

Competing Paradigms in Electronic Portfolios: Balancing “Portfolio-as-Test” with “Portfolio-as-Story”

Section I: Content

A. Statement of the problem: Clearly state the problem that focuses your presentation, provide relevant background, and place the problem in a broader academic context.

Electronic portfolios can have multiple purposes: as assessment tools to document the attainment of standards (a positivist model--an assessment portfolio); as digital stories of deep learning (a constructivist model--a learning portfolio); and as digital resumes to highlight competence (a showcase model-- a marketing/employment portfolio). There is currently confusion regarding the differences between electronic portfolios and online assessment management systems. (Barrett, 2004)

Research reported at AERA in the last five years (Breault, 2000; Placier, Fitzgerald, and Hall, 2001; McCoy & Barrett, 2004; Wieseman, 2004) has highlighted dissonance in the portfolio development process in teacher education. Instead of viewing their portfolios as lifelong learning tools that they want to use with their own students, teacher candidates are being “turned off” by the high-stakes assessment goals of the current tools that meet institutions’ data collection requirements, but do not give them the individuality to express their own voice in the stories of their learning journey. The challenge for teacher educators is how to encourage teacher candidates’ intrinsic motivation to maintain these e-portfolios as a lifelong professional development tool, and to model a process that also works with K-12 students. Lee Teitel (1998) points out that the best way to kill the portfolio...

would be to make it mandatory or to use it for evaluation. Key benefits are lost if the reflective culture of professional development is replaced by a “culture of compliance” –where teachers go through the motions of assembling materials according to a predated checklist. (p. 152)

B. Literature review: Provide a synthesis of the literature or knowledge base related to your topic; highlight competing hypotheses or major schools of thought.

A portfolio that closely emulates a paper version and happens to be stored in an electronic container is a very different document from the current implementation using online database systems. Technology appears to be changing the definition of “portfolio” (Batson, 2002) and many of these online systems may be careless imitations or distortions of the original purpose of the portfolio construct. The literature on paper-based portfolios has raised many issues and cautions about portfolio use (Lucas, 1992): the weakening of effect through careless imitation; the failure of research to validate the pedagogy; and co-option by large-scale external testing programs. Lee Shulman (1998) has pointed out five dangers of portfolios, including “perversion” by high stakes assessment, diverting emphasis from their original purpose of reflection on practice. It will be important for Teacher Education programs to maintain their focus on the original purposes for which paper portfolios have been successful, and carefully assess the impact that the conversion to an electronic format will have on those original goals.

In her recent webcast on “Electronic Portfolios: Why Now?,” Barbara Cambridge of the American Association for Higher Education, identified these principles of **deep learning**, which involves reflection, is developmental, integrative, self-directive, and lifelong. An electronic portfolio should support all five of these principles.

Wilkerson & Lang's (2003) article entitled, "Portfolios, the Pied Piper of Teacher Certification Assessments: Legal and Psychometric Issues" points out the potential legal liabilities for teacher education programs who want to use portfolios to meet accreditation requirements and to make high

stakes decisions related to licensure/certification. They quote a recent AACTE study that found: 90% of SCDE's use portfolios to make decisions about candidates and 40% do so as a certification or licensure requirement (Salzman, et.al, 2002).

Wilkerson and Lang's most recent work on designing standards-based assessments (2004) helps clarify further the need to begin with an analysis of purpose as the fundamental first step in designing assessments, including portfolios, with validity in mind. There have been many commercial tools come to market in the last three years, claiming to answer the needs of institutions to meet accreditation requirements, by taking advantage of Internet technologies. Many of these systems promise support for student portfolios AND aggregated assessment data to meet reporting requirements, but their failure to take into account the two purposes continues to muddy the waters. The literature on paper-based portfolios in K-12 education (Paulson & Paulson, 1991; Stefanakis, 2002) points out the difficulties of meeting these two diverse needs because the designers of these products are combining two different paradigms of portfolios which, by their very nature, are in conflict with each other. Pearl and Leon Paulson (1994) outlined these differences as positivism vs. constructivism:

The positivist approach puts a premium on the selection of items that reflect outside standards and interests...
The constructivist approach puts a premium on the selection of items that reflect learning from the student's perspective. (p.36)

