

A Review and Evaluation of an Alternative Method of Assessment

Samaneh Karami

Islamic Azad University, Iran

(Email: Samaneh.karami4588@gmail.com)

Abstract

Electronic portfolios are considered as invaluable means of teaching, learning and assessment. This paper aims at reviewing and evaluating the concept of electronic portfolios used in various educational settings. Electronic portfolios are used as the result of the development of portfolios. After providing different definitions of the term, advantages and disadvantages of it is discussed as well. Based on the review of the related literature, opinion of scholars and empirical studies, we believe that it would be advisable for all teachers to start using e-portfolios in their own classes, adapting them to their educational context and enjoy the many advantages offered through them. . E-portfolios not only support students' learning, but also encourage their self-assessment, use of self-regulation strategies and their critical thinking.

Keywords

Electronic portfolio, alternative method of assessment, review paper, language teaching,

Introduction

The impact of technology in educational environments is widely accepted by scholars and authorities in various fields. Technology integration has turned to be one of the key features of the modern teaching approaches, and as a result, it has become one of the primary tools for helping students in coping with complex problems they may encounter in real-world situations. Electronic portfolios (e-portfolios) are among one of the alternative methods of teaching, learning and assessment used in different fields for educational purposes. Some of the teachers used e-portfolios claim that these alternative methods of assessment can actually be seen as the most crucial educational technology development since the use of course management systems (Lorenzo and Ittelson, 2005). Still, there exist teachers and scholars who do not agree with them. This document provides a clear definition of portfolios and e-portfolios, then summarizes different views towards e-portfolios and advantages offered by electronic portfolios, as well as the obstacles that the users may encounter.

Portfolio Assessment

As Genesee and Upshur (1996) defined it, an electronic portfolio is believed to include a purposeful collection of students' work, this collection needs to demonstrate to both students and others their efforts and progress in specific areas. Arter (1990, as cited in Nezakatgoo, 2005, p.78) also gave a similar definition while considering some other important factors, maintaining that students must be engaged actively in the selection of portfolio content and criteria for selection as well as evidence of student self-reflection. Portfolios aptly combine the tenets of performance assessment with classroom instruction and integrate the products with the process (Hyland, 2002).

Previously artists or business people gathered their best work in the portfolios they kept and showed those portfolios as representations of their best efforts to their customers (Cameron, 2001:237, as cited in Zhang, 2009). Sometime after their use in art and business, portfolios have been introduced in language teaching classrooms to cater for the inadequacies observed with the one-shot tests, which aimed at measuring students' proficiency. With one-shot examinations, the teacher had a limited access to what the students had learned, on the other

hand; portfolios mostly demonstrate the learners' progress over a specific period of time, and the learners can also put various samples of the students' writings which they have worked on. Furthermore, teachers would be provided with enough information based on which they can make sound decisions (Zhang, 2009).

Ruskin-Mahyer (2000) believed that "portfolios ... Allow us to ... Form a learning partnership in which student and teacher can become collaborators, co-creating meaning in an ongoing dialogic process" (p. 138). Burch (2000) contended that writing portfolios are a synthesis of process and product, being evidence "of the process by which [the] writing is created, shaped, revised, selected, presented" (p. 150). They are considered as a type of formative assessment as opposed to a summative evaluation procedure. Portfolios can help teachers provide effective feedback to students when they are used as a type of formative process of evaluation and so can contribute to improving students' learning (Barrett and Carney, 2005).

Different documents that can be included in a portfolio can include essays, reports, audio or video recordings of presentations, diaries, tests, homework, self- and peer-assessment (Brown, 2004). Generally, portfolios are divided into three types based on Mandell and Michelson (1990, in Zhang, 2009) categorization:

- Showcase portfolios—Learner only demonstrates the best example of work relevant to each objective
- Cumulative portfolios—Learner demonstrates all the samples of their work
- Portfolio—Student sets pre/post-samples of their work

They may also serve different purposes: they may either be used for accountability purposes to show what has been achieved, for learning purposes to reveal what has been learned, or for marketing purposes to function as a showcase (Barrett & Carney, 2005). "Portfolios for accountability" function as a summative product of what the students do during the term and they reveal the students' achievement. "Portfolios for learning" can be put in contrast to the product-oriented portfolios above. These are process-oriented, and their focus is on the progress the students are making during instruction. It can help both teachers and students to assess what has been learned (Barrett & Carney, 2005). "Portfolios for marketing" are used to "show the best works for employment (Barrett & Carney, 2005). Portfolios of writing can incorporate several writing samples, which have been produced at different times; they can be used as a means of "extensive revision" or as a tool for investigating learners' progress over time (Song & August, 2002).

