E-portfolios

For the past 15 years it has been common for trainee teachers to compile a portfolio of evidence demonstrating how they meet the relevant standards for QTS. Increasingly, providers are moving towards electronic rather than paper-based portfolios. Many SCITTs and HEIs are integrating e-portfolios into their quality assurance and assessment systems. A variety of e-portfolio platforms are available. If you are a new SCITT or an existing SCITT that is interested in developing an e-portfolio then this article is designed to help.

What are the advantages to e-portfolio over traditional, paper-based portfolios?

Besides being less heavy and better for the environment e-portfolios have a number of advantages over traditional portfolios, but the relative merits of these depend on two things a) the purpose of the e-portfolio and b) the design.

Purpose

There are basically two purposes to e-portfolios. 1. To facilitate professional learning 2. To serve as a means of assessing and evaluating the outcomes for trainees. Most providers and organisations tend to value the latter, whereas the evidence suggest that trainees and portfolio users value and benefit from the former.

1. The value of traditional portfolios to reflection has been borne out by a number of studies e.g. Antonek, McCormick and Donato (1997), Lyons (1998). Building on this via a study which was able to compare cohorts using e-portfolios and traditional portfolios Wesel and Prop (2008) concluded that students using the e-portfolio not only spent more time on the e-portfolio, but also developed better outcomes in their final grades at the end of their study. They concluded that the e-portfolio therefore aided the level of reflection.

2. With regard to portfolios for assessment, impetus for this came from the States in the 1980s and spread to education in the UK in the late 1990s with the first national Standards for Qualified Teacher Status in 1998 (yes, it’s that recent!). Nowadays, just about all providers use portfolios as part of the assessment for QTS. The literature surrounding portfolios has been far more critical of those used for assessment purposes. Lyons (1998) for example, examines in some detail the ‘tensions’ between the use of portfolios for assessment and for learning. The pitfalls of portfolios for assessment can lie in the surface learning that they encourage; in other words, if the purpose of the portfolio is simply to demonstrate the meeting of particular standards the tendency is for the author to see the compilation of the portfolio as a mechanistic exercise of ‘jumping through hoops’, rather than having any deeper value as a learning experience.
In the States, Snyder, Lippincott and Bower (1998) warned that assessment portfolios could lead weaker trainees into a...

... *mechanistic understanding of teaching which was inconsistent with the program’s goals*...

The diagram below, from Dr Helen Barrett neatly summarises the issue of balancing the two faces of e-portfolios:

Dr Helen Barrett* [http://electronicportfolios.org/balance/Balancing.jpg](http://electronicportfolios.org/balance/Balancing.jpg)

It is important therefore to consider very carefully the purpose of an e-portfolio before you choose a design. What do you want your portfolio to achieve? Is it there to aid reflection or assessment? Can you design it to achieve both? It is my contention that, if well designed, an e-portfolio can not only support trainees’ reflective learning, but also be a considerable asset to providers in terms of monitoring, assessment and quality assurance.

Once you’ve decided on the purpose of your portfolio, you’ll have a better idea about what you’re looking for in terms of functionality and design.
Design

Basic e-portfolios fulfil the same functions as traditional portfolios. They provide:

- A document store
- A means of assessment
- A means to encourage trainee reflections.

With regard to the latter, as has previously been mentioned, Wessel and Prop’s research into the use of e-portfolios in medicine from 2008 indicated that

*The positive effect on the learning outcomes suggests a deeper level of reflection among the students using an e-portfolio.*

This may be because with e-portfolios there tends to be greater interaction between the author and prospective readers than with traditional portfolios. Some e-portfolios enable authors to share their portfolio with peers facilitating an online community of practice. The development of social media in recent years has meant that people are far more comfortable with sharing ideas online and opportunities for collaborative learning should not be overlooked, particularly for trainees on school based programmes, where there may not be many other trainees in a particular school. In addition, tutors who traditionally may have had little awareness of trainees’ progress between visits can now login, review and interact and as a consequence are able to make better informed interventions during school visits.

As the evidence indicates, first and foremost effective e-portfolios support and are valued by the learner and this should be a crucial consideration in the choice of e-portfolio design.

In addition to benefits for the trainee as learner, however, e-portfolios can prove very helpful to providers. They can facilitate more effective quality assurance as tutors and others who may only visit trainee and observe them teach a few times a year can have a much more effective awareness of trainees’ progress via online reflections and evidence from mentor meetings. Reports on trainees’ progress can be uploaded and an automated log kept of these which considerably reduces administration time.

Some e-portfolios offer tracking tools which provide a means to track trainees’ progress against the Teachers’ Standards. Providers and tutors can easily compare the progress of different trainees and are more swiftly able to identify where interventions are needed. Some portfolio tracking tools enable providers to run reports on the percentage of trainees who meet individual standards. This can be very helpful for self-evaluation. In this way a provider can gauge if additional training should be targeted at particular standards.

Conclusions

There are potentially many advantages to e-portfolios over traditional portfolios for both trainee teachers and providers and the choice of a particular portfolio platform will depend upon many factors. NASBTT wishes to help providers to make an informed choice; hence the
commissioning of this article. A separate article (which may be found here) gives a summary of current providers views of some of the e-portfolio platforms that are currently in use. JISC has also produced a guide entitled Effective Practice with E-portfolios which may be helpful for providers (http://repository.jisc.ac.uk/5997/1/effectivepracticeeportfolios.pdf). It is hoped that more providers will share their experiences with e-portfolios in initial teacher training so that the body of evidence concerning the effectiveness of their use continues to grow.

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References


vi JISC (2008) http://repository.jisc.ac.uk/5997/1/effectivepracticeeportfolios.pdf

vii Much of the information for this article originally came from research for a dissertation I produced in 2009 as part of my Masters’ degree with Oxford Brookes University entitled: How can e-portfolios be used to enhance teacher training on the Graduate Teacher Programme?