

# Implementing ePortfolios in a Multi-Disciplinary Tertiary Context in the UAE

by Jonathan Turner

*This paper will describe the ePortfolio implementation initiative at the Higher Colleges of Technology in the Western Region of Abu Dhabi. Starting with a description of the project, involving the implementation of Blackboard Learn (BbLearn) ePortfolios for both students and staff, the paper will go on to evaluate the project and make recommendations for the implementation of a similar project in the future.*

## Introduction

A brief definition of ePortfolios will serve not only as a starting point for this discussion, but also underline one of the central dilemmas involved in the project - namely the complex nature of ePortfolio definition. The role of digital artifacts is often included in definitions of ePortfolios such as "the product, created by the learner, (is) a collection of digital artifacts articulating experiences, achievements and learning" (JISC, 2008). But the collection of artifacts in itself does not seem to constitute an ePortfolio; rather, more ephemeral process-related themes are found time and again in the literature. Principally, we see a discussion of the process of reflection emerging from the collection of artifacts: "The real value of an e-portfolio is in the reflection and learning that is documented therein, not just the collection of work" (Barrett, 2009). This process is what allows students to express their personalities through the ePortfolio (Rodriguez, 2008), as well as forward plan "in response to an experience or episode of learning" (JISC, 2008). The idea of reflection is connected to documenting and sharing experiences (Reese & Levy, 2009), making an ePortfolio a shared, as well as a personal, event. EPortfolios are also intended for a specific audience at a specific point in time (Becta, 2007), which also adds to the complexity of a single bite-size definition. This "complex ePortfolio landscape" will be discussed (Hallam & Creagh, 2010) in relation to students in the UAE and show the degree to which the digital artifacts captured self-reflection and real, shareable learning experiences.

In addition to understanding the complexity of a single definition, it is essential to understand the importance of institutional support at all levels of management for the

success of a project of this nature. This support began with the previous Chancellor of the Higher Colleges of Technology (HCT), H.E. Sheikh Nahayan Mabarak Al Nahayan, stating his desire for the HCT to begin implementation of ePortfolios as part of its drive for lifelong learning. This address led to the Western Region Colleges, comprising Ruwais and Madinat Zayed Colleges, to begin adoption of ePortfolios through an initiative from the director's office. Institutional support manifested itself at College Director level, with time set aside for staff development on ePortfolio use and time release for a faculty member, specialized in ePortfolio use, to work with teachers and students in the classroom. This support was supplemented by logistical support for students and teachers from the college IT staff and at supervisor level in the form of implicit support for the project by allowing the project team access to teachers and students.

The project itself encompassed stakeholders from all levels of the college community, from management to staff and students. The resulting qualitative data taken from this range of stakeholders forms the basis for this study; including Foundations to final-year Bachelor students across subject areas; and from faculty in various programmes, including student services staff. It covers a range of ePortfolio functionalities, from assessment to reflection to showcasing and Personal and Professional Development Planning (PPDP).

The breadth of the project, and the closeness with which it has been followed by the researcher, has resulted in a rich body of evidence that allows the real picture of ePortfolio use to emerge through the use of classroom observations, questionnaires and interviews.

The subsequent recommendations are based on ePortfolio implementation in the UAE context, but may also be useful for other contexts.

### Choosing the Right ePortfolio

The first decision taken by the drivers of the project was to decide which of the many portfolio offerings to choose. Or indeed, whether to impose one particular portfolio platform, or whether to give students and teachers a choice from a limited range of options, or from amongst the multiple available options.

A team made up of pedagogic specialists, IT specialists and college management decided that the BbLearn ePortfolio platform was the best available option. In the end the choice was based on overriding practical considerations concerning availability, price, institutional backing and training concerns. The team tasked with implementation was aware from the outset that there was a strong institutional preference for incorporating tools from the BbLearn Learning Management

System (LMS) into its eLearning offerings. BbLearn is a complete LMS that describes itself as a toolkit for “managing content, engaging learners, and assessing outcomes” (BB Learn Overview), which includes an ePortfolio function housed on the LMS. The integrated nature of the system is likely to increase the use of the ePortfolio (Levy & Reese, 2009) which often suffers from poor uptake (JISC, 2008).

