



2011

Do ePortfolios Foster Creativity? An Evaluative Study in a Professional Development Context

Roisin Donnelly

Technological University Dublin, roisin.donnelly@dit.ie

Muireann O'Keeffe

Dublin Institute of Technology, muireann.okeeffe@dit.ie

K.C. O'Rourke

Dublin Institute of Technology, kevin.orourke@dit.ie

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Recommended Citation

O'Keeffe, M., Donnelly, R., & O'Rourke, K. (2011). Do ePortfolios foster creativity? An evaluative study in a professional development context. *Diverse International Conference 2011, DCU, June*.

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Do ePortfolios foster creativity? An evaluative study in a professional development context

Muireann O’Keeffe, Roisin Donnelly, Kevin O’Rourke

Learning Teaching and Technology Centre,

Dublin Institute of Technology

Keywords: creativity, ePortfolios, assessment

Abstract

The nurturing of creativity as a key skill in students is a current and topical issue due to the potential important economic and social benefits it can imbue. This paper outlines a case study in progress in an Irish higher education institution, which initiated as an evaluation of student ePortfolios and transformed into an examination of creativity within students ePortfolios. The context for the research is a group of postgraduate students using ePortfolios to build evidence of their learning experience on the programme. This research seeks to explore the notion of learner empowerment through creativity in ePortfolio use, specifically if the ePortfolio is a suitable pedagogical tool for enhancing creativity in their learning and practice. Findings from this research will influence the development of a framework to enhance student creativity in developing ePortfolios in higher education (HE).

Paper submission summary

Background and Context

Many HE initiatives are underway to encourage student creativity in order to enhance key skills of students and nurture life-wide creativity (Craft, 2011). It is noted by Donnelly & Barrett (2008) that pedagogical strategies need to arouse the imagination and engagement of students and that assessment, one of the most important influences on learning, needs to be aligned with learning outcomes which encourage creativity. Technology in recent years been regarded as having a potentially critical role to play in supporting and transforming creative communities at all levels and stages in the higher educational process (Craft, 2011). Within the context of

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this current study, some influential work has been carried out by Tosh et al. (2005) who believe that ePortfolios appear to offer an opportunity for learner control and to be capable of supporting or promoting deep learning. Students can make connections between the learning which occurs in different contexts: academic, workplace and community. Diehm's (2004) research has also focused on the use of electronic portfolio projects to highlight the creative nature of student learning.

