

Facilitating reflective and collaborative learning in EAP

Anthea Fester and **Dilani Gedera** investigate the use of ePortfolios.

Introduction

The research in focus involved a pilot study of the use of ePortfolios in an undergraduate third year English for Academic Purposes (EAP) course at a University in New Zealand. The overarching aim of the research was to evaluate the use of the ePortfolio in facilitating integrated learning, reflection and collaboration in an EAP context.

The study

This research project was conducted in an EAP course that focused mainly on Reading and Listening skills, with Writing and Speaking as subsidiary skills. This was a blended learning course which comprised face-to-face sessions, supplementary materials and activities uploaded on the institutional learning management system, *Moodle*. The course duration was one semester (12 teaching weeks).

Method

A multi-method approach was adopted for this pilot study, with data gathered using a questionnaire, semi-structured interviews with participants and the analysis of the learners' ePortfolios. *Google Forms* was used to design the questionnaire and *Nvivo* for the data analysis. Our study met the institutional requirements for ethical research, following the usual protocols for

informed consent, right of withdrawal and confidentiality of participants.

All the course material was uploaded to *Moodle*. In terms of learners' familiarity with the technology tools used, they had all used *Moodle* prior to attending this course. However, none of them had used *Mahara ePortfolio* before this course. We redesigned learning and assessment tasks before we incorporated ePortfolios in this context. We also outlined a clear support process. Some of the support given to students to enable them to use their ePortfolios included three workshops run by the e-learning

designer, including one in the second week of the course to teach them how to use the *Mahara ePortfolio*.

The teacher attended the workshops to ensure that she could provide assistance to students post-workshop. The workshops were interactive and collaborative, with learners helping their peers throughout the workshops as well as during the rest of the semester. Students were also provided with a sample ePortfolio (Figure 1), with the option of using this as a template for their own ePortfolio. In addition, students could email the e-learning designer or make one-on-one appointments for further support.

The screenshot shows a sample ePortfolio for Alex Wong. The header includes the University of Waikato logo and navigation links like Dashboard, Content, Portfolio, Groups, and Administration. The main content area is titled 'Collection: ESLA 301 sample ePortfolio' and shows 'You are on page 1/7'. The 'Personal Profile' section includes a photo of Alex Wong, his name, and a bio. The 'About me' section contains a paragraph about his background and interests. The 'Professional Skills' section lists skills such as communication, computer skills, and time management. The 'Contact Information' section provides an address, phone number, and email.

Figure 1: Sample ePortfolio

Participants

The participants were eight third year in-session undergraduate students who were majoring in different disciplines, including Screen and Media Studies, Finance, Marketing, Education and Sociology.

Key approach underpinning the study

A social constructivist approach was adopted where the emphasis was on active learning and learning perceived as a socially constructed phenomena. Social constructivism stresses the importance of the social and cultural nature of learning. The basis for this stance came from the works of the Russian psychologist Vygotsky. Vygotsky recognised the social nature of knowledge and claimed that learning is a socially constructed process (Vygotsky, 1978). In the context of our study, as the students were using ePortfolios, they were collaborating with their peers to complete tasks, sharing their work with others, providing peer feedback and learning from capable others.

Design of the assessments

The key focus of assessment was on the learners taking more control of the assessment process, together with increased collaboration. A number of the assessments in the course included reflection components, for example students reflecting on their own use of the ePortfolio. One major assignment that demonstrated the reflective aspect included the following tasks: (1) completing a language focus analysis, (2) creating presentation slides based on the language focus analysis and video-recording an oral presentation, (3) uploading the video presentation to their ePortfolio, (4) giving a peer access to the ePortfolio page where they uploaded the video and receiving peer feedback on their presentation (oral or text option for providing peer feedback), and (5) completing a self-evaluation and reflection related to their oral presentation and the use of the ePortfolio.

Learner-centredness and student control

In relation to the major assessment mentioned above, several aspects related to this assessment were decided and controlled by the learners:

- Students video-recorded their individual presentations at a time convenient to them in the presence of a group of peers, but without the teacher present.
- Students were able to review the video recording of their presentations before uploading the video file to their ePortfolio.
- Each student could decide who to grant access to their ePortfolio (teacher and student/s).
- Each student elicited feedback on their presentation from one peer, and this was provided in the ePortfolio.
- Lastly, each student gave the teacher access to their ePortfolio for the purpose of grading (including PowerPoint slides, video of presentation, student's own reflection, peer feedback, feedback to peers).

In the student reflections on their oral presentations, in particular, most of them said that they liked the fact that only their classmates were present at the recording, that the teacher was not in the room while they were presenting and recording, and that they felt less stress because the teacher evaluated their presentations independently and only after they had had an opportunity to review the video recording. It is worth noting that all previous presentations in other courses were made with the teacher present in the room.

Student voice

Two themes that emerged from our data were the affordances of ePortfolios (Figure 2), and challenges and improvements related to the use of ePortfolios.

