
DESIGNING ELEARNING ENVIRONMENTS CONDUCTIVE TO EPORTFOLIO IDENTITY SKILL DEVELOPMENT

Bruno Kappes, Ph.D.

*Psychology Department
University of Alaska
Anchorage, USA*

Abstract

eLearning environments, when appropriately configured, provide excellent conditions for acquiring digital literacy and critical skill-building essential to developing an effective eportfolio identity. Current elearning environments in educational settings may provide valuable essential training when the elearning coursework is deliberately structured to exercise efolio abilities and values. Designing elearning environments around engaging strategic assignments offers students practical experience and proficiency in effectively selecting, reflecting, connecting, articulating and documenting their ongoing learning. In the following review of an award-winning undergraduate psychology course, this paper will identify several examples of elearning applications, techniques and philosophies consistent with and relevant to ePortfolio development. Pertinent elearning assignment domains include: Identity Development, Independent Mastery, Metacognitions, Transfer of Skills, Social Feedback and Assessment. When course designs clearly provide the underlying pedagogic rationales, incorporate appropriate etool applications and implement creative elearning assignments, instruction essentially facilitates and provides opportunities for acquiring the required competencies instrumental in crafting a meaningful ePortfolio identity. Educational settings that neglect to strategically incorporate the relevant prerequisite mental and behavioral skill sets may find that their students' eportfolios lack the potential quality and value for which they were originally designed to achieve.

Keywords: eLearning, ePortfolio Identity, Self-Efficacy Skills, Stress Management, Transfer of Skills, Feedback and Assessment

Introduction

ePortfolio identity development consists of an active creative process that selects, organizes or otherwise processes content and then assesses the evidence (products) of one's professional and personal life-long learning through feedback and assessments. Given the nature of this desirable endeavor, where might one acquire and develop the necessary cognitive expertise and competencies required of this creative process apart from exposure or opportunity to refine these rather specific demands? B.F. Skinner in his 1968 book The Technology of Teaching states, "Only by defining the behavior we wish to teach can we begin to search for the conditions of which it is a function and design effective instruction"[1]. eLearning environments, when appropriately designed, may provide an excellent foundation for acquiring the digital literacy and critical cognitive skills essential for developing an effective eportfolio identity. Usually, the specific content of an Academic ePortfolio consists of a central dynamic between two equally important "faces" or goals [2]. The artifact collection reflecting one's learning journey represents a desired balance between the specific content required by educational rubric demands and the production of sufficient relevant samples of personal evidence showcasing achievement and learning. Current elearning environments in educational settings within their respective learning management systems can provide necessary and valuable training if the elearning course requirements are deliberately structured to exercise efolio thinking and processing [3]. By intentionally arranging elearning environments around engaging efolio-driven assignments, educators offer students the practical experience and proficiency in effectively reflecting,

connecting and documenting their learning. As is the case with most educational and training goals, eportfolio development and content quality is enhanced if there is a clear articulated purpose, sufficient opportunities to develop appropriate self-efficacy skills [4] and multiple avenues for feedback. These desirable tasks, when encouraged and developed within elearning environments, are then easily transferable to establishing and maintaining eportfolio identities. These unique tasks promote the acquisition of critical personal habits based on training and further refine the skills through successfully-reinforced experiences. This paper identifies several elearning applications, techniques and skills consistent with and relevant to eportfolio development. Pertinent elearning assignments and eportfolio attributes domains include: Identity Development, Independent Mastery, Metacognitions, Transfer of Skills, Social Feedback and Assessment. Using a popular university Psychology of Stress Management course as an example, each of these domains will be presented and the descriptions of the current assignment goals will assist in identifying the relevant training attributes common to eportfolio development. The following will identify pedagogic rationales, specific tool selections and creative elearning activities instrumental in crafting a meaningful eportfolio identity by facilitating the required competencies.

