Copyright is owned by the Author of the thesis. Permission is given for a copy to be downloaded by an individual for the purpose of research and private study only. The thesis may not be reproduced elsewhere without the permission of the Author.
Tertiary students’ views on the usefulness of eportfolio support services

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for a degree of

Master of Education in E-Learning

at Massey University, Manawatu,

New Zealand.

Mark Trevor Simpson

2011
Abstract

The benefits of eportfolios as a tool for learning and assessment have received recognition from numerous writers, researchers and practitioners internationally. Eportfolio use has been found to support constructivist, social and self-directed approaches to learning and assessment. Yet there is a lack of literature and research on how to serve students’ needs for support as they develop skill in using eportfolio tools. Eportfolio technology is in itself relatively new to many students, as is the very concept of portfolio use and its potential to enhance and support learning. There is also wide variance in the approaches taken to eportfolio use in higher education with many providers focusing on the summative assessment product or showcase that Barrett (2011a) and others (Shulman, 1998; Zubizarreta, 2004b) argue is less important than the formative process or workspace of eportfolio use. Where the eportfolio is seen as simply a technology vehicle for presentation the student may not benefit from the reflective practice, collaboration and feedback that studies show are key advantages of eportfolio use.

This study applies a mixed methods approach to explore the relationships between student use of support services and their attitudes and experience with digital technologies. Both quantitative and qualitative data was collected concurrently from surveys, frequency of usage logs, support emails and peer support forums. To contextualise the study, support services were designed that offered a range of types of support, catering to diverse student preferences and needs for support. Data was collected to identify student attitudes, experiences and practices in using each of these support services, and their impressions and intentions with regards to portfolio use and eportfolio skills development. The aim was to provide insight for educators and institutions, course providers and support providers, on how to effectively support students according to their needs and preferences for eportfolio use, particularly in settings where eportfolio technology is new to students and where related concepts such as reflective practice may also be unfamiliar.

Key findings indicate that student attitudes toward the true value of eportfolio use for their academic and professional practice impact on their use of support services and their perceived development of eportfolio skills more than any other factor. In particular, students with the impression that eportfolios have potential to support and enhance subject knowledge are more likely to use most support services offered, more likely to support other students, and more likely to have an intention to continue using eportfolios in the future. As literature supports the view that eportfolios can enhance and support learning the researcher sees this finding as central to an effective strategy for support services and a general strategy for implementing eportfolio use in tertiary programmes.
Acknowledgements

First and foremost I wish to thank my fiancée, Jeannie. Her support and patience has not only made this journey easier, in every way she has made it possible.

I also wish to thank the participants in this study for their honest and open contributions. Based on their experiences and their feedback this year it is my hope that the field of eportfolio use can be strengthened and supported, starting from this groundwork for effective strategies on implementation and support of eportfolios in higher education.

I cannot thank my supervisors enough, though I wish to do so here in some small way.

Dr. Mandia Mentis provided so much more than supervision; her advice, encouragement and confidence gave shape to this process and gave me direction in study that has brought about a more comprehensive research project than I could have anticipated just a year ago.

Dr. Maggie Hartnett has also guided me above and beyond what I anticipated or expected. She gave patient, consistent, meticulous support from a depth of knowledge in all areas of my study; she resolved all of my questions promptly and in detail; and always informed me with clarity on what steps needed to be taken to improve or correct this work.

Although she was not an appointed supervisor, I feel very fortunate to have had the help and support of Philippa Butler. Her prompt and patient expert advice on all matters quantitative; her facilitation of surveys; and her processing of raw data have been as indispensible as ongoing supervision.

Finally, I also express my gratitude to Massey University for the award of the Massey University Masterate Scholarship, which has enabled me to complete this study on a full time basis with confidence and security for the future.
# Table of Contents

**ABSTRACT** .............................................................................................................................. II

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS** ................................................................................................................ III

**TABLE OF CONTENTS** ....................................................................................................................... IV

| LIST OF TABLES ............................................................................................................................. VI |
| LIST OF FIGURES ............................................................................................................................ VI |

1 **INTRODUCTION** ......................................................................................................................... 1

| 1.1 RESEARCH SETTING .................................................................................................................. 2 |
| 1.2 RATIONALE FOR STUDY ........................................................................................................... 2 |
| 1.3 RESEARCH AIM, INTENTIONS AND QUESTIONS ....................................................................... 3 |
| 1.4 STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS .................................................................................................... 4 |

2 **LITERATURE REVIEW** ................................................................................................................ 5

| 2.1 EPORTFOLIOS: DEFINITION AND BACKGROUND .................................................................... 5 |
| 2.1.1 The teaching and learning portfolio ..................................................................................... 7 |
| 2.1.2 The two faces of eportfolios ................................................................................................ 8 |
| 2.1.3 Three stages of eportfolio development .............................................................................. 8 |
| 2.2 CURRENT RESEARCH ON EPORTFOLIOS IN ADULT AND TEACHER EDUCATION .................. 10 |
| 2.3 RESEARCH ON SUPPORT SERVICES FOR EPORTFOLIO USE ................................................. 13 |

