

A developer's challenges on an e-portfolio journey

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This paper describes an e-portfolio project at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University, designed to provide university students with an e-learning tool to showcase their cumulative, multi-modal evidence of linguistic accomplishments over time. It charts the initial phase of a portfolio journey from paper to electronic format, bringing to the fore some of the challenges a developer confronts when introducing and implementing an e-portfolio for English language learning. Such challenges range from practical issues (e.g. selection of an appropriate open-source platform) to higher-order concerns (e.g. sustainability; equity; benchmarkability). Despite the challenges, the paper concludes that the e-portfolio represents a powerful learning mechanism for addressing, among others, learner diversity rendered possible by information and communications technology (ICT).

Keywords: e-portfolio, developers' challenges, language learning tool; technology

Background

Although the portfolio as a learning and assessment tool has been widely adopted in Europe, U.K. and U.S (e.g. Elbow, 1990; Hamp-Lyons & Condon, 2000; Klenowski, 2002; Council of Europe, 2006), its application in the educational context in Hong Kong as an evaluative and developmental mechanism for English language learning (L2) has remained a much-debated concept (Chau, 2007). The portfolio is contentious primarily because of misgivings about its validity and reliability as an assessment device and about claims for fostering learning growth and competence (Lei, 2004).

Two recent developments, however, has prompted a rethink of the role of the portfolio on the part of educators in Hong Kong. The first development pertains to the proposed new senior secondary curriculum in Hong Kong, under which secondary students are expected to produce a learning profile or portfolio, listing their personal qualities, achievements in sport and the arts, and community activities (Education and Manpower Bureau, 2004). The second stems from a joint project of the eight tertiary institutions in Hong Kong to produce a sector-wide but flexible e-portfolio or language passport system with two main components:\

- a learning portfolio – to record and showcase students' accomplishments and language development over a period of time;
- an exit-portfolio – to demonstrate students' language proficiency (Berry & Pemberton, 2005)

This e-portfolio is to be implemented in phases, from development of a template in 2005 to implementation across the eight tertiary institutions in 2010. Trial runs and training workshops are being conducted, revision carried out in the light of feedback from participants. While it is recommended that the e-portfolio could include written and oral items and students' self-assessment of their language competence, much leeway is provided for its format and content, thus allowing participating institutions ample room to tailor their e-portfolios to the needs and purposes of their specific contexts. For instance, the e-portfolio developed by the University of Hong Kong emphasises the presentation of professional image, through the selection of a coherent set of work-related documents relevant to a target field or post and appropriate to students' personal qualities and skills. The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, on the contrary, adopts a learning e-portfolio designed to foster student responsibility for their own learning by supporting and developing their ability to self-assess, reflect and set appropriate goals for future learning.

This is the backdrop against which the e-portfolio project described in this paper is designed, trialled, implemented, and evaluated.

The e-portfolio project: Looking back to move forward

At the English Language Centre of the Hong Kong Polytechnic University, the portfolio as a medium for promoting learning and English language (L2) development is not a novel practice, although its current function and role differs from that in the past. While submission of portfolio work used to be an optional extra, which did not contribute to the overall course grade, a language portfolio now constitutes a required component for satisfactory completion of a course. In a questionnaire survey conducted in December 2005, students expressed their views on the portfolio according to the following table.

Table 1: Student feedback on the paper-based portfolio

Two things you LIKE about the portfolio	Two things you DON'T like about the portfolio
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • good feedback from teacher • encourages me to learn about myself • I can compare work with others • recalls what I have learned • good to put notes into • can be used to follow my progress and for reference • students can choose activities to put in the portfolio • really makes me to have motivation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • forget to record work • should not be compulsory • not enough fun • routine work; time-consuming • not enough guideline • some things, e.g. video cannot be kept in the portfolio • file is not large enough • limited choice

While acknowledging that student responses in the questionnaire survey make no claim to any conclusive evidence, comments raise some issues that may impinge on successful portfolio construction and implementation for developers, practitioners and students

- format (compulsory or voluntary)
- content (text- or media-based)
- rubrics (prose or point form)
- core elements (optional or prescribed)
- sustained motivation (feedback or workload or grade)
- purpose (course requirement; personal or professional development);
- assessment (formative or summative or blended).

Subsequent surveys of students' perception of the portfolio pointed to similar issues. Logically, when work on the design of the e-portfolio began in earnest in January 2007 at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University, the project team drew on insights gained from such surveys, augmented by formal and informal teacher comments.

