

ePortfolios: A College and Job-Seeking Tool

Literature Review

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With the shift from teacher-centered instructional environments to ones that are student-centered, institutions are held responsible for proving progression and growth in student learning (Wickersham & Chambers, 2006). In a 21st century society, technology is constantly changing and evolving to meet the needs of its consumers. In this digital age the access to information is a click or a voice command away, thus adapting to this reality helps stay abreast of changes being made to life's daily processes (Bagot, 2021). This review explores the research behind the purpose and usefulness of ePortfolios as a tool for career and college attainment. This paper aims to examine the perceptions of ePortfolios use as a college and career-seeking tool by high school students and young adults. The literature reviewed in articles, books and reports for this review will examine the purpose, benefits and barriers of ePortfolios, as well as the experiences and perceptions on how it can be used as a college or job-seeking tool and its role inside and outside of the classroom. Finally, the existing literature will be reflected upon, gaps identified, and next steps considered.

Understanding the ePortfolio

Identifying the purpose and benefits behind the push for ePortfolios requires a closer look at what constitutes an ePortfolio. An electronic portfolio or ePortfolio, is a collection of work created overtime and stored in a digital capacity. In an academic setting, good ePortfolios consist of student work showcasing their process of learning, along with a compilation of meaningful and authentic artifacts. In addition to the academic pieces created, ePortfolios have the capacity to capture other areas of a student's life such as volunteer experience and extracurricular activities. In other words, a good ePortfolio should be a representation of the products produced,

digital artifacts, and the process of growth and reflection (ePortfolios explained: Theories & Practice, 2019; Bagot, 2021).

Benefits

According to Bagot (2021), the ePortfolio provides both students and instructors with benefits that extend beyond just the academic setting. When given the opportunity students can connect to their learning on a deeper level, that includes reflection as part of the overall process. Furthermore, with the correct implementation put into place the results include choice, ownership, voice and authentic learning (COVA), and the development of twenty-first century skills.

COVA

Within the ePortfolio students are provided choice, develop ownership, while establishing, and share their voice in an authentic manner that allows for reflection on their learning experiences (Bagot, 2021). This approach is known as COVA, which emphasizes the use and importance of learner choice, personal ownership, voice, and authentic learning experiences that are active and student-centered (Harapnuik, 2018). Utilization of this model allows for a guided approach to learning that is holistic.

Choice. The component of choice emerges when learners are given the freedom to organize, structure, and present their learning experiences and subsequently the evidence of their learning, in a manner that aligns with individual selection (Harapnuik, 2018). The research points to the fact that choice contributes to a personalized learning experience, which in return gives students a sense of purpose in their learning (Bass, 2014). By giving learners a choice in their learning pathways, instructors and facilitators create long term learning experiences that connect

to real world application. Within the ePortfolio the design and contents are left up to the learner, where their personality and voice can be displayed through their production and accumulation of digital artifacts (Bagot, 2021).

Ownership. When students take control of their learning, they take ownership over its process, creating an individualized learning experience. Ownership falls within the context of instructor guidance, however by giving learners choice they become involved with creating and producing projects that involve reflection, metacognition, and additional opportunities to fine tune their ideas (Thibodeaux, n.d.). Barrett & Wilkerson (2004) explain that as learners become further engaged in the development of their ePortfolio the deeper the connection to the ownership of their learning. Consequently, as ownership increases, so does intrinsic motivation in students. Providing autonomy over the development of the ePortfolio gives students ownership and allows them to take responsibility for their learning, further increasing long term and sustainable achievement.

Voice. Students thrive in environments where their opinions and perspectives are welcomed. Essentially, when learners feel their thoughts and opinions matter, there is often an increase in learning potential that occurs, coupled with a deeper investment in school (Jostens, 2016; Bagot 2021). As a result, ePortfolios become more than a scrapbook of assignments, but instead become a platform for student expression. Moreover, learners can reach an audience outside of just themselves and the instructor, gaining the ability to display original ideas, collaborate on concepts, and interact with the learning in an authentic way.

Authentic learning. It is through authentic learning that students connect to real-world problems, and situations. The process of selection and engagement offers the learner relevant applications to help make more meaningful connections (Donovan et al., 2000; Harapnuik,

2018). It is important to note that within the COVA model, choice, ownership, and voice are derived and recognized through authentic learning. Without a dynamic approach to learning, interaction becomes static and lacks the authenticity needed to produce genuine choice ownership and voice (Bagot, 2021). Subsequently, without authenticity, the other components would be unable to genuinely exist for learners (Harapnuik, 2018).

21st century skills

The common description of 21st century skills is often centered around technology skills; however, skills needed for the 21st century go beyond just the focus on technology and look deeper into what skills are needed for students to succeed in careers and throughout their personal lives (Bagot, 2021). Craig Jerald (2009) notes through his research that one of the biggest problems with implementing curriculum conducive to preparing students for their futures, is the lack of understanding in what skills are needed. To gain a deeper understanding of what these skills are and which ones are essential, requires educational and organizational leaders to look at the evidence and communicate that information in clear and concrete ways. As a result, Jerald emphasizes that the framework for a 21st century education will consist of foundational subject content, technology skills, and applied interpersonal and thinking skills. 21st century skills are not new skills in their entirety, but a combination of previous skills and new demands needed for the world today (Bagot, 2021).

