



Graduate student perceptions of eportfolios: Uses for reflection, development, and assessment



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ABSTRACT

While there is discussion of eportfolios in many fields in higher education, there is little literature on eportfolios in the helping professions fields of school counselor and school psychology education. This study sought to explore graduate students' perceptions of the value of creating eportfolios and ways of improving the eportfolio process. Overall, the students found the construction of their eportfolios to be useful in reflecting on their competencies and in gaining confidence in using technology. The students also valued the hands-on training sessions, peer review opportunities and model portfolios, and technological skills built by creating the eportfolios, which they stated may be useful in job searches. Suggestions for improving the eportfolio process for future students include having all students only create eportfolios, being more explicit about reflection, and meeting with students earlier to expose them to the eportfolio platform in order to lessen technology anxiety and increase time for reflection.

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1. Introduction

Many disciplines and professions have long used physical portfolios for assessment, personal development, career searches, and to showcase work (Bartlett, 2006; Boes, 2001; James & Greenwalt, 2001; Wang, 2010). Many of these disciplines and professions have embraced the shift to eportfolios, also known as electronic or digital portfolios, as a way to more easily share, update, and collaboratively share the contents of the portfolios (James & Greenwalt, 2001; Lin, 2008). Previous studies have explored student perceptions of the value of eportfolios (Kabilan & Khan, 2012; Lin, 2008), instructors' perceptions of eportfolios (Fong et al., 2014), and how eportfolios can contribute to student self-efficacy, creation of communities of practice, and authentic assessment practices (Shepherd & Bolliger, 2011; Tang & Lam, 2014; Wang, 2010). In many disciplines and fields, the use of eportfolios has gained much attention over the past few years, with the concurrent rise in interest in online teaching and learning. This interest in eportfolios is unsurprising given the increased interest in online learning and using online technologies in higher education and in the K-12 environment. Helping professionals (i.e., school counselors and school psychologists) work within the K-12 environment and need to be current on online learning technologies and tech savvy themselves to be able to succeed as professionals. It would seem logical then to look into using eportfolios in education of students in helping professions as eportfolios have been

embraced by other fields as ways of increasing technology skills and showcasing work (Bartlett, 2006; Kabilan & Khan, 2012; Yu, 2012). However currently, although there is some literature on portfolios more generally (Curry & Lambie, 2007; Murphy & Kaffenberger, 2007; Sink, 2009), there is a dearth of eportfolio research in the fields that make up the helping professions. This is an important gap to fill to determine the value of eportfolios to the professional development and technological development of students in helping professions, especially with the drive for evidence and result-based practice (Carlson & Yohon, 2008).

In other fields, eportfolios have continued to gain traction and there is a lively discourse in the literature about the best practices, uses, and value of eportfolios, as well as numerous case studies (Pelliccione & Raison, 2009; Shepherd & Bolliger, 2011). Three main themes emerge from these previous studies: using eportfolios for summative assessment (Cobia et al., 2005), as formative developmental process tools (Cheng & Chau, 2013; Flanigan & Amirian, 2006), and as important tools for job searches (Boes, 2001; Yu, 2012). Yu's (2012) study of human resource managers showed that recruiters were positive about viewing eportfolios submitted by job applicants as a way of gauging performance and abilities, although Yu (2012) noted that eportfolios still seem to be in their nascent usage in job searching. Eportfolios are obviously not a panacea for learning and can take much time and knowledge on the part of the instructors to implement successfully (Vernazza et al., 2011). For full engagement with eportfolios, studies have shown that students need technological guidance as well as an understanding of the goals/outcomes for the eportfolios in order to help the eportfolio transcend merely as being a collection of documents (Oner & Adadan, 2011).

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1.1. Purpose

Eportfolios are being used and extensively studied in many professional disciplines (Bartlett, 2006; Okoro, Washington, & Cardon, 2011; Shepherd & Bolliger, 2011; Wang, 2010) as both formative and summative teaching and learning devices that are able to be translated to career development tools and into documents capturing evolving professional competence. However, there is very little published literature for helping professions regarding pathways for using eportfolios for professional development (Carlson & Yohon, 2008) and no known research studies. This multi-year study, encompassing three cohorts of students seeks to contribute to the nascent literature of eportfolios in the helping professions and to the larger discourse on eportfolios in higher education. The study sought to explore students' perceptions of the value of creating eportfolios, their potential uses in job searches, and ways of improving the experience for future cohorts.

