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Two-way Impact: Institutional e-Learning Policy/Educator Practices in Creative Arts Through ePortfolio Creation

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Abstract: While tertiary institutions in Australia are embracing e-learning and urging, or making compulsory, some use by academics, it is often the educators themselves who engage with innovative e-learning approaches. These approaches, in turn, influence others in the institution and the institution's thinking on e-learning. This paper focuses on the introduction or extension of ePortfolio usage into four creative arts departments in Australian universities. Each creative arts educator adopted the ePortfolio for a different purpose – music performance, theatre performance, music technology, music teacher training, professional writing - and in doing so has influenced, or at least is being monitored by, their university. All four projects have resulted in growth, development and enrichment of teaching and learning because of the ePortfolio's facility to engage students in such activities as reflection, ongoing student-teacher dialogue, collaborative essay writing, peer evaluation, identity formation, long-term career planning, and, in doing so, to influence institutional curriculum design and e-learning policy. The researchers wanted to assess the use of ePortfolio for creative arts students in how they could appropriately document skills, competencies and graduate attributes learnt during their degree programs for career readiness. Literature notes institutional interest in ePortfolios for purposes including career preparation (Reese and Levy, 2009); demonstrating and assessing student learning (Jafari, 2004); academic advising (Reese and Levy, 2009); and addressing public accountability concerns (Lorenzo and Ittelson, 2005a) by facilitating internal and external departmental review and accreditation (Reese and Levy, 2009). Within the four creative arts departments of our study the two-way impact between institution and educator is discussed. The findings of this study will inform future development of curriculum, policy and practice for creative arts students and academics in a variety of tertiary institutions. ePortfolios provide an efficient and transparent means to archive and access student work, and facilitate internal and external departmental review and broader institutional assessment.

Keywords: e-learning policy, ePortfolio, creative arts, curriculum enhancement, reflexive practice

1. Introduction

This paper explores the two-way impact, between institutional policy-makers and academics teaching undergraduate students, of ePortfolios in four Australian universities. The authors are part of a teaching and learning grant on ePortfolios in the creative arts (<http://capaeportfolios.ning.com/page/aboutus>) funded by a national body, the Australian Office of Teaching and Learning (<http://www.olt.gov.au/project-eportfolios-creative-arts-music-and-arts-students-australian-universities-2011>). The paper focuses on the use of the ePortfolio in creative arts departments, each educator/researcher adopting different platforms for different purposes. This use and its influence on the institution, plus each university's ePortfolio policies and planning, are discussed.

2. Literature review

Uses for ePortfolios

Institutional ePortfolio policy and practice varies considerably across Australian universities. ePortfolio use within a university originates from different departments or faculties and is adopted for a variety of reasons (Reardon, Lumsden and Meyer, 2005). Institutional policy may reflect these reasons which include career preparation (Reese & Levy, 2009); demonstration and assessment of student learning (Jafari, 2004); academic advisement and choosing the type of ePortfolio carefully to suit needs (Reese and Levy, 2009); and addressing

public accountability concerns (Lorenzo and Ittelson, 2005a) by facilitating internal and external departmental review and accreditation (Reese and Levy, 2009).

Institutions must also decide which type of ePortfolio best suits their needs (Lorenzo and Ittelson, 2005a) - homegrown or proprietary software; open source software; commercially available software; and software generated, or web-authoring tools (Lorenzo and Ittelson, 2005b; Stefani, Mason and Peglar, 2007). Other factors for consideration by the institution include: licensing conditions; development and maintenance expenses (Hallam et al., 2008); whether the ePortfolio is a stand-alone activity or part of another experience such as an internship; and how, when, and by whom the portfolio will be evaluated (Buzetto-More and Alade, 2008).

Institutional policy – top down

Several writings acknowledge support at the policy level within universities as crucial to successful ePortfolio implementation and practice (Cosh, 2008; Reese and Levy, 2009). Academic managers require “a broad understanding of the benefits and value that ePortfolios can bring to the learning, teaching and development processes, so that an ePortfolio culture becomes an integral aspect of the academic environment...[Benefits include contributing] to contribute to student-centred learning strategies, transparent learning outcomes and the relevant employability skills for graduates” (Hallam et al., 2008: 15).

Commitment to, involvement in, and support of, ePortfolio implementation by high-level administrators has been shown to contribute to successful implementation and utilisation of ePortfolios through lending credibility and giving visibility across campuses (McCowan, Harper and Hauville, 2005; Reardon, Lumsden and Meyer, 2005). Further, a study on ePortfolio use by university students in Australia, conducted by Hallam et al., (2008), states that strong alignment between strategic, tactical and operational areas of academic management is required for successful implementation. Effective practice is supported by clear communication within and across the institution; a common, collaborative language; strategic and technical leadership that provides examples of good practice; a cohesive approach to management and funding responsibilities; investment in staff development; and reward and recognition for staff in both academic and professional areas.