Implementing ePortfolios in the classrooms helps develop these needed skills and provides evidence of mastery and understanding of such skills. While developing the ePortfolio, students are collaborating, communicating, creating new innovative ideas and problem solving as they move through the process of learning. All of which serves as evidence towards the cultivation and development of their needed skills for the future. Furthermore, the students use

the skills acquired to not only develop their ePortfolio, but as a foundation for harnessing and expressing their creativity, critical thinking, and self-reflection, skills needed for both the academic and professional world (Dubinsky, 2003).

Barriers to implementing and using ePortfolios

As Goodson (2007) points out in an editorial centered around shaping the genre of ePortfolios, ePortfolios are still an emerging genre in education, and Educators have the opportunity to participate and shape them. To further explain, Stansberry and Kymes (2007) point out that moving beyond just the technology and design of the ePortfolio, allows for a transformative experience that has the potential to truly change teaching beliefs and practices. It can be argued that this mindset is spilling over into the workforce as the traditional job search shifts further away from printed classified sections of the newspaper and into electronic applications on the computer (Yamashita, n.d). Nonetheless, while the ePortfolio continues to gain attraction with its plethora of benefits, there are also barriers to consider when seeking to implement and utilize ePortfolios in different capacities. Barriers to ePortfolio use may include: a lack of confidence and mindset at compiling a portfolio, the absence of well designed guidelines or a clear structure, and uncertainty over the nature and amount of evidence needed across different disciplines.

Confidence & Mindset

It can be said that the ePortfolio is the embodiment of a growth mindset at work. According to Robinson (2017), “mindset is a set of attitudes and beliefs about abilities, such as intelligence” (pg.18). With a growth mindset individuals are capable of seeing success as something that is not limited, but instead believe that people can learn anything with the right

amount of effort (Bagot, 2021). As Carol Dweck (2006), points out, individuals with a *fixed* mindset believe that a person's qualities are permanent and see little benefit in trying out things that are not already well known to them. If this is the case, individuals with a fixed mindset may see ePortfolios and the autonomy/flexibility afforded by them, as a hindrance to their developmental process.

Guidelines & Structure

It can be difficult to move towards a new way of doing something without the proper guidance, and while part of the foundation of an ePortfolios lies within its ability to harness one's own personal voice, the need for structure should not be ignored. Darling (2001), emphasizes the detriment that can arise from a lack of well defined expectations, and clear structure, specifically higher degrees of confusion and anxiety about the nature and value of the task at hand. As a result, it is necessary to find a balance between student- led construction and overly prescribed guidelines. Too much direction may produce superficial reflections, a lack of true ownership and a limited evidence of learning; too little direction will lead to the degree of anxiety and confusion previously mentioned. As Darling (2001) explains, the happy median needed requires ongoing support and guidance throughout the developmental process, which comes from the support of mentors and supervisors. That level of support is essential, yet not always well understood when looking to implement ePortfolios, yet without it success can be limited.

Differences across disciplines

Developing ePortfolios requires individuals to acknowledge the role that technology must play in that process. Technology is a mainstream component that has entered schools in a disruptive manner, but that disruption continues to yield benefits as time progresses (Bagot, 2021). According to Rob Abel (2013), disruptive technology platforms used for education will

need to provide diversity in terms of their delivery models and their blending learning capacities. Abel explains that disruptive platforms will need to integrate with various providers to offer solutions and build partnerships with different institutions. As a result, Educators will need to be equipped with knowledge on how to implement technology as part of the learning. This is especially significant when looking at the implementation process across different disciplines.

To highlight the differences that may arise across disciplines, an examination can be done within the fields of education and medicine. For example, in a teacher education setting, ePortfolios serve the purpose of teaching prospective teachers how to be reflective, assessing their readiness to graduate, and as part of teacher education program accreditation (Zeichner & Wray, 2001; Butler, 2006). On the contrary, ePortfolios used within the medical field, while focusing attention on reflection is important, the primary focus of reflection in medicine is on actions, in conjunction with understanding how to continually learn to stay abreast of changes and advancements in medicine. This differs from the teacher education reflection, which focuses its attention on individual identities and beliefs (Butler, 2006).

To ensure the success of ePortfolios in any specific field requires time and consistent support and an understanding of the portfolio pedagogy as it relates to different disciplines. This must be coupled with thorough introduction to the portfolio process, and learning environments that allow users to feel ownership of the portfolio (Butler, 2006). With these components that implementation process is likely to be inconsistent, potentially resulting in short-lived usage of the tool.

Effective Use of the ePortfolio as a College Planning and Job-Seeking Tool

In a world that is rapidly changing, professionals and citizens need to be able to continuously learn outside of formal education. This can only be done when individuals make smart choices and invest the time and energy into personal development. Personal development comes in many forms, one of which is reflection, which can be achieved through the portfolio process (Cambridge, 2008). In a study done by Cambridge (2008), he details the relevance and depth of ePortfolios in the academic and professional world, expounding on the work of learning technology researchers who suggested that electronic portfolios may provide a means to the challenges of learning, relearning and unlearning outside of the formal education structure.