Identity Development & Independent Mastery

The core constructivist teaching philosophy underlying the rationale for several of the selected elearning assignments and eportfolio identities are basic to Plato's and Socrates' maxim, "Know Thyself." There is no doubt that 21st century digital skill literacy and demonstrated proficiencies have become the required prerequisites in this age of rapidly innovative Internet technologies. However and foremost, requisite eportfolio thinking and skill development will more likely emerge when courses are intentionally designed to be "Learner-Centered" and which encourage students to "Own their Learning." Several assignments in this award-winning stress management course are purposely structured, evaluated and updated to achieve this goal. Asynchronous participation, self-selected grade contracts, self-assessment inventories, choice of semester stress reduction project based on personal self-assessment, self-selected book reports relevant to one's chosen project, and self-ratings of weekly relaxation exercises are but a few examples of the academic applications that encourage a demonstration of self-development and which showcase evidence of greater self-reliance in learning [5]. The emphasis on identification of current strengths and weaknesses encourages personal discovery, responsibility and commitment to the implementation of personally-relevant stress reduction methods. Moreover, in a previous paper [6] this author outlined numerous examples of how each of these course activities identified above, in turn, formulates a "Community of Inquiry" and contributes to the desirable social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence necessary and critical to achieving effective online instruction [7]. Student engagement in coursework, as well as eportfolio development, is central to scholastic identity formation, independent mastery and social presence. [8] Although learning environment curriculums and eportfolios that allow for and encourage personal freedom of expression is certainly a valuable endeavor, let us hope that these activities require more than opportunities for self-expression, self-absorption and or perhaps self-aggrandizement. eLearning coursework and eportfolios must also include the demonstrated evolution of critical thinking, analysis, synthesis and cognitive skills that exercise evidence of scholarly thought and growth.

Metacognitions

Cognitive and educational psychologists have studied and generated an abundance of specialized research on metacognitions for many years and certainly appreciate several of its finer nuances. While the concept of metacognitions has many meanings and uses, it is commonly recognized to include "knowing about one's knowing," "thinking about ones thinking," or in educational circles "reflective practice." This processing includes aspects of self-awareness, self-monitoring, and self-regulation. Even clinical psychologists use this strategy in Stress Inoculation Therapy or (SIT) for the cognitive behavioral application and treatment of phobias and anxieties, [9] In SIT, patients are taught to examine, recognize, rehearse and replace irrational thoughts before, during

and after a potentially anxiety-provoking episode. However specific but no less unique, it is the systematic process of self-reflecting, thinking and planning that is at the heart of learning. In eportfolio terms, “self-reflection” is seen as the “heart and soul” of the central activity fundamental to successful eportfolios [2]. Most students have not been specifically trained or taught to reflect and connect previous learning from other courses. For this reason, curriculum must regularly provide practice at this skill.[10] To provide practice at establishing and processing one’s learning, the assignments in this Stress Management course were specifically constructed to afford students frequent opportunity for self-reflections. This is implemented through the use of weekly progress diaries, written assignments requiring personal contributions via blogs, diaries, and discussion boards called “Make it Real” and “Teach Us.” By selecting, collecting, reflecting and connecting both positive and negative personal health habits, students obtain the self-awareness, personal commitment, desirable personalized ownership, as well as the inherent motivation and responsibility vital to one’s success. Specific rubrics and instructions provided for each assignment outline the expectations of each of the assigned tasks. Students write a “Semester Growth Paper /Reflection” which details how each of the elearning assignments and the Semester Stress Project contributed to his/her personal stress-reduction activities. Students’ respective stress reduction project must provide evidence through dairies, charts and graphs illustrating the history of their behavioral change. Finally, students are required to complete an internal course analysis survey which asks them to rate their perceived value of the materials, content, assignments and in particular the quality of their respective demonstration projects. Below are three examples of the assignment criteria that exercise the essential metacognitions common to the processing and self-reflections found throughout the course. As you can readily see, these elearning exercises model the specific task demands common to most eportfolios.

Example 1: Key Concept – Weekly Discussion Board

Choose a topic presented in the current Learning Unit to discuss with the class. Cite your sources to receive credit for the work you have done. Remember that the work you do is a “reflection” of who you are. Posts should be accurate, considerate and grammatically correct. Full credit responses will include all of the following:

- 1. **Select** and clearly define a Key Concept from the eTextbook, eLecture, or eWorkbook. This MUST be referenced. (1pt).*
- 2. **Collect** a professional example from a journal article, book, movie or a known professional Internet site like APA.org or a university.edu. Showcase how the key concept you selected relates to or is used in a professional field. This MUST be referenced. (1pt).*
- 3. **Reflect** on how this key concept relates to your personal experiences. Provide a personal example of your life experience or understanding of this key concept. (1pt).*
- 4. **Connect** the key concept to another academic setting. How can you make a connection between your understanding of the key concept and information you already know from another course or learning environment? Provide the example of the connection you made and describe how it relates to the key concept. (1pt).*
- 5. **Cite Sources** – You will have at least two references and will cite any sources mentioned. Citations must be done in APA format. Please refer to citation guidelines if you are in doubt of plagiarism. (1pt).*
- 6. **Peer Feedback** – Reply with a comment on another student’s post. Be insightful and considerate when responding to your peers work. Credit will not be given to rude or inconsiderate responses. Responses must be a minimum of 2-3 sentences that convey insight beyond “I agree” or “Good Job”. Also, no credit will be awarded without a prior original post. (1pt). Credit will not be given for Peer Feedback without a submitted key concept post.*