3 **METHODOLOGY** ......................................................................................................................... 16

| 3.1 MIXED METHODS ‘CONCURRENT TRIANGULATION’ DESIGN ....................................................... 16 |
| 3.2 ETHICS ......................................................................................................................................... 17 |
| 3.2.1 Researcher embeddedness and bias ....................................................................................... 18 |
| 3.3 DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS ........................................................................................ 20 |
| 3.4 RESEARCH DESIGN .................................................................................................................... 23 |
| 3.4.1 Legitimation ........................................................................................................................ 24 |
| 3.5 RESEARCH SETTING .................................................................................................................. 27 |
| 3.5.1 The Researched Course ......................................................................................................... 27 |
| 3.5.2 Sample ................................................................................................................................... 28 |
| 3.5.3 Support Services .................................................................................................................... 28 |

4 **FINDINGS** .................................................................................................................................... 33

| 4.1 RESEARCH QUESTION 1: ........................................................................................................... 33 |
| 4.2 RESEARCH QUESTION 2: ........................................................................................................... 38 |
| 4.3 RESEARCH QUESTION 3: ........................................................................................................... 46 |
| 4.4 RESEARCH QUESTION 4: ........................................................................................................... 50 |
| 4.5 RESEARCH QUESTION 5: ........................................................................................................... 55 |
| 4.6 RESEARCH QUESTION 6: ........................................................................................................... 64 |
List of Tables

Table 3-1: Data sources and labels for this study ................................................................. 20
Table 3-2: Values applied for analysis of usefulness ratings .................................................. 21
Table 3-3: Legitimation types and the strategies used to assure them .................................... 22
Table 4-1: Means and standard deviations for expected Survey 1 versus expected Survey 2 39
Table 4-2: Change over time in ratings of expected usefulness .................................................. 39
Table 4-3: Means and standard deviations for expected Survey 1 versus actual Survey 2 ...... 40
Table 4-4: Means and standard deviations for actual Survey 2 versus expected Survey 2 ...... 41
Table 4-5: Qualitative themes from email and forum posts ....................................................... 42
Table 4-6: Age group versus support service usefulness ratings ............................................... 43
Table 4-7: Survey 1 results for experience versus attitudes ....................................................... 44
Table 4-8: Survey 2 results for experience versus attitudes ....................................................... 44
Table 4-9: Results for experience versus supporting others ..................................................... 45
Table 4-10: Results for attitudes versus supporting others ...................................................... 46
Table 4-11: Survey 1 experience versus expected usefulness ...................................................... 47
Table 4-12: Survey 2 experience versus expected usefulness ...................................................... 48
Table 4-13: Survey 2 experience versus actual usefulness .......................................................... 49
Table 4-14: Survey 1 attitudes versus expected usefulness .......................................................... 50
Table 4-15: Survey 2 attitudes versus expected usefulness .......................................................... 51
Table 4-16: Survey 2 attitudes versus actual usefulness ............................................................... 52
Table 4-17: Comparison of tables for supporting others versus expected usefulness and supporting others versus actual usefulness showing change over time ........................................ 69
Table 4-18: Means and standard deviations for experience with epportfolios .......................... 67

List of Figures

Figure 2-1: Balancing the two faces of ePortfolios (Barrett, 2009) ............................................. 6
Figure 2-2: Screenshot from instructional video outlining Simpson’s (2011) three stages of portfolio development for the Mahara platform ................................................................. 10
Figure 3-1: Representation of concurrent triangulation design for this study ............................. 24
Figure 3-2: Sample pages from the student eportfolio guidebook ............................................. 30
Figure 3-3: Sample shots from the instructional videos ............................................................... 30
Figure 3-4: Example portfolio presentations in various formats ............................................... 31
Figure 4-1: Survey 1 expected future usefulness of support services ....................................... 33
Figure 4-2: Survey 2 expected future usefulness of support services ....................................... 35
Figure 4-3: Survey 2 actual usefulness of support services ....................................................... 36
Figure 4-4: Comparison of Survey 1 and Survey 2 data on expected usefulness of support services ........................................................................................................... 38
Figure 4-5: Comparison of Survey 1 expected usefulness and Survey 2 actual usefulness of support services ........................................................................................................... 40
Figure 4-6: Comparison of Survey 2 actual usefulness and Survey 2 expected usefulness of support services ........................................................................................................... 42
Figure 4-7: Frequency of support service usage over time ......................................................... 44
Figure 4-8: Participant age ........................................................................................................ 46
Figure 4-9: Participant ethnicity ................................................................................................ 48
Figure 4-10: Participants’ highest qualification held ................................................................. 49
Figure 4-11: Years of experience (professional or personal) in endorsement area .................... 50
Figure 4-12: Survey 1 versus Survey 2 ratings for experience with digital technologies .......... 65
Figure 4-13: Survey 1 versus Survey 2 ratings for attitudes toward portfolios .......................... 66
Figure 4-14: Frequency of instances for qualitative themes over time ..................................... 67

Mark Simpson: Tertiary students’ views on the usefulness of eportfolio support services