All HCT students and teaching staff have BbLearn accounts and this ubiquity, combined with the financial consideration that no further tools or licenses needed to be purchased, was the central motivation for adoption. Other platforms were either pay-to-use, which was deemed impractical, or free but with limited features. There were however still some stronger free options that were nevertheless deemed unsuitable for roll-out and training reasons. If we were going to roll-out the ePortfolio project to a large number of students and faculty, it would be a priority that training could be conducted trainer to faculty, faculty to student and student to student, made achievable by the use of a single ubiquitous platform.

Illustration 1 – an example of a reading and writing eportfolio

Despite the multiple limitations of BbLearn which will be touched on later, what the platform did was to meet the criteria described above, as well as being flexible enough to meet the needs of most of users, which again will be discussed in more detail, after first describing to roll-out procedure that was adopted.

## Roll-out Procedure

According to Duncan Gillespie, e-Learning coordinator at Dumfries and Galloway College, ePortfolios must be introduced during induction and not half way through the semester (JISC, 2008) as part of a coordinated induction and roll-out. This roll-out would start with a pilot group of stakeholders including senior managers, IT and academic staff and student representatives; followed by a second roll-out to a larger "champions" group, headed by all or some of the pilot group. Phase three assessed champions' feedback which produced recommendations and changes before roll-out to the target population as the final phase. (McConnell, et al, 2012).

Roll-out for the Western Region ePortfolio initiative involved roll-out to both staff and students, from a range of disciplines. Over the course of the semester this meant direct training for approximately 300 students, with between 70-80% of these receiving two or more one-hour training sessions focusing on the logistics of creating a portfolio, as well as underlying pedagogy. There was an initial group of four champions from faculty, management, IT and Student Services followed by a larger group of 13 faculty who actively engaged in the ePortfolio roll-out with their students.

This group of champions was self-selecting; both teaching and non-teaching staff were invited to attend four pre-semester and in-semester professional development sessions. These staff PD sessions focused on staff members producing their own 'showcase' ePortfolios rather than how to produce student ePortfolios. This meant that sessions focused on the mechanics of ePortfolio creation with a secondary focus on the types of artifacts that could be included. By semester-end we had also produced an iTunes U course on how to set-up a BbLearn ePortfolio that would be available as an ongoing support tool for all users and potential users. Again this course focused on ePortfolio creation in terms of navigating BbLearn, with a secondary focus on pedagogical aspects.

At the time of writing, phases 1 and 2 of McConnell et al's roll-out procedure have been completed with phase three taking place in the upcoming semester. The roll-out procedure for students was similar to the staff PD in that it dealt with possible uses for the ePortfolios, with a focus on how to use the variety of available tools within the BbLearn platform and the types of content that might be included.

The decision about which of these options to exploit was left to the stakeholders - in the first instance the faculty members - who decided how they could incorporate ePortfolios into their learning and assessment strategies. Finally, the students themselves were allowed greater or lesser freedom in terms of how to interpret the course directives and so different levels of autonomy were present across different subject areas.

## How the ePortfolios were Used

Students produced ePortfolios from a wide range of courses, including, academic English as a second language, Spanish as a foreign language, Statistics, Foundation maths, Foundation English as a second language, CV writing, Community Studies and Physics. Each ePortfolio design was determined to a lesser or greater extent by the course tutor, although both the product and process of individual students showed a range of approaches within these tutor-led frameworks. EPortfolios were designed using both mobile devices (usually Apple iPads) and laptop computers, the latter of which proved to be more suitable.

Fifty participants completed an online questionnaire concerning their ePortfolio use and face-to-face interviews were conducted with six of the tutors who used ePortfolios with their students, yielding the following responses.

The most highly ranked response from five possible options, to the statement on the online questionnaire "Put the following uses for the ePortfolio in order, so which is the most useful function through to the least useful", was "to keep a record of my own work" with a value of 3.58 out of five. The second highest response with a value of 3.46 was "for me to organize my own work", with the third highest response with a value of 3.33 being "for the teacher to grade my work". If we compare these values with the lower value responses of 2.52 and 2.10 respectively for the statements, "for potential employers to see what I can do" and "to have a sense of my progress", we can begin to see a more explicit focus on product with a more implicit focus on process.