Example 2: Reflection Paper Questions & Expectations

Please follow the subsequent steps to complete the Reflection Paper:

- 1. Please reexamine all your Key Concept Discussions you submitted throughout the course.*
- 2. Reexamine all your responses to other students.*
- 3. Reexamine your All-About-Me profile you created at the beginning of the semester.*
- 4. During reexamination ponder on the following questions found below.*

5. *Then answer in 300-500 words on the progression you have made academically, intellectually, and maybe even personally, from the beginning to the end of this course. As well as, according to the performance and quality of work you generated within the course. It may surprise you all you have learned!*
- *Why did you take this course originally?*
 - *Do you feel like you know more about the psychology of stress than before taking this course?*
 - *What is your current impression of stress management as a field of study and science now that you have taken a course on it?*
 - *Did this course change any of your stereotypes or perceptions of stress, if so, how?*
 - *How was the course similar or dissimilar to what you expected originally when you first began this course?*
 - *What parts of the course were the most intriguing to you?*
 - *Why do you think communication through students is important?*
 - *How can other students play an interactive role in giving feedback for teaching and learning?*
 - *Did you notice any subject themes or consistent feedback in your Key Concept posts?*
 - *How did you take the feedback you received and incorporate it into your project?*
 - *Have you noticed other ways you learn best as a result of this online course, if so, what are these other ways?*
 - *Has the course strengthened your learning style and if so in what ways?*
 - *How has your contribution to class discussion and responsiveness to other students promoted learning and interaction?*
 - *How do you think this knowledge and stress skills may be able to benefit you as an individual in society, not only personally, but also professionally?*
 - *Does the field of stress management apply in any way to your future career or goals and how so?*
 - *Did this course impact the way you normally think, feel, or behave? If so, what will you do differently as a result?*

Example 3: Semester Growth Paper

These questions have been converted into an evaluative online Course Analysis Survey

1. ***Class eLectures:*** *Were the class lectures helpful? How?*
2. ***eTextbook:*** *What aspects of the eTextbook were most useful?*
3. ***eWorkbook (on flash drive):*** *In what way was the eWorkbook helpful?*
4. ***Videos:*** *What did you learn from the online streaming videos? Did they help to illustrate certain points?*
5. ***Exams:*** *Were the major exams and quizzes helpful in determining what you learned?*
6. ***Book Reviews:*** *How useful were the books you chose to review in creating your semester project?*
7. ***Internet Sites:*** *Did the Internet sites you researched have useful or accurate information?*
8. ***Relaxation Exercises:*** *Did the relaxation exercises help you to manage stress? Which ones did you like best/least and why?*
9. ***Discussion Boards and Blog Entries:*** *Did they help you to interact with other students? Did writing and responding to discussion boards and blog entries help you to better understand the course material?*
10. ***Project Presentations:*** *Was putting together a presentation helpful to you? Did you learn anything from other student presentations?*
11. ***Semester Project:*** *What is your overall opinion of your semester project? Do you think it helped to manage your stress? Will you continue with your project after the class has ended?*
12. ***Course Design:*** *Could you navigate the class website without difficulty? Was the information on the website accurate and useful?*
13. ***Extra Credit:*** *How useful was the extra credit assignment?*
14. ***IT Staff:*** *Did you receive assistance from IT? Was the IT staff helpful?*
15. ***Teaching Assistant:*** *How helpful was the teaching assistant?*

