are scarce to non-existent. Hopefully, as instructors and institutions continue to use ePs and report their success, more journals will become available, and more K-12, specifically middle school educations and campuses, will begin implementing them.

Focus of the Current Study

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Currently, the district I work for is not supporting my plan of implementing ePortfolios in my graphic design class, at least not how I want to execute the project. Although creating ePortfolios aligns with the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) for my content area, the district does not support blogging (they consider it a form of social media) or eP building on any platform except Google Classroom. While the students can use Google Classroom to create a version of an ePortfolio, the design capabilities are limiting. Using a platform restricting choice and creative expression is antithetical to ePortfolio development. Additionally, platforms like Google Classroom don't support blogging, and reflective writing is vital to collaboration and critical and higher-order thinking.

I plan to use this literature review to continue the development of my action research plan and present my findings to my district in hopes they will rally behind the implementation of ePortfolios and consider purchasing a platform like Bulb for student eP creation. Bulb will allow students to have creative control over the aesthetics of their ePortfolio, blog, and incorporate multimedia, all while protecting student privacy and maintaining media release compliance. Although not the best option, due to the fact the student doesn't own the ePortfolio, as they would lose access after graduation since their Bulb account will be linked to their Google account, it still serves as a better option than Google Classroom or not introducing our learners to ePortfolios at all.

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