Tertiary students' views on the usefulness of eportfolio support services

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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.

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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.

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