The importance of the two highest rankings relating to record keeping was also reflected in both student and teacher comments, with student comments relating to the role that ePortfolios play in helping to organise work and having "everything in one place" and teacher comments focusing on the role of the ePortfolio as a "repository". This product-related focus was present in the number of comments relating to the permanence of the ePortfolio, and the effect that this has on students' output, such as in these comments from teachers 2 and 4 - "it definitely encourages students to produce a better final product" and, "they can see the work that they've done".

"I like E-portfolio because it seems so organised. To me it is so useful because you can actually put your homework and project in a proper way and it doesn't complicate things, the way I use my E-portfolio by submitting homeworks and projects. The E-portfolio can be improved in making it less complicated because that's the only thing that I see bad about it, but other than that it's really a useful thing".

"I like it because it is useful and can save all your work online. It is not useful because it takes little of time, but it's still good to improve my skills by sharing it with others".

"First of all I think e portfolio is useful where you can see your work organized and have references. It is easy to do, but need more practice to master it. This is new way of learning and keeping the work".

"The eportfolio is a much useful resource to keep your work than another resource, and it helps us to reduce the amount of paper. I like eportfolio because it keeps my assignment".

**Students' comments**

More surprising was the disparity between the perceived lack of importance for the more process-related statement "to have a sense of my progress", and both student and teacher comments related to process-related facets of the ePortfolios, with two of the teachers observing students "tweaking" and "editing" their own work. There are a number of possible reasons for this disparity which the qualitative nature of the data gathering process does not clarify. It seems that at least part of the explanation lies in the espoused theory (Schon, 1983) that ePortfolios are "containers for collections of evidence for a purpose" with "connections with the former paper-based records of achievement" (Becta, 2007) and the more tacit practice of focusing on the process of ePortfolio creation without necessarily being able to identify this as such.

The breadth of courses incorporating ePortfolio resulted in a range of ePortfolios. Many of the ePortfolios reflected traditional portfolios in that they concentrated in examples of static text uploaded onto the ePortfolio. Some courses saw examples of less traditional media, such as hyperlinked text, sound and movie files. Some examples of the student products included: A community studies field-work log, in which students recorded their community visits using text and image. As reported by Teacher 3, "they simply edit their log week by week and add information as the semester goes on". For example, reading and writing portfolios, in which students selected examples of academic reading with their own summaries and examples of academic writing. A third

example was as a record of language learning; this included sound, movie and image files, as well as embedded and attached text.

The level of self-expression afforded by the ePortfolios reflected what Helen C. Barrett (2009) calls an 'expressive' ePortfolio designed to "express their (the students) individual personalities". This level of self-expression is reflected in the teacher interviews, as in the comment from teacher 2: "I'm surprised by how much some of the students have gotten into the design of it". This level of expression showed itself at one end with examples of students producing unsolicited personal blog rolls, and at the other end with students adding no personal features at all. The teacher interviews also revealed other examples of student autonomy with 4 of the 6 interviewed teachers mentioning student autonomy explicitly and one observing the emergence of peer teaching, although how this autonomy demonstrated itself is less clearly defined. There is even evidence of autonomy in the more superficially prescriptive ePortfolios, such as the case with the statistics course in which the teacher stipulated that students upload their homework onto the ePortfolio. Although the content of the homework was broadly the same for all students, the way that they chose to upload the paper-based exercises was left up to the individual, with some students scanning and uploading, some taking photos and uploading and some re-doing the exercises onto Word files for uploading.

**Illustration 2 – an example of a student using the eportfolio as a tool for self-expression**



To at least some extent this notion of self-expression can be extended to a greater level of expression between teacher and student, in the form of more personalized and controllable feedback. This is evidenced in teacher and student comments, "I like everything in one place like that, easily accessible, easy to give feedback". This feedback took multiple forms, but the most salient was the comments feature available on the BbLearn ePortfolio that allows for

teachers to make comments on individual artifacts in the ePortfolio or more generalized comments. The interaction between student and teacher is also reflected in the perceived value of the tool as a means to control student output as reflected in this comment by teacher 2: "I have

the Ss save all of their homework assignments so that I can check at the end of the semester to see if they have completed all of them."

