

Creating E-Portfolios in the Virtual Learning Environment: A Technologic Tool for Academic Assessment and Career

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Abstract. Many adults are returning back for additional education and training. These adult learners are seeking additional education and training either for professional advancement, career development, or personal growth. Thus, adult learners are examining the potential long-term investment and whether or not their additional education and training will help them during their lifelong learning endeavors. Knowles (1980) noted that “adult [learners] see education as a process of developing increased competence to achieve their full potential in life. They want to be able to apply whatever knowledge and skill they gain today to life more effectively tomorrow.” This raises the question of whether or not our educational institutions are offering enough learning opportunities to help satisfy the needs of the adult learner, as well as meeting the growing workforce needs of society’s business needs. The main focus of this presentation will be to examine how one virtual university has addressed the learning needs of today’s working adults, provided additional skills training for workforce needs, and enable adult learners with skills and training to prepare for lifelong learning events and career plans. Universities today are re-evaluating their graduate course offerings. Thus, this presentation will focus on how one virtual university has started to redesign their graduate business courses to offer more real world learning and help their adult learners to gain value through their learning and participation. The main focus of this presentation will focus on how one virtual university has implemented the use of e-portfolios into their Organizational Consulting course. Instead of requiring short writing assignments, the learners focus on developing a potential consulting practices/business. The presentation will focus on how academics, practitioners, and adult learners can benefit from the use of e-portfolios and how they can create academic and career development opportunities and learning events. Learning should be an ongoing process, and the use of virtual learning can help create and implement improved and more interactive learning opportunities for adult learners.

Keywords: E-Portfolio; Virtual Learning, Adult Learning, Consulting

1. Impact of Virtual Learning

Whether one uses the term distance education, online learning or virtual learning, the one key element is technological impact on education. For the purposes of this paper, we will be interchanging these terms, but with the intent of emphasizing what technology can do for learning and today’s adult learners. Therefore, what is distance education? Neal and Miller (2006) defined distance education as “education that takes place independent of location, in contrast to education delivered solely in the classroom, and that may be independent of time as well. ASTD, an education/training & development professional organization, noted that “distance education can be characterized as an educational situation in which the instructor and students are separated by time, location, or both. Education or training courses can be delivered to remote locations via synchronous or asynchronous means of instruction [1]. Thus, we are seeing more non-traditional students are taking advantage of online course offerings/programs and starting to enjoy learning even more.

Further, we can see another factor affecting the change in educational demographics has been the onset of more technology focused in the online learning field. This advancing technology has become available in many parts of the world, and a new type of adult learner population has emerged. The image of the traditional adult learner has been a bit unchanged in several countries, but given the impact of the Internet, this traditional “student body” is changing its image as more people enroll into online courses. In the field of business and management, educators have recognized the demographical changes of the student population. In a virtual environment, the student is not the same traditional student seen in classrooms in previous years, but rather one that reflects a vast array of cultural differences and needs that require educators to help build “new learning paths” towards the creation of virtual learning communities.

As technology has started to create a powerful infrastructure, these technologies have allowed higher learning, educators, and students more improved access to education on a much higher playing field. Thus,

the business world has started to partner with educational institutions to help them become more acquainted with new technology, as well as telling them what they need from today's graduates. Finally, many educational institutions, as well as the corporate world, are focusing on the learning process and its impact on their organizational structure and employees.

2. Overview of Working Adult Learners and their Needs and Wants

While many adults are considering online learning to be a new academic stepping stone, one must also consider the next step for college graduates – the world of work. In this regard, the corporate environment may differ from the academic setting; however, the need to learn and grow is equally important in the world of business and academia. As online learning has become more focused on the academic setting, many companies are learning that online learning has many benefits in the corporate/business environments. Thus, many companies and organizations are focusing on the “learning” element of their employees’ daily work lives, as well as helping to build their knowledge management with a concentration on helping the organization learn from previous and current experiences. Thompson (1995) stated that “organizational learning involves the acquisition of new information and the ability to analyze that information creatively, learn from it, and apply that learning in useful ways.” [2]. More organizations have realized that there is a need to “capture” and “utilize” this type of learning, and they also have realized the need for the organization, as a whole, to concentrate on building up this learning element.

In particular, one new way of offering courses with this new technology is to help students find research, apply it to their own learning and professional needs, and develop meaningful projects. In the field of consulting, many people rush into consulting and realize later that there is more than just talking to clients, one needs a strong foundation of business operations/management in place to be successful. In this paper, the topic of e-Portfolios in the context of an organizational consulting course will be examined and discussed in terms of virtual learning and enabling students to use skills learned in this course, as well as developing their own organizational consulting e-Portfolio. However, we need to first examine how classroom work has changed as the classroom environment and learning has changed over the past decade.