Teacher Education institutions need to meet both of these purposes of licensure/certification and continued growth and development. The positivist approach is appealing to those with interests in licensure/certification because there is a requirement that learning be held constant. It provides a common core against which growth can be measured and flourish. We are establishing minimal competency that makes the practitioner "safe to teach" and then can be used to build a career ladder. There may be a hierarchy here. The positivist approach is "the floor below which they cannot fall". The constructivist approach is where we *hope* our teacher candidates will go *above* the floor, showcasing the many ways that they are going beyond minimum requirements, to make their classrooms exciting places to learn and to establish themselves as professionals who will continue to grow. There is a need to implement and research technology tools and strategies that support the constructivist approach, such as **web logs** (Tosh & Werdmuller, 2004) and **storytelling** (McDrury & Alterio, 2003) that each promote using reflection and experience to improve learning. Schön (1988) states, "...storytelling is the mode of description best suited to transformation in new situations of action" (p.26). The challenge for teacher education programs will be to find ways to meet both purposes without sacrificing the quality of, and need for, *both* "portfolio as test" *and* "portfolio as story."

C. Contribution: Discuss how your work relates to the conference strand under which you are submitting the proposal.

With increasing pressure to document effectiveness and success, teacher education programs are collecting "finer grained data and evidence" with assessment systems mandated by accreditation. These assessment systems are often called "electronic portfolios" when, in reality, they rarely resemble the student-centered philosophy of the original constructivist portfolio movement. The more "sophisticated forms of portfolios" may meet the needs of institutions for performance-based assessment data, but do the current approaches help teacher candidates make meaning of their own experiences and increase their awareness of teaching practices? This interactive dialogue will highlight successful exemplary practices that model decisions, which balance the institution's positivist needs for data collection with the learners' needs for a constructivist environment to document their own deep learning.

D. Relevance: Discuss how your proposal relates to at least two of the following perspectives: implications for policy; using data to inform policy or practice; successful (exemplary) practices.

This interactive session will discuss how to create an Institution-Centered Assessment and Accountability System without losing the power of the portfolio as a student-centered tool for lifelong learning and professional development. Participants will discuss how to use sound assessment based on established performance expectations and how to maintain the authenticity of the portfolio process to help teacher candidates develop the skills and attitudes necessary to implement this strategy with their own students once they have their own classrooms. [implications for policy]

The real balancing act is how to meet the needs of the organization for an assessment management accountability system while not losing what might be valuable already in a paper-based reflective portfolio process. More research is needed on examples of implementation that clearly differentiate between student-owned electronic portfolios and the assessment systems used by faculty to record evidence of students' progress toward meeting standards. The wireless network will be used for participants to view examples of universities that have successfully maintained the integrity of both processes. [successful exemplary practice]

E. Conclusions: Provide conclusions about both the focus of your work and the issue in its broader context.

A recommended design will be demonstrated as three independent but interconnected systems, represented in the attached diagram:

- 1) an archive of learner work (the artifacts stored with captions/reflections);
- 2) an assessment management system to document achievement of standards; and
- 3) an authoring environment where learners can construct their own electronic portfolios and reflective, digital stories of deep learning.

Universities that have implemented this model will be invited to participate in the discussion. Presenters will also share a possible strategy to create multiple portfolios that address the new requirements from NCATE for 6-8 key assessments – including a series of thematic portfolios that target both purposes separately but fit together as an assessment system.

Section II: Outcomes and Methods

A. Learner/participant outcomes: Describe what you intend the participants to learn during the session.

Participants will

- become aware of the competing paradigms of electronic portfolios in teacher education and the implications for teacher candidates' reflection on deep learning.
- become aware of options that balance the assessment data needs of administrators with the tools needed by teacher candidates to tell their own stories of deep learning.
- be able to evaluate their own assessment systems and self-diagnose any needed changes.

B. Methods: Describe how you will design the session so that the learner/participant outcomes are achieved.

A special web site and online web-based discussion will be established for this session, to highlight exemplary practices. After a brief introduction to the challenges of these competing paradigms, participants will be shown where examples of both types of portfolios can be found online. There will be opportunity to discuss these issues, and share examples. Participants will use the wireless network (in small groups or with the facilitators) to become aware of the many web-based resources that can be accessed when they return to their home institutions.

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