Description of the development work

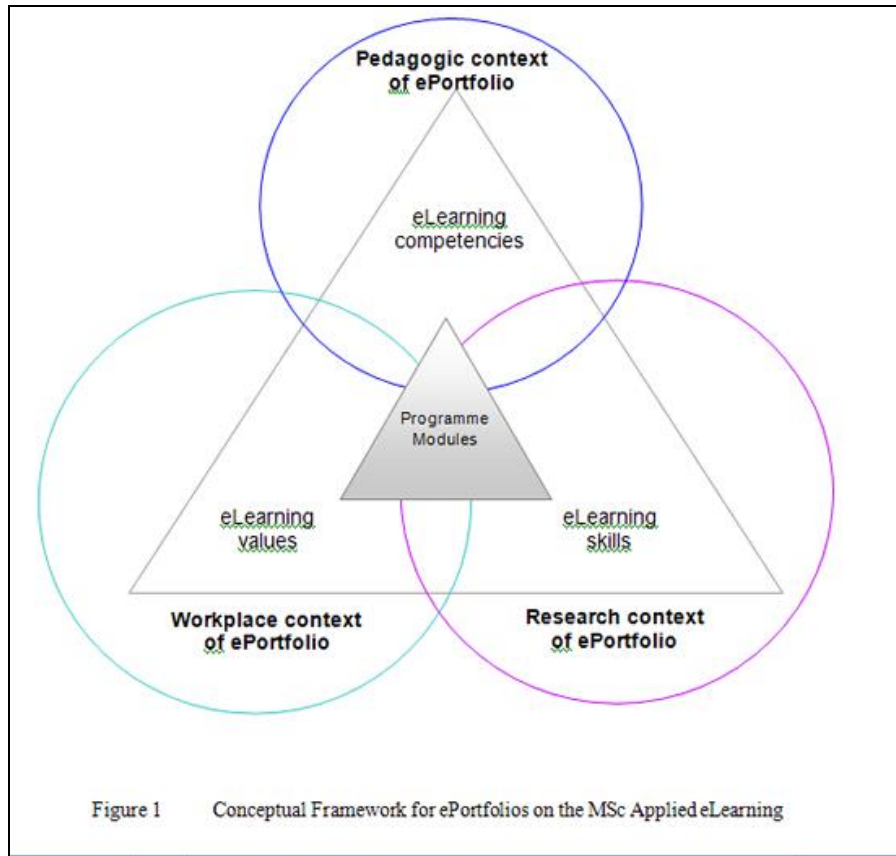
ePortfolios are thought to support learning in various settings and stages and to promote more profound forms of learning, while also supporting professional development (JISC, 2008; Northover et al, 2009). To this end ePortfolios are currently developed by postgraduate students on the programme of the MSc in Applied eLearning at Dublin Institute of Technology to demonstrate their learning journey over a two-year part-time programme. Students are encouraged to draw from both informal and formal learning activities to develop ePortfolios, which are personally managed and owned by the student, and where items can be selectively shared with peers on the programme and programme tutors. A framework and other induction activities are provided to students of the programme to support them in the construction of their ePortfolios.

A visual representation of the work/system developed

Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual framework under which the ePortfolio has been integrated to the MSc programme. It seeks to help participants to connect their learning experiences in different contexts (i.e., pedagogic, workplace and research) and to demonstrate competency in a given domain (module of study). Participants learn skills in these different contexts and the ePortfolio provides an opportunity to articulate and connect their learning in many different ways. Beyond documenting skills in their domain, the ePortfolio provides opportunities for participants to articulate their competency in areas that are specific to their educational experience on the programme. These include competencies from the three main contexts that they gain because of their work on the programme. These contexts are pedagogic (their own learning), research and their own workplace. The overall goal of the ePortfolio is to allow participants to not only "show" but to demonstrate what they know to the world.

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Evaluation work

Anecdotal evidence, over the past three years, has indicated that the development and evidence of learning within student ePortfolios has differed greatly. These variations are witnessed through artefacts assembled, the quality of individual student reflection and types of media used to construct artefacts within the ePortfolio.

This research commenced as an evaluation of ePortfolios in supporting student's evidence of learning within their studies. However it became apparent that the notion of creativity was very important to the innovative development of ePortfolios by students. Therefore in this study we wish to explore supports for creative development of ePortfolios and also to examine if the tools and electronic platforms provided are appropriate to the development of creativity within ePortfolios. The results of this study will, with anticipation, revise the current framework, so that students are empowered to be creative in developing their ePortfolios.

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Significance of work for others

It is intended that the outcomes of this research will enhance future use of the ePortfolio with students on the MSc Applied eLearning programme. This study will provide recommendations on enhancements to the current framework to support students in creatively developing their ePortfolios. This revised framework could also be potentially used in developing assessment strategies and nurturing creativity on other programmes wishing to incorporate ePortfolios.

Future work

From January 2011, this study will begin by examining the student experience of creating a programme-based ePortfolio. We wish to investigate if students have been enabled to creatively explore their learning through the use of ePortfolios and if the ePortfolio is a suitable pedagogical tool for enhancing creativity in participants' learning. Data will be collected through document analysis of a selection of participant ePortfolios aligned to a template on creativity; through student's presentations of ePortfolios; focus groups and individual interviews. Over the coming months research data will be analysed and presentation of initial findings is envisaged to occur in June 2011.

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