Two provosts in USA universities see the ePortfolio as presenting information in ways which are both “certifiable and practically useful” (Plater, 2006: 64). One certifiable aspect will allow the transference of student records from institution to institution – college to university bachelor degree – providing a “true seamless transfer” (Henry, 2006: 55), allowing better advice to be given to the student regarding placement and with potential to “supplant the traditional transcript and replace the degree” (Plater, 2006: 63). Another certifiable issue is the use of random samples of ePortfolio work to monitor the quality of an institution’s academic program and “determine areas of improvement” (Henry, 2006: 60). Once in a university program, the ePortfolio can, practically, “trace student progress” (55), help students plan and think ahead to choose a major area of study and track their own progress, resulting in graduates who have a “demonstrated mastery of learning outcomes” (55). For Henry, students’ fascination with presenting themselves and their own work will provide “the hook for students and ePortfolios” (57). However, Plater acknowledges the importance of the need for a collective will in the institution to put these changes in place, otherwise the provost has a lonely and uncertain path ahead.

An ePortfolio policy for all - horizontal

In considering implementing significant educational change, Hall and Hord (2001) state that “Although top-down and bottom-up change can work, a horizontal perspective is best” (10). They acknowledge that change mandated from administration may be effective if accompanied by support, training, and an understanding of the change process. A horizontal approach to implementing change includes administrator support and assistance in securing resources, as well as commitment from those involved in implementing the change (Strudler and Wetzel, 2005). Heinrich (2008) argues that if ePortfolios are to support lifelong learning, the institutional role should be one of support, rather than control, and suggests that the advantages of institutional types of ePortfolio may be maintained by hosting an ePortfolio system with an external provider. Shared governance in higher education is a recent tradition evolving as faculty professionalized, gained power and sought delegated authority in decision-making on key issues such as curriculum, students, and teaching

and learning in areas of their expertise (Kezar and Sam, 2012). While faculty participation in institutional governance is considered to be both desirable and important in the field of higher education, Jones (2011) also found that faculty are rarely satisfied with their level of involvement in governance. Within an institution, multiple interests may also be represented in the development of ePortfolio policy and practice, as various parties envisage different usages (Hallam et al., 2008). To this end, Jafari (2004) notes that different functional requirements of ePortfolios may be perceived by provosts, deans, chairs, career centres, faculty, students, accrediting bodies and professional organisations. Hallam et al. (2008) recommend open dialogue and collaboration across a range of contexts that include the learner, those involved in teaching and learning, and those involved in academic policy, government policy and technical standards.

3. Methodology

A case study, or multiple case studies, explores a “bounded system...bounded by time and place” (Cresswell, 1998: 61). This takes place “through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information rich in context” (p.61). The four institutions at the heart of this paper offer multiple case studies from two predominant sources of information - the e-learning/ePortfolio policy and application of each university, and the ePortfolio use by four academics in the creative arts. In doing so, the multiple case studies aim to “probe deeply and to analyse intensively the multifarious phenomena that constitute the life cycle of the unit [ePortfolio policy and use] with a view to establishing generalizations about the wider population to which that unit belongs” (Cohen and Manion, 1994: 106-107). The participant observer engages in “the very activities they set out to observe” (107) and in our study, the researchers are the academics active in using ePortfolio in their respective creative arts departments. Exploring creative ways in which university music educators are engaging with emerging practices in music teaching and learning, editor, Clements (2010), offers “personalized case studies” (ix) in which the researcher/writer is often the active participant and facilitator. She notes that “these models of successful alternative approaches can be replicated in a variety of school, university, or community settings” (ix). Because the literature review of our study notes a lack of research on ePortfolio use in the creative arts in universities, findings may establish some issues for the wider creative arts population or be able to be replicated in other universities.

4. ePortfolio case studies – institutions and academics

4.1 Sydney Conservatorium of Music – The University of Sydney

Institutional policy

At the University of Sydney, eLearning is a unit within the DVC Education Division and the university-wide e-learning strategy is part of the division’s strategic plan. However, each faculty is expected to develop their own Teaching and Learning Plan which must be aligned with the University’s strategic plan. The eLearning aspect of the Sydney Conservatorium of Music (SCM) Learning and Teaching Strategic and Operational Plan: 2011-15 actions technology to be used “appropriately and consistently so as to support multi-modal learning”, part of which is to “trial the development of e-portfolios”.