We can summarize the ePortfolio use with a number of contradictions and inconsistencies. First, there was no

### Illustration 3 – an example of teacher feedback using the comments function

Adjectives	Huevos rancheros	Hi, I can't see the link for Huevos Rancheros! Frown	Tuesday, April 2, 2013	Mr. Jonathan Turner
colours	Adios	In 'adios' try making the link you copy pasted a hyperlink	Tuesday, April 2, 2013	Mr. Jonathan Turner
Common expressions (with audio)	Week 7	yo hablo I speak	Tuesday, April 2, 2013	Mr. Jonathan Turner
Countries		usted habla you speak		
Education Expressions		Don't forget that 'Usted habla' is the formal 'you', there is also 'Tu hablas' (informal 'you'), could you include that in the table as well please?		
Family vocabulary (with audio)	All weeks	If you set the language to 'Spanish' (any kind should be ok), you will be able to do a spell check, at the moment all of your words are underlined in red!	Tuesday, April 2, 2013	Mr. Jonathan Turner
FOOD	more feedback	Wow, there is lots of information in your portfolio, muy bien! here are a couple of suggestions and comments - your presentation is really nice, your work is well referenced and easy to read - you seem to mainly have word documents, maybe you could experiment with a couple of other file types? - with your language notes you could try personalising a little, so when you study a phrase you could relate it to yourself, for example with the verb "ser" you could write or record "soy Mona, soy estudiante y soy de los emiratos arabes"	Monday, April 15, 2013	Mr. Jonathan Turner
Fruits	Report on Al Andalus	Hi, I can't find your report	Wednesday, April 24, 2013	Mr. Jonathan Turner
Grammar				
Home				
Huevos Rancheros				
Huevos Rancheros- Récipe				
Masculine & minine nouns				
t Al Mansoori				

clear subject or course that seemed more or less suitable for ePortfolio use. As well as a wide range of courses there was evidence of a wide range of file types. This wide range was also reflected in students' reactions to the ePortfolios, with some students embracing the technology - 75% of students qualified the ePortfolios as "useful", and others producing the bare minimum required for course, with 25% of students regarding the ePortfolios as "not very useful". The data shows an explicit focus on product as reflected in the student questionnaires and an implicit focus on product as reflected in the teacher interviews. The portfolios themselves showed both a high degree of engagement in a number of cases and only minimal engagement in others with the only constant being these inconsistencies.

### Problems and Weaknesses and How to Address These

The problems encountered during the project and the weaknesses in the project implementation can be classified into three broad areas: The choice of technology, the roll-out procedure and the stakeholders understanding of the role of ePortfolios.

The starting point of any criticism of BbLearn is that it is not in itself an ePortfolio. Rather it is intended as an LMS, with core functionality being based around course delivery with the ePortfolio functionality being something of an add-on. Perhaps in part because of this, the resulting BbLearn ePortfolio is difficult to use and has an unattractive interface, especially when compared with

more up-to-date and specific ePortfolio products.

The problems with design and functionality were consistently identified by all of the teachers interviewed for the project who said that they found the interface “clunky”. And whilst 75% of students found the ePortfolios “useful”, 31% found the interface “difficult to use”. Even enthusiastic exponents of the ePortfolios commented on the limitations of the BbLearn design features: “it is not flexible for create attractive design”. Even those users who mastered the narrow and deep architecture and produced rich ePortfolios found the finished product aesthetically displeasing, with the student comment above being typical. The level of difficulty was reflected in the amount of time needed to train both teachers and students in the use of the ePortfolio. Multiple training sessions were required to train stakeholders in even basic operability such as uploading files with the negative washback of these time-consuming training sessions being far-reaching, given that the focus on operability was at the expense of developing an understanding amongst the stakeholders of the pedagogical implications of the ePortfolios. So rather than focusing on the strengths of the ePortfolio, time was spent addressing its weaknesses.