The nuts and bolts

It was decided in January 2007 that the e-portfolio would be trialled on a small number of courses in the new Semester, from September to December 2007. An e-portfolio is believed to have the benefit of providing students with a choice to capture and reflect on their multi-faceted experiences by utilising the potential of information and communications technologies (ICT) for language learning. Therefore, initially, the e-portfolio would serve as a support resource, not assessed, in order to enable students to

- record and examine the goals, successes and failures of their English learning experiences
- understand more about themselves and how to communicate this to others
- try new things, assemble evidence, reflect on activities, and make sense of experiences
- take responsibility for managing their own learning, language development and career paths
- demonstrate language accomplishments, technical capability and other skills to prospective employers in digital form
- make important connections among aspects of their life as a student, a community member, and as a professional.

Having identified the goals of the e-portfolio, the team then proceeded in February 2007 to formulate a realistic action plan for designing and building the prototype. Some of the key activities featured: identifying functional requirements; selecting an appropriate open-source platform; designing the user interface; identifying logical rules; conducting system tests; discussing with technical team server

availability; collecting and analysing feedback from participants; reviewing the prototype in response to feedback; and running familiarisation workshops for participants.

Elgg + Moodle = developer's choice?

The English Language Centre of the Hong Kong Polytechnic University has a history of supporting English language learning with technology through the adoption of Moodle as a course management system. Both teachers and students have their own login accounts to access the e-Learn platform. The e-Learn platform supports two main streams of online activity: self-study (with answers marked by the system automatically); and interaction between teachers and students (feedback and review of student assignments through electronic files upload).

However, it is generally agreed that Moodle is not particularly suited to the development of an e-portfolio because as an open-source course management system, security poses a major concern. Added to this is Moodle's lack of provision of a social networking system, perceived as crucial for interaction among e-portfolio users. Elgg (<http://elgg.org/>) has been chosen because it offers a viable option in terms of its social networking facility and inbuilt features for weblogging, file storage, personal profiles, which can be modified and adapted.

In March 2007, subsequent to the selection of Elgg as a suitable open-source platform for the e-portfolio, the team realised they had to tackle three main issues. The first was the development of a single login system for both Moodle and e-portfolio (accommodated through Elgg) users to enhance ease of navigation and time efficiency, taking account of the different levels of technical competence of students and teachers. Another issue pertained to the use of terminology, open to different interpretation and confusion. To cite an example, there was lively debate among team members to decide on a single word or expression to refer to the collection of work students assemble and deposit in their e-portfolio – 'artefacts', 'products', 'files', 'items', 'evidence'. Intense discussion was also directed at such technology-oriented phrases as 'networking', 'community', which mean 'friends' and 'users' respectively in everyday parlance.

Table 2: Challenges faced by developers

Challenge	Example
sustainability	In the case of funded projects, what can be done when seed money runs out or when project staff leave?
equity	If a project is publicly funded, should access to the e-portfolio be provided for all? If so, how would this impinge on server capacity?
shareability	How far can a template be shared, thereby minimising needless duplication of effort?
validity of claim	Is uploaded information tamper-proof? Whose responsibility is it? Would a disclaimer suffice?
benchmarkability	In the event of e-portfolio assessment, what would be the criteria for benchmarking such e-portfolios (across institutions), without compromising the role of an e-portfolio being a medium for lifelong learning and development?
security	To what extent can the user's right to privacy be safeguarded?
target users	How do employers perceive such e-portfolios? Are students sufficiently motivated to create an e-portfolio? How receptive are teachers to e-portfolios?
others	Teachers' concern about workload? Institutional support? Recognition given by society or employers? How best to create and sustain an e-portfolio culture?

The third and final area of concern for the team was the transfer of ideas from paper to the electronic medium, which involved more than 'cut-and-paste' or a few mouse clicks. Pedagogic practices conceived on paper (single-dimensional, monologic) often had to be reconceptualised and presented in ways that capitalised on the availability and diversity of online tools conducive to the dialogic, interactive, and multi-dimensional nature of learning using ICT. A case in point was the presentation of project aims and self-running tutorials, which would have read like a chapter taken out of a coursebook had it not been livened up with the aid of animation and visual effects.

A developer's challenges

Apart from the above issues, the team has also identified some higher-order concerns that are likely to challenge developers (Table 2).

Conclusion

With the first phase of the project completed, main points emerging from teacher and student feedback on the e-portfolio will inform and shape the next phase of implementation. The next phase will involve introducing the e-portfolio to both credited and non-credited English language courses, focussing on two main aspects: first, how dialogue between students and teachers can be enhanced to sustain motivation; second, how such motivation can help to deepen students' reflective practice. Despite the challenges discussed above, it can be concluded ICT represents a powerful tool for addressing the diverse needs, styles, intellectual and technical capabilities of learners in the 21st century. The e-portfolio is just one among an array of learning options rendered possible by technology.

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