Impact on the academics

For the academics working with ePortfolios, the impact of this directive and the specific action point has been that, firstly, staff had to establish eLearning sites (most using Blackboard, with a few on Pebble Pad) so that course outlines are available via the Learning Management System. Although staff use of ePortfolios across the university is low, Rowley and Dunbar-Hall have used the eLearning policy as an incentive and encouragement to trial ePortfolio in their classes.

Academic ePortfolio use

Only students in music education had begun using ePortfolios before the current project and this was the result of an internally funded institutional grant introducing ePortfolios into the four-year, undergraduate professional Music Education degree program in 2009-2011. Pebble Pad was the platform selected by the University of Sydney for all its students. Acting as capstone objects in the music education program, ePortfolios were intended for use in job applications and designed to address the requirements of professional teacher accreditation. Their implementation was analysed for their advantages to student learning and self-

reflection (Rowley, 2011), implications for curriculum design, IT requirements (Taylor, Dunbar-Hall and Rowley, 2012), and their relationships to assessment (Rowley and Dunbar-Hall, 2012) and accreditation.

The current project transfers understandings about uses of ePortfolios with music education students into other areas of tertiary music study - composition, musicology, and performance. Findings demonstrated differing levels of student engagement with ePortfolios, ambiguities over their efficaciousness in music as a profession, a range of student desires to engage with ePortfolios and the technology required to work on and through them, and a spectrum of possibilities for their use.

Impact on the institution

Both the process and the product of the three year internally-funded project acted as a model for ePortfolio development in the Music/Arts Faculty and the wider institution. Results of research from this project were published in articles and presented at conferences, one of these to a university audience at the invitation of the university's eLearning office. The summary of the project was presented to the SCM and students described their ePortfolios to the 2011 Faculty Learning and Teaching annual forum. This internally funded project became the basis for a successful government-funded grant across four Australian institutions, of whom the researchers in this paper are team members.

5. Queensland Conservatorium – Griffith University

Institutional policy

While there is currently no individual policy on ePortfolios, Queensland Conservatorium Griffith University (Griffith) has a range of policies and statements which pertain to engaging in online learning and teaching strategies including the Blended Learning Strategy. The blended learning environment at Griffith is characterised by:

- Strategic and systematic use of technology in association with a quality face-to-face environment to support student learning;
- Enhanced interaction between students, staff, peers and the learning community;
- Creation of collaborative, distributed learning environments;
- Increased capacity for student-managed learning;
- Learning that takes place at students' discretion in terms of time and place; and
- Flexibility in terms of implementation at the program and course levels.

Impact on the academics

Griffith has supported the development of online and distance learning strategies for well over a decade with support aimed almost entirely at a uni-directional models that focussed on delivering materials and information to students. Academics considered early-adopters of technology were spearheading moves to create bi-directional online strategies that placed emphasis on students' ability to generate, upload and edit their own content. It was not until the late 2000s that the impact of these early adopters around Griffith University gained traction to the point of influence.

Top-down approaches have achieved overall acceptance and uptake of technology for student-centred learning, including learning management systems such as Blackboard, real-time communication strategies such as video conferencing and Wimba Classroom, and video capture and delivery of lectures for student consumption. Hitchcock has noted however that these one-size-fits-all strategies require a heavy centralised commitment from the University in time, money, technological support and manpower, thereby limiting the number of 'top-down' directives via a form of natural selection. Impact on an institutional level is certainly slow in coming. While this has been frustrating for many academics, given the size and bureaucratic weight of each institution and the financial commitment involved, this is hardly surprising.

Academic ePortfolio use

Academic ePortfolio use is completely driven by staff interest at Griffith. There are no current plans (or indeed perceived demand) for institutional-wide integration of ePortfolios. Use of ePortfolios in the Music department came because music technology is largely driven by hard-copy portfolios, similar to many creative arts sectors such as photography and art. For students, creating portfolios in this area: is a process of creativity in establishing identity, potential and evidence of skills, reflective ability and professional capability; is a career object because of traditional use throughout the professional sector; is evidence-based; depicts personality & aesthetic character (uniqueness and identity) reconfigurable for different contexts; displays understanding and potential not just outcome and should collate rich media in different forms; is often bulky and costly to produce (and share/reproduce/update); and encourages wide dissemination in network driven industries where most jobs are not advertised, as opposed to the inherent impediments of traditional hard-copy material.