A College Planning Tool

College planning can be a similar process to applying to a job, where students (candidates) must display their skills for a chance at being accepted. An ePortfolio by design can be structured in a manner that highlights the work produced by the student, with an element of growth and reflection evident (ePortfolios explained: Theories & Practice, 2019). As a result, ePortfolios create a platform for students to illustrate their breadth of work across multiple formats that goes far beyond what can be seen through a GPA or resumé (Holtzman et al., 2021). The purpose behind the career eportfolio enables students to develop and grow their own voice through the act of storytelling, done in a manner that represents their high school career, and prepares them to become more credible, future employees (Heffelfinger, n.d). As the goal for most students post secondary education is to obtain a job, the practice of utilizing an ePortfolio throughout high school, especially during the college planning process can prepare them for building up a career portfolio in the future.

A Job-seeking Tool

The use of ePortfolios within the hiring process continues to be mixed, however more focus is being placed on the efficiency as job applications move to a fully online process (Ring et al., 2017). It can be argued that while a resume has not become completely obsolete, an ePortfolio, which can be customized towards individual employers, allows students and professionals the opportunity to demonstrate their best work, while cultivating a design that focuses the employer's attention on the knowledge and skills needed for the position applied for (Heffelfinger, n.d). In a comparison to the traditional notion of sending multiple documents along with a resume, web-based ePortfolios can be embedded into the resume itself, giving a potential hiring manager easier access into a candidate's collection of artifacts.

Across different agencies and fields the uses and purpose of the ePortfolio may vary, however, many organizations are moving towards adopting ePortfolio initiatives into their model. From the research, it can be noted that organizations have continued to use ePortfolios as a way to support lifelong learners, as well as a range of interconnected purposes, displaying the Creator's depth of knowledge and expertise across multiple areas of focus (Cambridge, 2008). While this is not definitive, it can be inferred that many employers may be encouraged by applicants who present an ePortfolio during the application process.

Summary

Contributions to the field of Education

Education and the professional world are continuously evolving, making it even more prevalent to stay abreast with the changes. The ePortfolio by design, shifts the focus away from the teacher/instructor/facilitator and onto the learner/student. As a result, the teacher moves to the role of a coach, and creates a space for students to display their own path of learning

(Heffelfinger, n.d). What the electronic portfolio creates is far more than just a digital forum for documents, but instead creates an online presence that serves as representation for a person's personal brand. Digital media allows individual voices to be heard, while adding a level of richness that is shaped through the stories told within the ePortfolio. Essentially, the audience is afforded the opportunity to engage in an intentional manner, through the elements present in the ePortfolio. Digital storytelling, done through the eyes of the creator (Jones & Leverenz, 2017).

Strengths & weaknesses of this body of literature.

As students participate in the process of creating ePortfolios they move away from being just a consumer of material and become an active participant in the learning process. They allow their voices to shine through and utilize purposeful self-reflection to communicate accomplishments and tell their story (Ring et al., 2017).

Through the literature, the effectiveness and growth of ePortfolio usage becomes more evident. As researchers Ring, Waugaman, and Brackett (2017) summarize in previous studies, the effective use of ePortfolios in the job-seeking process concluded that there was a high degree of importance to creating the ePortfolio. Specially pointing out that students who received mentoring on ePortfolio pedagogy demonstrated better interviewing skills than students who received little or no intervention (Yamashita, n.d.). This helps support the research question that there is a correlation and a benefit to using ePortfolios as a job seeking tool. Additionally, some specific correlation is connected to using ePortfolios in the college application process.

Researchers Holtzman, Kraft & Small (2021) point out that the use of ePortfolios creates a platform for students to externalize their growth. With this platform students are able to display their work and knowledge across multiple formats, going far beyond what is seen on a transcript or through a numerical GPA.

Nonetheless, it should also be noted that while the use of ePortfolios continues to grow today, research on the specifics of how and to what degree they are effective in helping obtain specific college acceptance or job placement is limited. Literature exists that addresses ePortfolio use as a job-seeking tool as individual areas of study and as a tool for outlining a students development over an extended period of time (i.e. high school), but there is little that addresses the effectiveness specifically in obtain admissions or a specific job. This makes it difficult to draw any conclusions on the main focus of the research questions, but connections can still be made using the existing literature with relatable topics in a more general way.

What is missing from the literature

While the research does present a strong amount of information geared toward career ePortfolios, there is still limited research on its benefits or effectiveness in conjunction with the college application process. Additionally, research available is geared more towards adults, rather than specifically high school juniors and seniors. This made it difficult to examine the portion of the research question related to that particular demographic, however there were correlations that could be made.

Additionally, there is still a limited amount of research directed towards specific fields and the perception of value in regards to ePortfolios, nor is there a wide range of information related to how socio-economic or ethnic demographics may play a role in the resources and support needed for successful implementation of ePortfolios.

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