



Technology, identity and the creative artist

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Most tertiary students dream about their futures at some time during their studies, and the creation of a portfolio can play an important role in the formation of future identity. In today's culture, technology is rapidly expanding and changing and our society is becoming progressively more networked, digitised and globalised. Teaching and learning processes are affected by technological developments, and the portfolio has been modified to utilise this technology (Penny & Kinslow, 2006). The process of developing electronic portfolios promoted a technology-enriched environment for creative arts students to cultivate their learning and knowledge. This paper reports from an OLT (formerly ALTC) funded project at its mid-way point. The project is introducing ePortfolios to students through existing curriculum in the creative and performing arts at four universities in Australia. The project forms part of continuing work to research practices in technology supported teaching and learning.

Keywords: ePortfolios, identity, creative arts, graduate employment

Introduction

Given the strong impact that ePortfolios have had on the higher education sector in areas of teaching and learning (e.g. previous ALTC grants at Queensland University of Technology and Curtin University), this project aims to enhance development of strategies for tertiary creative and performing artists to document skills acquired, and outcomes achieved, as beginning artists. Our project involves 186 students in four institutions (Curtin University; Queensland Conservatorium of Music, Griffith University; Sydney Conservatorium of Music, University of Sydney; University of Western Sydney), and includes a range of types, formats, uses and expectations of ePortfolios.

The creative artist's needs

Graduates from the creative arts transition to a complex work environment featuring multiple concurrent roles and a continuous cycle of work and learning. As individual students in creative and performing arts have different needs and expectations of their future, an ePortfolio is a way to assist students to reflect on their present and dream about their future. This paper is reporting on data gathered from four institutions that are using ePortfolios with creative arts students. Each institution in the OLT project is approaching ePortfolios, their introduction, contents and applications from its own perspective. One of the project's outcomes is to provide tertiary students from the performing and creative arts with skills to create an ePortfolio to document their academic and artistic outcomes for future enhanced employability in the arts sector. Imagining the future though understanding their present is one of the key outcomes reported so far in the students' creation of their portfolios.

Technology

A portfolio is a compilation of examples that present an individual's learning journey over time, demonstrating accumulated knowledge, abilities and personal qualities or traits (Butler, 2006; Sherry & Bartlett, 2005). ePortfolios are a tool that can inspire new and creative ways of thinking about the use of computers in education. ePortfolios offer learners the opportunity to trace their development and improvement over a period of time, and also to reflect on the processes of learning (Dunbar-Hall, Rowley, Webb & Bell, 2010). Their various advantages include accessibility, storage, ease of sharing, availability of upgrading, the ability to link various forms of digital media, options for presenting work examples, flexibility in selection of content dissemination, and collating and organisational potential (Sherry & Bartlett, 2005; Akcil & Arap, 2009).

In general, Batson (2002, p.1) notes that 'electronic portfolios have a greater potential to alter higher education at its very core than any other technology application we've known thus far.' There is evidence to suggest that there is an increasing emphasis on reflective learning and practice in higher education, and for some authors the nature of ePortfolios both encourages and supports this style of learning (Pelliccione & Dixon, 2008).

Identity

During their higher education studies, most students begin to think about their future work and lives. Creative arts students often define their future as being 'professional' (e.g. as a musician, artist, actor, writer etc.). By highlighting aspects of artistic identity versus professional career identity, the study reported here aims to generate new insights regarding the training of artists and the role that the portfolio can play in this identity development. This distinction is evidenced in the voices of the two students who feature in this short paper. A key component to the introduction of ePortfolios to the students in the various institutions has been the emphasis on authenticity and reflection. Rowley (2011) suggests that constructing an ePortfolio can be an effective method of developing these reflective skills. The students discuss how reflective practice involves not only thinking about isolated events but encompasses many aspects of their life, including musical background, attitudes, strengths weaknesses and philosophies.

The majority of research and literature concerning identity representation and development focuses on the concept of individual choice. Electronic portfolios tell a story about an individual and their learning, growth and development over time. A "self-constructed identity" (McAlpine, 2005, p.382) is portrayed through an ePortfolio. Therefore, identity development and representation is often considered in the discussion of ePortfolio research. An ePortfolio can be used to construct and present a particular identity for a certain purpose, and from a broad perspective, ePortfolios have been described as a means through which an individual has sophisticated control and manipulation of one's "virtual identity". Research also suggests that successful ePortfolios that encourage interaction through feedback have the capability to "support identity formation as well as representation" (Hartnell-Young in Jafari & Kaufman, 2006, p.129).