Work with ePortfolios was reinvigorated at Griffiths in music technology by the funded project of which all authors are members. Hitchcock chose to use only open source web-software, with six issues as the basis for the decision: i) not to be tied to any single solution (distributed component architecture, cloud components); ii) should be intuitive to learn and be situated in real-world contexts; iii) it needs to have defined place(s) to start embedded support through stages; iv) be sufficiently frustrating to provide challenges including peer recognition and benchmarking; v) needs to build desire to repeat and improve leads to regular (staged) rewards; and vi) be customisable enabling a sense of personalisation and ownership. Hitchcock has a history of working collaboratively toward successful innovation and technological advancement within the institution leading to uptake by others and served on the eLearning committee, bringing his experience to the committee and in turn, influencing fellow academics.

Impact on the institution

While these are early stages in this new project, technocentric thinking has been minimized with a view to raising potential for other interested academics to embrace ePortfolios with low technological barriers to engagement. Hitchcock has observed that some of the technological learning aspects now appearing as top-down directives in 2013 were instigated by bottom-up activities in the early 2000s. The music technology area at Griffith trialled ePortfolios as core learning objects in various guises in the 2000s. The main impediments to broader uptake by students and therefore by staff were seen as: firstly, the ePortfolio being difficult to maintain in-house – for example, university networks at the time were not devised to allow student upload of material thereby creating a unidirectional staff-to-student information flow; secondly, the commercial sector was not ready for online portfolios and were perceived as not always being prepared to deal with the unusual, or possess the inclination to do so; thirdly, student resistance to uptake of the platform in relation to workload and cutting edge concerns; fourthly, bandwidth issues overall including costs, consistency and reliability; and finally, cross platform and browser issues including coding inconsistencies, formatting inconsistencies, accessibility issues, proprietary vs open source content, ownership and long-term storage.

5.1 Curtin University

Institutional policy

An ePortfolio platform, 'iPortfolio', was developed at Curtin University in 2009/2010 for use by staff and students and released for general use in 2010. The platform's development was championed by an academic whose efforts led eventually to university-wide support. One year after its introduction it had more than 17,000 users (von Kinsky & Oliver, 2012). At Curtin, flexible learning in all its guises comes under the Deputy Vice Chancellor Education. In the 2011 Flexible Learning Policy and Procedures, the iPortfolio is one of the approaches "that facilitate effective student engagement through the provision of appropriate online environments"

(<http://policies.curtin.edu.au/findapolicy/docs/Flexible%20Learning%20Policy%20and%20Procedures%20-%20Oct%202011.pdf>).

Impact on the academics

The impact on academics has varied according to uptake by schools and faculties, determined in part by whether the iPortfolio was embedded within programs. A distinct advantage for Curtin academics has been that the platform was fully developed and centrally supported, which has meant that engaging with an ePortfolio is very easy, requiring minimal technological skills and no new design or development. Beyond the practical implications, the most impactful aspect has been that the iPortfolio was designed to “encourage student reflection on ‘lifewide’ experiences that enhance employability and augment learning within the formal curriculum” (von Konsky and Oliver, 2012: 67). This includes space for students to evidence each of their graduate attributes as well as the three main aspects of the University’s ‘Triple I curriculum’, which incorporates Industry (graduate employability), Indigenous, intercultural and international (global citizenship), and Interdisciplinary experiences (Curtin University, 2010). A future-oriented focus, such as this, necessitated a commitment by the university to give students lifelong access to their portfolio, which is becoming more problematic as the number of users increases over time.

The iPortfolio’s emphasis on ‘self and career’ has enabled academics to ‘house’ within a student’s portfolio the results of career development activities such as work-integrated-learning. This has led to its use in many programs. Popular features include an app, which enables users to photograph evidence with their smartphone and upload it directly to their iPortfolio; and the ability to incorporate multimedia files, which are used to evidence multiple artefacts including video résumés, 3-dimensional design work and film.

Academic ePortfolio use

Given the complex nature of careers across the creative sectors, the development of employability skills is a high priority. What the students tend not to consider is the relevance of this learning to their future lives and careers; in an already overcrowded curriculum there is little space for this discussion. As the Curtin project set out to discover whether an ePortfolio could be a means of exploring possible future selves within and beyond the professional world of the arts, one of its intentions was to assist students in making the transition from students to graduate professionals. Bennett involved 1st year Performance Studies students enrolled in a core performance course, and third year Professional Writing students in a work placement course, in a project which challenged them to think about the role of undergraduate study in their future lives and careers, and to begin to compile evidence within their portfolios of a broad range of skills and abilities.

Impact on the institution

Curtin’s iPortfolio has 30,000 users at the time of writing, the majority being students. The activity level on each these accounts, however, is not known. Given growing concern that many higher education students feel unprepared for the workplace and have not had career-related discussions as part of their studies (AUSSE, 2010), it is likely that the use of iPortfolio as a career and life-development tool will continue to increase. In the case of this study, Bennett and her colleagues have noted increased career awareness among the students and the engagement with portfolios will be formally assessed and reported late in 2013.