Advantages and Drawbacks of Portfolio Assessment

Several advantages have been proposed for portfolios (e.g., Brown, 2004; Genesee & Upshur, 1996; Song & August 2002). Burch (2000) maintained that they give students "insights into themselves as writers" and also gives them the ownership of their works. Delaying grading until later has been said to be an advantage of portfolios. In spite of this, many teachers still grade their students' portfolios since it has been argued that the "students understand degrees instantly, teachers feel obliged to tell students where they stand, and grades provide all parties with evidence of teacher authority" (Nelson, 2000).

Brown (2004) succinctly categorized 'potential benefits' of portfolios. Portfolios:

- Encourage motivation and responsibility
- Encourage students-teacher interaction
- Appreciate the uniqueness of each student,
- Provide evaluation of multiple dimensions of learning. (p. 257)

Another advantage of using portfolios has been proposed for those who learn English as a foreign or second language because portfolios permit a measure of what students are able to do based on a broader set of samples, and because they replace the writing exams under pressure of time, which for a long time was claimed to be discriminatory against non-native writers (Hamp-Lyons & Condon, 2000 cited in Song & August 2002, p.125).

Hyland (2002) also proposes some "potential pros" of writing portfolios, including their integrity in combining the goals of a program with those of the curriculum and validity in revealing a correspondence between the goals and classroom practices.

Along with all these advantages, however, several disadvantages were also accounted for in the literature for portfolios. Of these, practicality has been a matter of concern due to the fact that portfolios generally take a long time from teachers for responding to their students (Brown, 2004). Brown and Hudson (1998 as cited in Song & August 2002) stated five of the disadvantages with the use of portfolios: the concerns related to design and logistics of portfolios, method of interpreting the results, and issues of reliability and validity. The use of portfolios raised some matters such as the "reading process" (portfolios involve a number of texts written by different students, and so evaluation is problematic), the "scoring procedures" (the question raised here is whether the holistic scoring of such a complicated work of writing is suitable), and what can be learned from their use (Yancey, 2000, p.136). What also concern researchers and teachers alike are the issues of reliability, validity, and practicality as far as time is concerned (Song & August 2002). Nelson (2000) also warned us that portfolios cannot be used successfully unless the goals and aim are clearly defined, and learners are guided alongside with systematic reviews. The criteria on how the portfolios are going to be assessed should be clear for both the teacher and the students, for instance both the students and the teacher should agree to include all the required entries, and also the quality of the final products must be discussed, both depth and seriousness of revisions and the layout and design of the products must be clear (Smith, 2002, as cited in Zhang, 2009).

E-Portfolio

After the use of motion pictures, radios and televisions in education, computers came into the educational realm to act not so much as a "revolutionary impact on instruction" but only as an aid, being used in foreign language teaching numerous (Harrington & Levy, 2001). Harrington and Levy (2001) believe that the use of CALL (Computer-Assisted Language Learning) in classroom brings about some differences such as a different viewpoint on teaching about the roles the students and the teachers can take in the classroom, "what instructors expect of students, pedagogically as well as technologically, and teacher expectations with regard to professional development and support for instructional technology" (p.17). All of which should be taken into consideration when examining the effect technology can have on education. The integration of CALL into the curriculum may bring about qualitative changes in student attitudes towards language study, motivation to learn, and learning strategies, which all merit evaluation (Harrington & Levy, 2001).

When using facilitative computer-based tools, students enhance their technological competencies in ways that can be applied to other studies and, ultimately, to future work-related needs. Technology for language instruction contributes to life-long learning skills in many respects, and it behooves CALL practitioners to measure the impact and make it known institutionally. (Harrington & Levy, 2001, p. 267) Computers are beneficial to writing classes because they provide opportunities for "student-centered and collaborative instruction" (Hyland, 2002). In the history of writing, teaching took place through defining a space for

students on papers to write their compositions and for teachers on the margins to comment on the students' writings (Anson, 2000).

Anson (2000) argued that the introduction of computers into the classrooms is the result of the teachers' interest in teaching and that the use of computers in classes "offered students a screen on which they could manipulate texts, but they could still print out their writing and turn it in on paper." Though they helped students to quickly "practice the processes of writing," the product was still seen on paper. So the commencement of the use of computers did not change the habits of the past that much. However, Anson (2000) believes the use of computers in educational contexts could bring about so many opportunities for change in the way teachers respond to the students' writing papers since electronic data supplanted "papers" and "written responses" (Anson, 2000).