The concept of identity has also been described as the "learners' authentic voices" (Barrett, 2007). Barrett explains that through the process of developing and creating their own ePortfolios, learners' unique "voices" become evident. The capacity of incorporating multimedia components to the ePortfolio presents a new dimension to the definition of "voice" (Barrett, 2007). However, the inflexible structure of some ePortfolio systems does not accommodate individuality or personality. Barrett (2007) asserts that in order for an ePortfolio to be successful and engaging it is essential to allow flexibility so that learners are able to "express their own voice and leave their own mark in their portfolios" (p.4).

McAlpine (2005) also supports maintaining a flexible portfolio structure to allow for "multiple identities", various presentations and permit students with opportunities to tailor their portfolios for certain needs. McAlpine (2005) also explores the concept of ePortfolio identity with reference to authentication, discussing ePortfolios in terms of "story" and "assessment". McAlpine (2005) mentions the difficulties associated with authenticating electronic data, "checking that the data which is being presented does indeed associate itself with the real-world entity that it says it does" (p.381) and describes this issue of authenticity as contributing to difficulties with ePortfolio assessment.

Research supports the evidence of the importance of music in the formation of personal and social identity. This would be particularly relevant for the identity formation of musicians and aspiring music teachers, as music forms such an integral part of their lives.

...music can be used increasingly as a means by which we formulate and express our individual identities. We use it not only to regulate our own everyday moods and behaviours, but also to present ourselves to others in the way we prefer. Our musical tastes and preferences can form an important statement of our values and attitudes, and composers and performers use their music to express their own distinctive views of the world (Macdonald, Hargreaves & Miell, 2002, p. 1).

The above quote mentions aspects contributing to an individual's identity such as musical preferences, attitudes and worldviews. Electronic portfolios offer a medium through which to present the many different facets that contribute to an individual creative artist's identity. The capabilities of an ePortfolio allow users to be creative in their presentation: to include real insights into whom they are as individuals, writers, teachers, musicians etc., or to highlight certain characteristics, skills, talents or abilities. A creative artist can therefore use this electronic medium to present each aspect of identity with more depth and profundity than can be achieved via other means.

Two students' voices

The project to date has worked with 186 creative arts students and has collected a range of data that demonstrate the development of students' identity through the interplay with the technology. The excerpts that follow come from the portfolios of two students after their internship program at a range of creative and performing arts professional practice placements.

We start with an extract from Andrew's portfolio following his experience at a classical music station:

One of the earliest and simplest reinforcements of an idea central, I believe, to any career related to music comes back to the triangular relationship between composer (in which I was, up to this point, chiefly interested in and connected to) performer and audience. While I appreciated the role of performer and audience, I don't feel I ever comprehended the necessity of spending some time as each of these parties like I do now as a result of the tasks undertaken at the radio station. As a programmer, presenter and listener, I believe these experiences were synonymous with composing, performing and participating as an audience member. Where the composing is programming and selecting the program and presenting is performing, the most important member of the triangle really seems to me now to be the audience

Andrew had for some time thought of himself through different lenses. After this professional practice experience his identity began to emerge, as he grew closer to the end of his degree program. The creation of a portfolio for Andrew allowed him to justify why he felt ownership of multiple identities and to be confident enough to write these in a reflective way.

The second student, Sally, stated that the development of the portfolio at the conclusion of her semester gave her the confidence and knowledge required to approach the industry and gain employment. It also led to a better understanding of how to apply her musical knowledge outside of the learning environment and into the workplace. Sally felt that the development of the portfolio

has been extremely significant and helpful in my journey as a musician. It has helped me realise and become more interested and passionate in becoming an orchestral musician in the future, as I needed to document and find evidence for the various performances I undertook during the semester.

The voices presented here illustrate that the different identities students emerge with as a result of the portfolio task can enable them to reflect on their present and imagine themselves into the future.

The future meets the present

With a focus on the ePortfolio and identity, the two students were part of a cohort of 186 students. Observations across the student participants strongly suggest that they have become more aware of their professional selves as they have developed their professional portfolios. Moreover, students have used this awareness to evaluate their own thinking in relation to their progression, goals and achievements.

Exploring real world experiences through the ePortfolio allows creative arts students to engage with technology in a way that strengthens their own identity. Exploring identity provides students with options, opportunities and a space to continue their own learning in a reflective way. A dream can be a reflection and the portfolio is a powerful reflective tool, particularly given that the real world of professional practice is often a long way from the work in which creative arts students will engage once they have graduated (Bennett, 2012).

Alongside any advantages attributed to ePortfolios in the development of student identity is the level of technological skills required for their creation. Students' technological learning has been enhanced through the production of their portfolios across a number of different platforms. Crucially, the individual nature of the ePortfolio has enabled each student to tell his or her own story, and to renegotiate their identity and the personas they present through their portfolio. This level of independent learning, reflection and investigation has encouraged in students an understanding and appreciation of the powerful role that technology can play in their future.

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