Transfer of Skills

Each pedagogic goal, elearning activity and the subsequent eportfolio activity listed below allows students to acquire personally relevant and useful stress management “skills before pills” beyond the academic environment. Permitting students to personally choose and research their own stress reduction interventions allows for relevancy, efficacy and fit. Likewise, these processes, when purposively structured, teach students to commit, select, reflect, record and demonstrate evidence of their successful achievement. The deliberate efolio organizational structure and elearning environment in this stress management class promotes independent mastery, self-generated goal-setting, reflective critical thinking skills, self-directed motivation, personal commitment, peer support, review of health habits, identifiable progress, and creative problem solving solutions. The personal and public integration of several of these health-related elearning activities influences a significant relevant social issue “stress without distress” while simultaneously providing essential eportfolio values and skills. By carefully examining the extent to which each elearning assignment meets one’s pedagogic goals, we may also, in turn, evaluate the desirable evidence of the process/product produced relevant to the inherent aspects of eportfolio identity development. Please see sample below:

Pedagogic Goal	eLearning Activity	ePortfolio Activity
Community Learners	Intro Web Page, PP Presentation, Blogging	Process/Product
Lecture Content	eLectures, eText, eWorkbook, Links	Process
Lecture Materials	DVDs, PowerPoint Synchronized Workbook	Process
Stress Self-Assessment	External Links, Web Sites, Book Reviews	Process/Product
Content Review	eTextbook, eWorkbook, Key Concepts	Process
Content Assessment	Quizzes, Major Exams, Reflections, Project	Process
Relaxation Skills	Streaming Audio/Exercises, Self-Ratings	Process/Product
Visual Content	Streaming Film Video, eLecture, Links	Process
Sharing, Networking	Project PP, Key Concept Feedback, Blogging	Process/Product
Presentation/Organization	Project PP, Key Concepts, Reflection Paper	Process/Product
Instructor/Feedback	Graded Reflections, Peer Feedback, Skype	Process
Reflective Thinking	Reflection Paper, Key Concepts, Course Survey	Process
Independent Mastery	Semester Project/Charting, Graphing, Diaries	Process/Product
Creative Problem Solving	Topic Selection, Books & Web site Reviews	Process

Social Feedback and Assessment

Students support one another through weekly progress blogs, as well as present their final semester stress reduction projects by posting their completed project via PowerPoints for other students’ review and comment. They also post their reflection paper with the requirement that they provide feedback to others. This sharing and networking inherently affords students greater opportunities to observe and discover creative solutions from their class cohorts. This deliberately-structured peer engagement also provides a venue to directly exercise and implement relevant peer feedback methods to their own personal stress reduction project. Instructor feedback and assessment is provided directly through grading of quizzes, exams, book reports, web site reviews, presentations, progress blogs, key concept postings, reflection papers and semester projects. Self-selected learning/grade contracts promote necessary ownership and personal accountability. Required public discussion promotes peer support, encouragement and guidance. Weekly supportive peer evaluations and peer feedback on class subject contributions helps to shape observable learning outcomes. Students are rewarded by the support, insight and social reinforcement of genuine praise and celebration of their incremental successes. Students feel a part of something greater than themselves and are encouraged to take risks regarding their views, their failures, and the small but steady changes in their behaviors. Many students express that the skills learned in this class go beyond the course, and that they leave with a new set of

competencies that not only contribute to significant changes in their health behaviors, but have set them upon a path toward life-long learning and self-efficacy.

Summary

The major premise of this paper is about the necessity and desirability of designing elearning course environments that maximize opportunities for eportfolio identity development while simultaneously meeting academic and scholarly expectations. Students are required to meet course material standards and then ultimately demonstrate the practical application of their learning. Several experts have suggested that students should be educated for this challenge by adopting efolio thinking in their respective courses and by providing the scaffolding [11]. This approach is seen as essential to fostering and training habits that promote quality and valuable eportfolio skills. This paper has demonstrated by several examples how one might structure elearning assignments and coursework activities that deliberately nurtures these types of values, skills and training. While Internet and innovative technologies (eportfolios, for example) have certainly allowed greater freedom of expression, communication and identity development, they have also required greater responsibility for understanding, teaching and directing this powerful means of self-expression. Perhaps, due to the ever-evolving and rising cost of technology and the need for accountability, academic environments (particularly elearning environments and eportfolios) are under pressure to demonstrate the “learning” and substantiate cost and methods via measurable expected outcomes. ePortfolio identity development is substantially improved when students are taught to incorporate the specific efolio values and skills throughout their academic coursework.

“Just as people don't judge their self-efficacy in driving by whether they can find their ignition and negotiate entering the roadway, students do not judge their future academic performance (and thus, scholastic self-efficacy) by whether they can repeat what they have learned verbatim. The world is much more complex than that.” Albert Bandura

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