Harrington & Levy (2001) asserted that writing methods are going to move from "hard copy versions" of portfolios to electronic versions which is also called e-portfolios. The National Learning Infrastructure Initiative (NLII, 2003 as cited in Barrett & Carney, 2005) a program which takes advantage of information technology to improve teaching and learning (Morrison & Barone, 2002) defined e-portfolios as a collection of actual evidence which is drawn from a larger archive of what learners have learnt over a specific period of time.

Furthermore, Jones, Gray, and Hartnell- Young (2010) mention that e-portfolios can be used for achieving different objectives, such as the application for occupations and also assessment for learning. Among all the various applications of e-portfolio, many scholars have concentrated on e-portfolios potential to improve students' ability various areas (Cheng & Chau, 2009; Sung, Chang, Yu, & Chang, 2009).

E-portfolios of writing provide more general and global self-assessment of students' language skills (Godwin-Jones, 2008). Ali (2005) also defines e-portfolios as a collection of students' works either online or on a CD-Rom which helps them share their function with a larger number of audiences, and at the same time motivating them and teaching them the language better.

Advantages and Drawbacks of E-Portfolio

These kinds of portfolios can be stored in CD-ROMs, DVDs, WWW servers or videotapes. E-portfolios can be considered as a kind of Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC), which utilizes the computer only as a tool for helping people interact with each other through different modes. CMC aims to understand "to what extent do people just map their existing patterns of behavior onto communication in the new medium" (Herring, 1996 cited in Harrington & Levy, 2001). As stated by Levy (2006), CMC-based CALL can include a broad array of activities from chatting and conferencing (both audio and video) to sending e-mail messages. It can be either synchronous (as in Internet Relay Chat) or asynchronous (as in e-mails). In synchronous communication learners normally feel the pressures of processing language in real time (Levy, 2006), which reveals much of language is used in such a context with frequent use of some strategies to improve communication and fill in the gaps when necessary, boosting students' fluency at the expense of accuracy and focus on form. (p.147).

As is argued by Levy (2006), "the time which a technology mode allows for its interactions directly affects the language and learning which result from its use." Because the learners are more pressed for time in synchronous CALL, more communication strategies emerge with the focus being primarily on meaning. On the other hand, asynchronous communication which can include e-mails and asynchronous conferencing (like discussion lists) lets the students the

opportunity of processing language in their own pace with no pressure for time, allowing them to reflect more, giving voice to more reticent students (Hyland, 2003).

One such asynchronous tool to communication is the use of electronic mails. An advantage of using e-mails is their capability to reduce the pressure on learners to produce a constant flow of language in a face-to-face context and to eliminate the problems related to heavy accents (Bloch, 2002). Godwin-Jones (2008) mentions an advantage of keeping an e-portfolio is the fact that everyone can share the content easily with others. Another advantage mentioned by Barrett & Carney (2005) is that they "promise support for both high-stakes assessment and in-depth student learning."(p.89). On the other hand, some scholars are skeptical of ambiguous learning results and outcomes of assessment. Sometimes, the selection of artifacts may not be representative of learning progress. The possibility of plagiarism increases due to the digital nature of electronic portfolios. Schools and universities also need hardware and software for production and publication of e-portfolios, thus they require the development of specific set of skills and funding. (Sewell, Marczak, & Horn, 2007).

Conclusion

Based on the review of related studies and theories on the use of e-portfolios, it can be inferred that although they are useful means of teaching and assessment, the idea of using portfolios is not popular with all teachers (Bryant 2002). Various educational groups might realize different benefits offered by e-portfolios. As an example, it is believed that learners benefit from getting engaged in self-reflection in their learning process, and they are also able to present their achievements and accomplishments to their potential employers (Reese & Levy, 2009). Furthermore, various institutions and educational settings benefit from critical information that supports internal assessment (Reese & Levy, 2009). Nowadays, electronic portfolios are used as a method of teaching and assessment in countries such as Europe and the United Kingdom (European Institute for E-Learning, 2009), , China (Chau, 2007), Canada (Abrami & Barrett, 2005), and the United States (Lorenzo & Ittelson, 2005). As Lorenzo and Ittelson (2005) state e-portfolios need to be integrated across campus systems as a primary approach for learners to document their skills. Finally, we believe that it would be advisable for all teachers to start using e-portfolios in their own classes, adapting them to their educational context and enjoy the many advantages offered through them.