Perhaps the single biggest strength of ePortfolios that was lost in the roll-out procedure was the lack of understanding of the role of reflection in the ePortfolios, both amongst teachers and students. This process of reflection can manifest itself in the comments feature of the ePortfolios, which allows for teachers to make comments that can be incorporated into developing further versions of artifacts. This could mean multiple versions of an artifact or tweaking of a particular version. The same comments feature could be used by students as a way of reflecting on the process of creating a particular artifact, as could the journal feature of BbLearn. Reflection could also be developed using the front page of a particular portfolio as a blog-roll of comments, which could in turn refer to multiple versions of developing artifacts.

Another particular difficulty for both students and teachers was differentiating between artifacts and portfolios, which again led to stakeholders failing to exploit the reflective nature of the ePortfolios. One of the BbLearn’s ePortfolio strengths lies in the user’s ability to build a bank of artifacts which can be used on multiple occasions in multiple ePortfolios. This means that not only can banks of artifacts be used to produce different ePortfolios for different purposes, but also multiple versions of an artifact can be saved with comments on its development as a way to demonstrate reflection, in for example a piece of student writing.

Of course, addressing the issue of reflection is not simply a question of building-in a training session on being reflective, but rather requires a deeper understanding of the role of reflection not only amongst students

but amongst teachers. This means a more concerted institutional approach to exploring the role of reflection with an integration of this understanding into the fabric of course design beyond the ePortfolio.

It is apparent after this semester-long study that the successful institution-wide adoption of ePortfolios does not come without a concerted and sustained effort. This should involve the choice of the right ePortfolio or indeed ePortfolios as a first step. Secondly, the roll-out procedure should focus on both the mechanics of ePortfolio creation and on the underlying pedagogy of ePortfolios. This can only be achieved in a reflective process itself on the role of ePortfolios. This may be achieved by the introduction of a credit-bearing course at foundation level that involves the creation of a reflective ePortfolio as posited by Worley (2011). This portfolio would be a record in itself of the process of reflection required in its creation, and it would be assessed under these conditions. The course would be based around competences intended to reflect future ePortfolio creation, with the students being involved in the production of these competencies and how they can be reflected in the ePortfolio artifacts themselves. “What competencies the work is intended to demonstrate, what the standard or criteria for competencies are in each area, and what aspects of the work provide evidence of meeting those criteria” (National Educational Technology Plan, 2010). These competencies would reflect the centrality of the reflective process and so challenge what Barrett (2009) admits is the tendency of most portfolios to emphasize the showcase element of ePortfolios.

An ePortfolio course could also include examples of the full range of functionalities of ePortfolios, such as multiple file types, different design elements and the use of reflective elements. Choosing a particular ePortfolio product may or may not be desirable at this point, it may be preferable to stipulate the functionality required for the course and allowing the choice of ePortfolio to be part of the course itself, or it may be preferable to provide a range of options and allow students to choose between them. This approach could be part of an assessed reflective element that seeks to address the lack of reflection in students. Other elements in a reflective component could include self-assessment, a learning journal or multiple drafts with comments of a particular artifact.

The introduction of this type of course would have considerable positive washback for future courses. That is to say, if ePortfolios were incorporated into future courses and if students were adequately prepared in the production of ePortfolios from a foundations level, then quality reflective ePortfolio production could become an ongoing and central element in the life of the student. This type of centralized and cohesive approach could also help avoid the rather “fragmentary” nature of ePortfolios in institutions, “with the result that various people at the same university might not only operate in different contexts but also have disparate understandings about

ePortfolio usage" (Hallam & Creagh, 2010). In addition Hallam and Creagh recommend academic, administrative and IT support for staff, as well the creation of an ePortfolio community of practice and a regular ePortfolio conference, that would lead, as described by Worley 2011, to examples of ePortfolios to help students in "developing a narrative", which is often difficult to achieve because of a "lack of good examples". These examples could be shared through a community of practice in a number of ways, including through events such as conferences, or through internally accredited ePortfolio courses for practitioners. The completion of a short teacher training course in ePortfolio use could also be linked to institutional certification of approved teachers to deliver ePortfolio training courses for students. This process would also help challenge negative perceptions of ePortfolios amongst some teachers, or at least self-select those teachers who are more inclined to incorporate ePortfolio-use into their courses.

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