5.2 University of Western Sydney

Institutional policy

The University of Western Sydney (UWS) feels that “the push towards greater flexibility of learning, supported by existing and emerging technologies, is substantially being driven by students who increasingly seek to engage in learning when and where they choose” (http://www.uws.edu.au/gilthub/qilt_hub/blended_learning_14_5_13). Because many student learners are “digitally literate, frequent users of mobile devices, and seeking highly interactive, visual, immediate, and socially engaging learning”, the university is adopting a “strategic and systematic approach to combining times and modes of learning, integrating the best aspects of face-to-face and online interactions for each discipline, using appropriate ICTs”, through a Blended Learning Quality Framework, currently being implemented by Schools. While the Blended Learning website lists several approaches to online learning (http://www.uws.edu.au/gilthub/qilt_hub/blended_learning/using_technology_for_blended_learning) no mention is made of ePortfolios, however a trial is now underway.

Impact on the academics

UWS began a trial of Pebble+, an ePortfolio platform, in 2012 with four academics in music, medicine and engineering taking part. The confluence of two events – looking at CareerHub as a possible career professional ePortfolio component of a professional practice unit, plus an invitation to join the OLT funded ePortfolio grant – introduced Blom to the idea of embedding an ePortfolio platform into her Music teaching of group music performance and a professional practice, final undergraduate year, capstone unit in which students take their arts practice into the community.

Academic ePortfolio use

In a second year music performance unit focused on group rehearsal and performance, the ePortfolio offered a collaborative platform for essay writing in pairs, drawing in video and audio clips for deeper analysis and discussion. Through Blackboard (2012) and Pebble+ (2013) students individually reviewed two in-house concerts of professional performers, often accompanied by video footage taken by students on a mobile phone, and at the end of the semester, peer reviewed the essay of another collaborative writing pair, with guided criteria to focus their comments. This e-written task, plus the ability to type comments in real time for assessable rehearsal and performance events, sending marks and comments immediately to students, has drawn the ePortfolio deeply into the teaching of this real time activity, music performance.

The third year professional practice capstone unit required students to take their music practice – performing, organising, recording, music criticism, music survey, teaching, among others – into the community. Through the ePortfolio platform, a summary of this practical project – written, edited visual and audio - plus a professional career portfolio of CV, photo, letter of introduction, is available, in theory and in practice, for a potential employer to view, on invitation.

Impact on the institution

The four academics on the Pebble+ trial are being monitored through an annual questionnaire seeking student and teacher responses to using the platform. At the end of 2012 a summary report noted the need for ongoing workshops for both students and staff, a ‘user guide’ approach to “unit-specific instructions for completing and submitting tasks” through the portal, and ‘careful consideration’ as to whether this was the most suitable platform for the outcome, especially in relation to students working in group and sharing within teams, as Pebble+ is “much more a Personal Learning Environment more suited to individual development” (Black and Rankine 2012: 8).

Data has been gathered from students on several ePortfolio uses and findings will be disseminated through articles and conferences.

6. Conclusions and discussion

Across the four case studies, a spectrum of two-way relationships between institution and teaching academics emerges in relation to the ePortfolio as an eLearning approach. These range from early adopters influencing the institution; academic served on the institution’s eLearning policy-making committee; a platform designed specifically for the institution with feedback from staff and students; an influential trial being adopted by other disciplines in the institution; to a monitored trial of an ePortfolio platform for possible purchase and adoption. Within this spectrum, platforms range from homegrown one-size-fits-all, through commercial ePortfolio/eLearning platforms, to open source. Use of ePortfolio platforms facilitate student reflection; collaborative essay writing; peer evaluation; ability to house multiple artifacts; representation of multiple interests; and the relevance of learning for future lives for career development and employability and lifelong learning. Academics impacted on the institution by being a member of the institution’s eLearning committee and informing potential online learning and engagement strategies; use of an ePortfolio platform encouraging other disciplines to trial and adopt; taking part in a monitored trial of an ePortfolio platform adopting divergent multiple learning strategies; internally and externally funded grants; plus conference presentations and published papers disseminating information. The researchers of the personalised case studies support the notion that institutional leadership must be bi-directional, where people at the ‘coal-face’ of teaching and learning challenge their institutions to engage in different ways and on different levels, including policy debate,

and where institutions demonstrate leadership through a balance of autocratic decision-making and a willingness to be challenged from the bottom up.

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