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Getting electronic portfolios up to standard: Preparing to implement an electronic portfolio (efolio)

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Abstract

Many training institutions are increasingly expected to provide platforms and tools to allow students to reflect on their teaching and learning throughout their period of study. Data is collected each year as indicators of progress and attainment but often this does not fully reflect the true picture. Employers and professional bodies are also beginning to use portfolios to identify employees that match their requirements and be able to gauge that certain benchmarks are being achieved. With improvements in access, storage ability and provision of linkage to standards or competencies electronic portfolios have the potential to provide a more accurate view of a student's achievements and experiences. These digital repositories allow students to create a clear and consistent record of their knowledge and understanding in readiness for a particular audience. This paper describes an electronic portfolio tool and the proposed initial stages of its implementation with staff into a core program of a Faculty of Education.

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emerging technologies
CONFERENCE
Supporting a Learning Community

Getting electronic portfolios up to standard: Preparing to implement an electronic portfolio (efolio)

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Many training institutions are increasingly expected to provide platforms and tools to allow students to reflect on their teaching and learning throughout their period of study. Data is collected each year as indicators of progress and attainment but often this does not fully reflect the true picture. Employers and professional bodies are also beginning to use portfolios to identify employees that match their requirements and be able to gauge that certain benchmarks are being achieved. With improvements in access, storage ability and provision of linkage to standards or competencies electronic portfolios have the potential to provide a more accurate view of a student's achievements and experiences. These digital repositories allow students to create a clear and consistent record of their knowledge and understanding in readiness for a particular audience. This paper describes an electronic portfolio tool and the proposed initial stages of its implementation with staff into a core program of a Faculty of Education.

Introduction

Electronic portfolios are now seriously considered as a means of collecting and presenting information about an individual's attributes and experiences. As part of a more formal component of their coursework, learners are increasingly being asked to provide a portfolio containing a detailed account of their learning experiences during their period of study.

The aim of this project is to investigate an implementation of electronic portfolios (eFolios) across a Faculty of Education and develop effective staff development strategies that would support future implementations. Many institutions are examining electronic portfolio tools and are developing strategies and the necessary frameworks to support implementation. It is hoped that this project will uncover some of the key components that are required to introduce such a tool across a Faculty and determine what factors support successful adoption. A number of different professional development strategies will be used and their effectiveness will help determine what is required to fully support staff in similar or future implementations.

The project will be able to provide:

- Implementation guidelines for students and staff working with the efolio tool
- Development of appropriate support mechanisms for similar or further implementation
- Provision of feedback to inform the future development of the tool(s)

Background

The process of developing portfolios (electronic) can provide documented evidence of performance obtainment (competencies), self-evaluation, achievement of goals and objectives and guide long-term professional development (Barrett, 2000).

With this in mind, the ePortfolio project is the result of collaboration between teaching, administrative and technical staff of the University

of Wollongong's Faculty of Education to design, develop and implement a Web-based e-portfolio system which would allow students to document their performance towards achieving the range of professional standards, graduate qualities and expected course outcomes.

The University community is currently examining possible solutions to provide all faculties with a tool or set of tools that would allow students and staff to compile and maintain an electronic portfolio. With the redesign and offering of a new Bachelor of Education course, there became a pressing need to provide more tangible connections between students' experiences and a set of given standards. This implementation is proactive in that the Faculty is anticipating the future requirements of the NSW Institute of Teachers to integrate the *Professional Teaching Standards* into all courses and to provide all beginning teachers with a clear understanding of these standards.

It is also a platform to support and provide evidence of the *UOW Graduate Qualities* (and the associated Faculty qualities) being attained by all graduating students.