Affordances of the use of an ePortfolio

Students were asked about the affordances of the ePortfolio, with six key points emerging (see Figure 2). Most students found the ePortfolio easy to access, and liked the ability

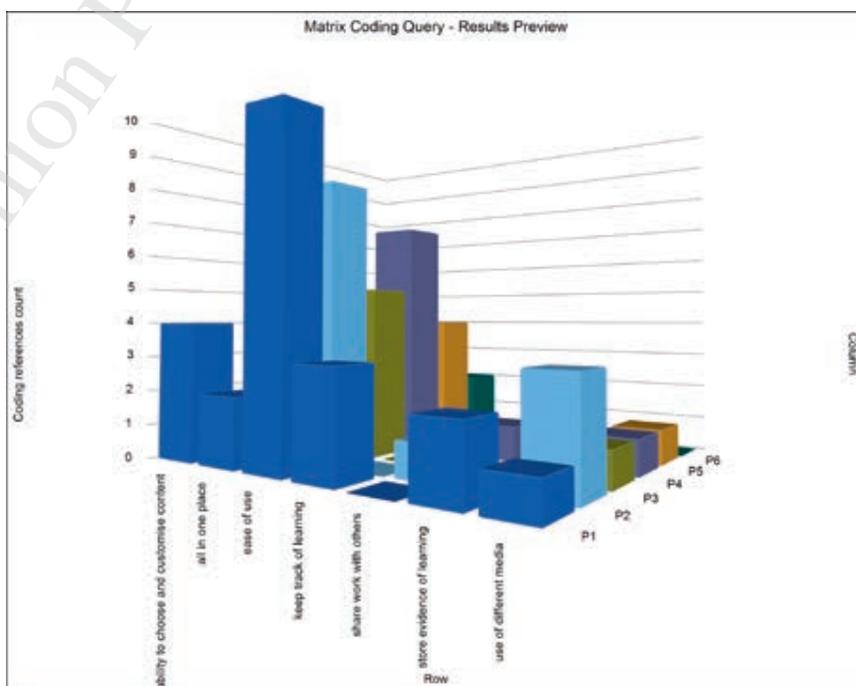


Figure 2: Affordances of ePortfolios

to choose and customise content and the fact that they got to use different media. Other positive comments related to the fact that they could share their files with their peers, files were all in one place, the ePortfolio was easy to use and they could keep track of their learning.

There was clear evidence that students engaged in useful collaboration in relation to their ePortfolios, as indicated by the following comments by students:

Student 1: 'It was a little difficult. A classmate helped me ...'

Student 2: 'I liked it because sometimes there may be some errors that I don't know about. So some guys with big knowledge, I can learn many things from them. I am really happy, I said, "oh you can teach me". Because I think people need to help to push you to learn. Because many things are big and that I don't know about. So I like to learn.'

Student 3: 'So I think with a small group, you've got to work with others. There are just a few of you and you always need to talk to each other, so we sort of become friends.'

Challenges and improvements

Students were asked about any challenges that they faced while using the ePortfolio and suggestions for improvement. Student comments related to challenges and improvements include the following:

Student 1: 'There are so many things on the main page and it looks so complicated.'

Student 2: 'Sometimes there is some trouble with sharing.'

Student 3: 'I shared with my classmate and he couldn't find it.'

Student 4: 'I think also for the feedback from the lecturers. I think if you could put all of it on one page. Then we can open them at the same time that would

be great ... Because when we click the comments, we can't see them straight away, we need to download the file.'

Student 5: 'What I don't like about ePortfolio ... sometimes it can be complicated. If we want to share a file and you have to go into the page and share this page. I got confused when I didn't use the ePortfolio until Sunday. I totally forgot how to open this page.'

Teacher reflections

- I was impressed with the enthusiasm with which students embraced ePortfolios and, in particular, in the way that (1) students collaborated and supported their peers, (2) shared knowledge and resources, and (3) produced high-quality reflections.
- As well, this was a learning process for me since it was the first time I have used an ePortfolio with students.
- In future, we will provide students with more detailed written guidelines on using the ePortfolio to complement workshops and assistance from the e-learning designer, their peers and I.
- Interestingly, the student who expressed the most insecurity and anxiety about her ability to use the ePortfolio, actually used more features in the ePortfolio space such as audio recording her reflections, sharing more pages with peers and using *Prezi* as her presentation tool.
- The abovementioned student also ended up being one of two students who supported and helped the other students the most.

E-learning designer reflections

- The results of this research project reinforce the importance of learning and assessment design when incorporating new educational technologies into a course.
- Clear guidelines for activities and assessment tasks are crucial (particularly with non-native speakers, it is good to provide written

or video guides rather than verbal instructions).

- Providing samples are always useful, e.g. a sample ePortfolio.
- More collaborative tasks should be used with students, starting from the beginning of the course.
- In future, the ePortfolio interface should be made easier for the learners to negotiate.

Reference

Vygotsky LS (1978) *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.



Anthea Fester (PhD) is an academic staff member at the Waikato Institute of Technology. She teaches on the New Zealand Certificate in English Language programmes (NZCEL). She has a PhD in EAL curriculum and syllabus design from the University of Waikato, where she has had extensive teaching experience in EAP, applied linguistics and language teacher training.



Dilani Gedera (PhD) is an e-learning designer at the University of Waikato. She provides e-learning support and training on all aspects of teaching and learning for staff. She has a PhD in E-learning from the University of Waikato, and has worked as a lecturer in New Zealand, Sri-Lanka and Malaysia for 14 years. Her research focuses on e-learning design and educational technologies and the ways they can enhance learner engagement in blended and fully online learning environments.