3. Transfer Learning from Brick-and-Mortar Classrooms to the Virtual Learning Environment

As more academic departments start to use portfolios, we can now see a new generation of portfolios, but in electronic format. Electronic Portfolios (e-Portfolios) have been defined in many different ways in terms of how they are designed and developed, as well as implemented and evaluated. According to the University of Berkeley (2004):

“An e-Portfolio functions like a file cabinet with file drawers and file folders. Students store personal, educational, career, skill assessment, non-academic/work experience, certification, and rewards information in their portfolios. The information placed in an ePortfolio is referred to as an artifact.” [3]

In order to compete with other universities, some academic institutions are quick to employ very extensive and developed e-Portfolio software systems, others educational organizations may want to consider their own creation and implementation of an e-Portfolio system (evaluative project). In the literature, we see that Goldsby and Fazal (2001) noted that student-created portfolios are commonly “used in teacher preparation programs to demonstrate teaching skills and expertise. This practice was started to be introduced as test scores alone lack the comprehensive scope needed for effective assessment and evaluation, portfolios can be implemented to interpret/make decisions regarding learning of teaching competences” [4]. Further, eportconsortium, noted that the role and function of an E-Portfolio was:

. . . . [to] facilitate[e] and captur[e] the evolution of concepts and ideas through revisions of work and interactions with instructors, mentors, classmates and friends, electronic portfolios can be much more than a Web site that simply organizes and presents final projects. They can foster learning spaces where the author can gain insights and a better understanding of him/herself as a learner.” [5]

Consequently, we can surmise that there are many different needs to be considered here in terms of determine how an e-Portfolio system/project can be used and eventually evaluated. In any event, it is

ultimate role of the educational institution to determine if there is a need and how it can be met in terms of an e-Portfolio approach.

4. Consideration Skills Sets Needs and Hands-on Application

We need to look at how and why e-Portfolios are used in today's online learning environment. What are their role and function in the learning process? Can educational institutions evaluate a student's skills and ability, as well as help them prepare for potential career development opportunities? Many universities are investing in the creation and implementation of e-Portfolios. These e-Portfolios serve several purposes, but the final outcome is whether the e-Portfolio itself can be seen as a true measure of what the student has been able to achieve – as well as serve as an indicator of their potential skills and abilities. In addition, does the e-Portfolio is to help highlight the student's ability to create a collection, selection, and reflection of their online works that best demonstrates their skills and abilities? Therefore, we need to look at the evaluative purpose of e-Portfolios. In terms of evaluating a student's work, some universities are focusing solely on academic criteria and do not seek further reflection of the student's work. For the purposes of this paper, the main focus of this writing will be to focus on how they can change a traditional set of learning assignments into a more meaningful group of learning activities in the format of an e-Portfolio.

5. Transforming Application Work into a Meaningful Learning Project

These e-Portfolios can serve as a showcase of a collection of selected "created" academic achievements to demonstrate a student's writing and researching skills. Also, the e-Portfolio is a process by which the faculty member helps to guide, facilitate, mentor, and evaluate the student's ability to critically think, write, and research. With the passage of key education legislation, such as the No Child Left Behind, ADA, etc., there is a growing need for documentation/evidence of academic achievement. Further, with the movement of transforming today's classrooms from a teacher-centered approach to one of a learner-centered one – the instructor can help to facilitate and guide the student through the e-portfolio process; however, it is the student that ultimately selects their best work and begins his or her journal to develop his or her own e-portfolio. Further, e-portfolios serve not only in the academic achievement process, but they are also used as an academic record for students to share with potential employers during an interview.

What is an e-Portfolio and do many schools use it to its fullest extent? Greenberg (2004) noted that "the e-portfolio is not simply a personal home page with links to examples of work . . . it is a network application that provides the author with administrative functions for managing and organizing work (files) created with different applications for controlling who can see the work and who can discuss the work (access) . . . [6]. It has been noticed by many academics that the application of e-portfolios in the academic environment has been increasing over the decades. With the onset of the technological evolution, the use of computers in the academic setting has enabled many instructors, administrators, and staff members to create and implement a variety of educational applications. Thus, we need to look at the types of e-Portfolios used today.

While each instructor or course designer prepares courses, they have to decide upon which type of portfolio is necessary to meet the course objectives. According to Greenberg (2004), there are three types of portfolios: (1) *Showcase e-portfolio – organization occurs after the work has been created*; (2) *Structured e-portfolio – a predefined organization exists for work that is yet be created*; and (3) *Learning e-portfolio – organization of the work evolves as the work is created*. [7]

Next, if we examine the use of e-Portfolios in terms of school accreditation, many educational institutions focus on the "showcase e-portfolio" approach. However, as more and more online schools begin to incorporate e-portfolios into their courses and programs, they are learning more towards structured e-portfolios. On the other hand, some colleges and universities are moving a step further to a more learner-centered approach and using learning e-portfolios. In this regard, the student starts to take charge of their learning, manages their learning activities and output, and starts to see connections in terms of whether their learning has meaning and can be applicable in the real world (business) environment.