The standards

a) Professional Teaching Standards

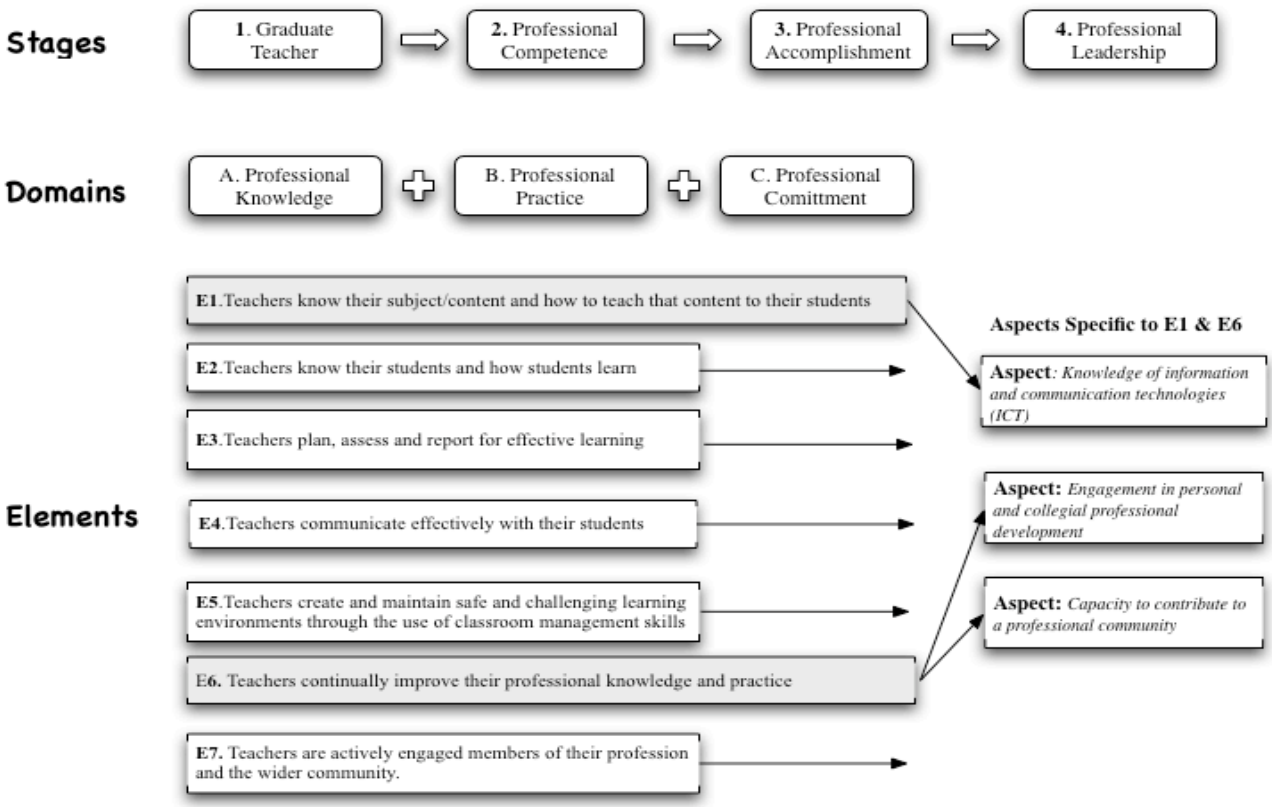
The Ramsay Report (2000) in reviewing teacher education recommended the establishment of a professional body, the NSW Institute of Teachers, to provide guidance and a framework for the professional status of teachers. This Institute, endorsed by an Act of Parliament and established in 2004, has since become responsible for teacher accreditation and the provision of a set of standards that would guide individual teachers and support the development of teacher education training programs. The resultant set of *Professional Teaching Standards* provided a sequence and a framework for all teachers throughout their career. This framework provides

> … a common reference point to describe, celebrate and support the complex and varied nature of teachers' work. The Professional Teaching Standards describe what teachers need to know, understand and be able to do as well as providing direction and structure to support the preparation and development of teachers. (NSW Institute of Teachers, 2005)

Referring to these standards Figure 1 shows the stages of a teacher's development, in the three domains with seven elements and particular aspects of this framework. The stages viewed in this diagram are from the perspective of an education system and can be seen as segments or disjointed periods in the career of a teacher.

With the implementation of an ePortfolio at this beginning stage of a teacher's career, it is hoped that it will provide a scaffold that would prepare and initiate reference and attention to these standards.

Figure 1: NSW Framework of Professional Teaching Standards



b) University Graduate Qualities

The University is currently examining the qualities that are perceived to be essential for all graduates in gaining employment and making an important contribution to society and their chosen field. The following graduate qualities are included in the ePortfolio and can be linked with supporting evidence:

> The university is committed to developing graduates who are:
>
> *Informed*
>
> Have a sound knowledge of an area of study or profession and understand its current issues, locally and internationally. Know how to apply this knowledge. Understand how an area of study has developed and how it relates to other areas.
>
> *Independent learners*
>
> Engage with new ideas and ways of thinking and critically analyse issues. Seek to extend knowledge through ongoing research, enquiry and reflection. Find and evaluate information, using a variety of sources and technologies. Acknowledge the work and ideas of others.
>
> *Problem solvers*
>
> Take on challenges and opportunities. Apply creative, logical and critical thinking skills to respond effectively. Make and implement decisions. Be flexible, thorough, innovative and aim for high standards.

Effective communicators

Articulate ideas and convey them effectively using a range of media. Work collaboratively and engage with people in different settings. Recognise how culture can shape communication.