References

- Abrami, P.C., & Barrett, H.C. (2005). Directions for research and development of electronic portfolios. *Canadian Journal of Learning and Technology*, 31(3).
- Ali, S.Y. (2005). An introduction to electronic portfolios in the language classroom. *The Internet TESL Journal*, 6. Retrieved January 1st, 2018, from <http://iteslj.org>
- Anson, Ch. M. (2000). Distant voices: Teaching and writing in a culture of technology. In K.B. Yancey (Eds.), *Issues and trends in postsecondary English studies* (pp. 167-189). Urbana-Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English.
- Barrett, H., & Carney, J. (2005). *Conflicting paradigms and competing purposes in electronic portfolio development*. Retrieved May 2nd, 2017 from <http://electronicportfolios.com/portfolios/LEAJournal-BarrettCarney.pdf>
- Bloch, J. (2002). Student/teacher interaction via email: The social context of Internet discourse. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 11, 117-134.
- Brown, D. (2004). *Language assessment: Principles and classroom practices*. NY: Pearson Education.
- Bryant, S. L. (2002). *Portfolio Assessment: Instructional Guide*. Hong Kong: Hong

Kong Institute of Education.

Burch, C.B. (2000). Inside the portfolio experience: The student's perspective. In K.B. Yancey (Ed.), *Issues and trends in postsecondary English studies* (pp. 148-164). Urbana-Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English.

Chau, J. (2007). A Developer's Challenges on an e-portfolio Journey. *Proceedings Ascilite Singapore, 2007*.

Cheng, G., & Chau, J. (2009). Digital video fostering self-reflection in an e-portfolio environment. *Learning, Media and Technology, 34*(4), 337–350.

Corwin, T. (2003). Electronic portfolios. *Campus-wide information systems, 20* (1), 32-38.

Retrieved March 7th, 2017, from <http://www.ingentaconnect.com/content/mcb/165/2003/00000020/00000001/art00004>

Genesee, F., & Upshur, J. (1996). *Classroom-based evaluation in second language education*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Godwin-Jones, R. (2008). Emerging technologies web-writing 2.0: Enabling, documenting, and

assessing writing online. *Language Learning and Technology, 12*, 7-13. Retrieved July 3rd, 2017, from <http://lt.msu.edu/vol12num2/emerging.pdf>

Gray, L. (2008). Effective practice with e-portfolios. *JISC, 5*-40.

Harrington, M., & Levy, M. (2001). CALL begins with a "C": Interaction in computer-mediated

language learning. *System, 29*, 15-26.

Hyland, K. (2002). *Teaching and researching writing*. London: Pearson Education.

Hyland, K. (2003). *Second language writing*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Jones, G., Gray, L., & Hartnell-Young, E. (2010). Effective practice with e-portfolios: How can the UK experience inform implementation? *Australasian Journal of Educational Technology, 26*(1), 15–27.

Levy, M. (2006). Effective use of CALL technologies: Finding the right balance. In R. Donaldson, & M. Haggstrom (Eds.), *Changing language education through CALL* (pp. 1-18). NY: Routledge.

Lorenzo, G., & Ittelson, J. (2005). An overview of e-portfolios. *Educause Learning Initiative, 1*- 27.

Morrison, J.L. & Barone, C. (2002). *The National Learning Infrastructure*

Initiative (NLII): An Interview with EDUCAUSE's Carole Barone. Retrieved August 20, 2017, from

[http://technologysource.org/article/national_learning_infrastructure_initiative_\(nlii\)/](http://technologysource.org/article/national_learning_infrastructure_initiative_(nlii)/)

Nezakatgoo, B. (2005). The effect of writing and assessing portfolio on final examination scores and mastering the mechanics of writing of EFL students. Unpublished master's thesis, Allame Tabataba'i University, Tehran, Iran.

Ruskin-Mayher, S. (2000). Whose portfolio is it anyway? Dilemmas of professional portfolio building. In K.B. Yancey (Ed.), *Issues and trends in postsecondary English studies* (pp. 137-147). Urbana-Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English.

Sewell, M. Marczak, M. & Horn, M. (2007). *The use of portfolio assessment in evaluation*.

Retrieved October 21st, 2016, from <http://ag.arizona.edu/fcs/cyfernet/cyfor/portfo~3.htm>.

Song, B., & August, B. (2002). Using portfolios to assess the writing of ESL students: A powerful alternative? *Journal of Second Language Writing, 11*, 49-72.

Sung, Y. -T., Chang, K. -E., Yu, W. -C., & Chang, T. -H. (2009). Supporting teachers' reflection and learning through structural digital teaching portfolios. *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning, 25*(4), 375–385.

Zhang, Sh. (2009). Has portfolio assessment become common practice in EFL classrooms? Empirical studies from China. *English Language Teaching, 2*, 98-118.

Reese, M., & Levy, R. (2009). Assessing the future: E-portfolio trends, uses, and options in higher education. *Research Bulletin*, 4, 1-12.