6. Virtual Learning Methods and Applications in a Global Environment

How can educational institutions make changes that will be highly effective, meet the needs of society and industries, and help students learn and retain content knowledge? The answer is simple, they have to assess, review, and re-evaluate their course offerings. For purposes of this paper, the author will examine a course activity in an organization consulting course, in which graduate students learn about the various methods of approaching consulting, as well as setting up their own consulting business. They learn what makes a good consultant, but equally important they learn about themselves and how to connect their current learning and work experiences into a meaningful project (e-Portfolio), as well as setting up a potential business venture. The following sections explain how one key learning activity is used, as well as monitored by the instructor, to evaluate the student's ability to interact in the course, shared learnings obtained during the course, and develop a final research paper on the possibility of opening up an overseas office for an American business.

6.1. Creating Meaningful Applications in Virtual Learning

Each student selects a particular business (consulting) area that they feel they have some experience and interest in focusing their new consulting business with (their niche). They will start working on various parts of their coursework in anticipation of putting all learning activities together for a learning Electronic Consulting Portfolio (ECP). During the term, the class participations in live lectures and interactions during the week in discussion boards – all focused on the overall topics of organizational consulting and their ECP. In particular, the student does not work in a vacuum during this process, but rather he or she shares with his or her classmates their various research strategies, useful websites, as well as various strategies used to organize and present the final research findings. Why is interaction and communication so important in virtual learning? While there are students who still think consultants are more experienced people, the instructor tries to help them focus on current skill sets, application of their learning from current and previous courses, and realize their potential in this field. The intent here is to help students see connections, value, and application of meaningful coursework that will help them to realize that they do not have to “focus solely on one area”, but they can diversify their way of thinking about their future career choices. The key is to use the building of an e-Portfolio and to demonstrate to them that it is a “living document” that they can add to as they move along in their careers.

6.2. Sharing Content Knowledge While Building Value

Why is sharing content knowledge and learning from each other valuable? This interaction accomplishes several purposes. First, the students work with other classmates in problem solving different research areas in terms of organizing and planning their project. Second, they share various strategies that they have noted in the literature, as well as key strategies noted also in the media or by their own personal experiences. Third, during the course, there are various discussions led by the instructor to help the students learn from the various lessons learned.

7. Final Consideration of Teaching Strategies, Tools and Techniques

We need to realize that not all teaching approaches and strategies will work. Equally important, we need to consider the use of technology and its many different applications, as well as limitations. While not all teaching strategies, tools, and techniques may be effective in one's learning environment, they may not be successful in another classroom or educational institution. Since each environment is unique, as well as the learners participating in it, it is ultimately the teacher who needs to assess the virtual environment and determine if change is necessary. Not all educators may be as flexible in their teaching method, and they may not be willing to change. Thus, this leads us to the next question for examination. Do educators incorporate different teaching strategies and techniques to meet the ever-changing needs of these virtual learners in terms of learning from their cultural differences in order to enhance the learning experiences of all?

The virtual learning environment has helped to eliminate a few of the barriers in learning. White (2002) noted “Nowhere is thinking more evident than in the textual environment of the online classroom. If writing is thinking, then online students display their thinking throughout the course, illustrating their individual styles and changing attitudes” [8]. In particular, educators can incorporate various strategies, tools, and techniques to help draw upon the experiences of all class members – rather than just a select few. This

reinforces the beauty of virtual learning – because it is a continuous process (not limited to a set time and place as a traditional course).

8. Conclusion

Finally, we need to consider why virtual learning is significant in the teaching and learning of various subjects and how e-Portfolios can add more meaningful value to an online course. The main element of this equation is the use of virtual learning as the platform to help facilitate the learning and bring the graduate students to another learning plateau. With the use of this technology, coupled with their project creation and researching endeavors, they are able to interact faster with virtual team members to examine and explore strategies relevant to their research and future career endeavors. Equally important, not all courses offer students a final project that they can walk away with and actually use and update later on. The use of an Electronic Consulting Project (ECP) accomplishes all of these objectives and helps the student explore their ability to organize a potential consulting business, as well as learn more about project management and development of an ECP. Finally, the use of various virtual learning methods can be important on not only the learning aspect of a course, but also on the instructor's teaching effectiveness and communications process with the learners.

9. References

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