Responsible

Understand how decisions can affect others and make ethically informed choices. Appreciate and respect diversity. Act with integrity as part of local, national, global and professional communities. (UOW Graduate Qualities, 2008)

Outline of the ePortfolio tool

The web based system will be accessed using a student's username and password, as illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2: ePortfolio logon screen

Once authenticated using the University's central systems, details of the student's enrolment such as course of study, current subjects, student number and email address will be retrieved and a simple and consistently available tabbed menu is provided. The menu is shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3: ePortfolio menu

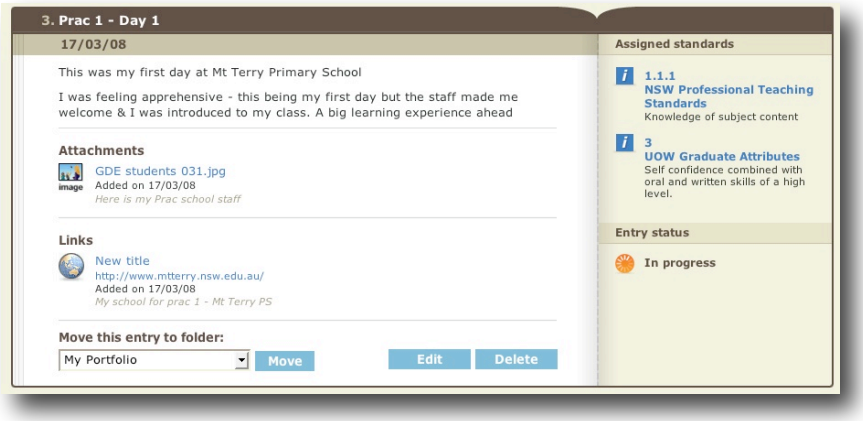
Each menu item provides a specific function that is described below:

Profile - provides a combination of centrally provided and used entered data

Portfolio - the main component of the system that allows the user to create entries to reflect on a learning experience. These entries use a title, a comment, and can have related attachments (such as documents, images, weblinks, audio files, etc.) and links to selected

teaching and graduate standards (Figure 4). Folders can also be created to aid the management of these entries.

Figure 4: Sample ePortfolio entry



Standards

The ePortfolio system will contain the designated standards sets: Professional Teaching Standards and the UOW Graduate qualities but it also has the functionality of allowing the student to create their own standards, for example, a set of community standards or personal goals.

Reports

The reporting function will allow the student to collate a set of entries for a particular purpose. Such reports may be tailored by combining sets of entries and their related attachments and links and then the customised output can be reported:

- As a link to be emailed for third party viewing - another student, prospective employer or lecturer
- As a rich text formatted document for saving, printing or future editing
- To self check (or formal check) that various standards have been covered

A built in *Help* system is included for all students with a specific *Admin Menu* (for designated staff)

Proposed implementation plan

This implementation will use a three-phase of *Create, Connect, Reflect* approach, firstly with faculty staff and then similarly with students.

The Creation Phase

The aim of the *Creation* phase is to create a non-threatening environment whereby staff/students feel comfortable with the ePortfolio tool and its capabilities. A series of information sessions will be conducted to facilitate staff to become aware of the system and its possibilities. These sessions will include:

- A formal session with the subject co-ordinators and directors of the complementary programs

- A series of voluntary information presentations with all staff within the Faculty that give details of the tool and the implications for staff in general and specifically for those teaching in the Course
- A series of hands on workshops where staff have a chance to use and experience the tool from the perspectives of staff and also students.

The Connect Phase

The aim of the *Connect* phase is to facilitation staff to make connections on how the tool can be used to link with the various artefacts collected and the appropriate linkages that can be made with the Professional Teaching Standards and UOW Graduate Qualities.

During this period staff will be required to examine their current teaching outlines and re-evaluate them in terms of the required Professional Teaching Standards and Graduate Qualities. The Faculty course directors will also be required to edit existing subject templates to include specific references, both formal and informal, to the ePortfolio.

The Reflect Phase

The aim of the *Reflect* phase is the development by both groups of a variety of reflection strategies to allow a consistent and meaningful use of the tool throughout the student's course of study. At this stage there will be opportunities for both teaching and executive members of the Faculty to meet and discuss the possible strategies to support students' use of the tool. The phase will be supported by:

- Written reviews of how they see their students using the tool - with specific examples of portfolio entries that relate to their subject
- Examples of report templates for a range of situations
- Suggestions for overcoming the obstacles that have arisen during this trial period,.

Conclusion

Data from interviews with staff and students will provide evidence of the success of these strategies. It is hoped that the staged approach will give staff an opportunity to align themselves with the student perspective and gain insight into how the ePortfolio can become an integrated and seamless component of their course of study. Further research will be required to ascertain the possible value and extension of this, or similar tools, into their careers as teachers.

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