2. Methods

2.1. Setting

Professional Practice Portfolios have been required by the authors' university for graduate students in a combined school counseling or school psychology with marriage and family counseling program for over 15 years. The portfolios provide a way for students to demonstrate their professional competencies that are defined by the standards of the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing, the State body charged with credentialing all educators in California. Additionally, those competencies are aligned with standards set by the California Association of School Counselors and the National Association of School Psychologists. The portfolio could also be used in interviews with potential employers as evidence of successful professional practices as noted Flanigan and Amirian (2006) and Yu (2012). Given ubiquitous nature of the Internet in professional work, the program decided that an eportfolio option offered a flexible platform where the students could showcase their work, as showcasing work for job searches was seen as the most noted use of eportfolios by students in a study by Bartlett (2006). This format was most convenient and useful in sharing with prospective employers, as noted previously (Yu, 2012). Additionally, the eportfolios could be used in creating a learning community where sharing one's professional portfolio with trusted colleagues could become integral to an ongoing reflective professional development process as shown by the positive results in using communities of practice in eportfolio assessment by Wang (2010). The authors selected Google Sites as the eportfolio platform (<http://sites.google.com>). Google Sites is a free website creation and hosting service, which can be easily adapted to the creation of professional eportfolios without knowledge of coding.

2.2. Participants

A total of seventy students from the helping professionals (school counseling or school psychology with marriage and family therapy) cohorts from 2010–2011 academic year to 2012–2013 academic year participated. The participant demographics were: 47% European–American, 25% Latino–American, 7% African–American, and 21% Asian–Pacific Islander–American. The students were split evenly between the two helping profession programs. Participants were in their second-year of a two-year school counseling and marriage–family therapy program or their second or third year of a 3-year school psychology and marriage–family therapy program. This study received approval from the Institutional Review Board and all study participants completed informed consent protocols approved by the University.

2.3. Data collection instrument

Researchers developed an online questionnaire (see Appendix A), similar to those used by (Herner-Patnode & Lee, 2009; Lin, 2008). There were ten quantitative questions and six open-ended questions (see Appendix A). Using a Likert scale, the quantitative questions covered the students' opinions about the usefulness of the eportfolio construction in fostering their reflectiveness on their learning (questions 2–4, 8, 9), gaining confidence in using technology (questions 5, 7), and using the eportfolio in searching for employment (questions 1, 10). For example, the students were asked, "Did constructing the eportfolio help you to see your growth in skill and knowledge acquisition?" as one question related to using the eportfolio for fostering reflection. All other questions used in the questionnaire can be found in Appendix A. These three areas of interest correspond to the themes found in the literature on eportfolios (Kabilan & Khan, 2012; Oner & Adadan, 2011). The six open-ended questions asked the students to provide examples of what worked for them during the construction of their eportfolios, what areas of their experiences were best captured in the eportfolio formats, and their reflection of their learning processes (see Appendix A).

2.4. Procedures

During their time in the helping professions program, students created eportfolios using Google Sites. All cohorts attended three hands-on training sessions in a computer lab on campus on how to construct eportfolios using Google Sites led by a member of the library faculty who has extensive experience using and teaching others to use Google Sites. Prior to these training sessions, students received rubrics describing the expectations for the eportfolios and the standards that would be used to evaluate the eportfolios by the educational psychology faculty member. Each of these training sessions lasted for an hour. The library faculty member also provided each student with a detailed handout on creating and customizing their eportfolios. This handout has gone through ten revisions to incorporate answers to common student questions and the changing interface on Google Sites. In order to create a dialogical community of practice, students presented their eportfolios-in-progress to receive formative feedback from their peers in class. They also went through an online peer evaluation process guided by the eportfolio rubric being used by the faculty in their summative evaluation. The educational psychology faculty member also provided formative and developmental feedback throughout the process.

The eportfolios served both as a developmental tool for the students and as a summative assessment at the end of the program. At the end of the academic year, students presented their eportfolios in class and the instructor graded the eportfolios against the rubric. The students also completed the online questionnaire about their experiences at the end of the academic year, after completing their eportfolios (see Appendix A).

2.5. Data collection and analysis

Data were collected through the online questionnaire and the researchers analyzed their responses collectively. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the quantitative data from the surveys. Inferential statistics were not completed due to the small cohorts of students. Structural coding was used to analyze the qualitative data and find categories and patterns in the participants' responses (Saldaña, 2009). Two rounds of coding were completed. The first round coded all the data from the responses into categories based on the concepts written by the students. The second round of coding checked the codes and categories so that patterns could be illuminated. Results were also compared across cohorts to determine if there were any differences in the responses.

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