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Using an e-portfolio to facilitate a reflective critical commentary

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Description | What was done?

Background/ context

This study describes the introduction of an e-portfolio to assess an optional second year module in early modern Spanish studies. The effectiveness of this move away from conventional course work (essay) plus examination towards an authentic alternative means of formative and summative assessment is evaluated.

The removal of the traditional January examination period at an institutional level within Queen's University Belfast has made it necessary for module tutors and course convenors across many disciplines to consider alternative forms of summative assessment in response to this change. At the same time, the current trend of moving away from traditional examinations towards alternative modes of assessing learning outcomes in higher education has had an impact on course design with an emphasis being placed on the importance of 'assessment for learning', i.e. formative assessment.

The main aim of the study was to begin to explore alternative assessment in the form of a written reflective commentary. The tutor, Isabel Torres, wished to evaluate whether this model would improve achievement of learning outcomes by encouraging students to think critically and reflect on their own learning.

Motivation and Aims

Two factors motivated Isabel to use an e-portfolio for both formative and summative assessment of early modern Spanish drama. Firstly, she had used alternative assessment models in a final year poetry course with a very positive outcome and this inspired her to trial an alternative model in the 'World as Stage' Module that is offered to second-year students. Secondly, the introduction of the new academic year structure with the removal of the customary 'January examination period' prompted her to consider alternative methods of summative assessment in this module.

It has been argued that assessments can only be authentic when they meaningfully connect with students beyond the assigned grade at the end of their obligatory participation in the project (Frey, Schmitt & Allen, 2012). For this module, Isabel wanted students to connect with the module content to find real value that they would take with them beyond the completion of the module, making the learning a truly authentic experience.

In previous years, this module was assessed by an essay, worth 30% and a 2 hour written exam worth 70% (comprising 2 sections with a choice of one question from each section equally weighted). The content and design of the module, which already included several interactive activities (both individual and collaborative), lent itself well to a formative 'assessment for learning' approach which it was hoped would enhance the learning process for students. Isabel decided to use a reflective commentary both for formative and summative assessment purposes, engaging students in a process of reflection and improvement throughout the duration of the 'World as Stage' Module. She chose to use an e-portfolio to facilitate this reflective critical commentary and give students a structure within which to work.

Reflective writing encourages students to think critically and the benefits of reflective learning are widely acknowledged (Brockbank & McGill, 2007; Bain, Ballantyne, Packer & Mills, 1999). As far back as 1988, Gibbs recognised that 'It is not sufficient simply to have an experience in order to learn. Without reflecting upon this experience it may quickly be forgotten, or its learning potential lost'.

Choosing the right tool

An e-portfolio is a digital tool which enables the collection of ideas, evidence and artefacts in a variety of media (Sutherland and Powell, 2007). E-portfolios have been used effectively to scaffold the reflective process for learners (Roberts, Maor, & Herrington, 2016). Both formal and informal feedback on performance can help students to evaluate their understanding and become more adept (Nicole and Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). In this study, the use of an electronic portfolio provided a structured space for students to record their notes, archive their work and engage with timely feedback from their tutor. Using an e-portfolio enabled them to reflect critically on their progress, as well as work collaboratively with their peers and also to 'showcase' their work. A key priority was to design a model that could prioritise process without sacrificing product.

There is an abundance of e-portfolio tools available and some are specifically designed for learning and teaching, with many examples within an academic context being pitched at postgraduate level and/ or including work-placements or internships. However, after careful consideration Isabel decided that neither these, nor a dedicated, commercial e-portfolio platform would work for her purposes. A comparative analysis of common features identifies the predominant features of most e-portfolio systems as: advisement, artefacts, assessment, communication and collaboration, course management, evaluations/observations, hosting and support, intended user and user type, learning outcomes, reflections, reporting, rubrics, sharing of information, surveys, templates, and other technological requirements (Sweat-Guy, & Buzzetto-More, 2007). Using the matrix provided in this analysis, it was evident that commercial systems were over-complex and provided many additional features that would never be used by students completing the assessment tasks for the 'World as Stage' Module.

Moreover, the cost and effort required to procure such a system, create personal accounts and logins and the length of time needed for tutors and students to become familiar with these tools for a one-off module of study could not be justified. Another drawback of paid systems is that when a student leaves the university, it is often difficult to take their portfolio with them.

For the purposes of this module, students required a tool that they could learn to use quickly and easily. This module was taught over a period of 12 weeks and there was no time to schedule additional technical training or give students extra time to become familiar with the technology.

Additionally, Isabel would have described herself as 'not very confident' using technology, only using the tools she needs to get a job done well. She is not a technical guru and is used to working on a desktop computer in the university or a laptop at home. Complicated login procedures, steep learning curves, additional flashy features were not something that she wanted for herself or her students. She felt that she did not want the technology to become a distraction or a burden to either her or them.

The Centre for Educational Development recommended using OneNote Class Notebook for students to create and develop their portfolios. This was primarily because it is part of Office365 suite of Apps and is supported by Queen's University Belfast. The look and feel of the tool is very familiar to students who use MS products on a day-to-day basis. It works well on desktop computers, laptops and mobile devices and integrates easily with personal devices.

Finally, it is a very simple procedure to export both individual portfolios and the Class Notebook in its entirety. Therefore, if students wished to keep their work to access after they complete the module or if Isabel was required to send assessment work to an external examiner or share with internal moderators of the module, it would be a very straightforward process.

Methodology

Preparation

Prior to beginning her teaching, Isabel spent some time familiarising herself with OneNote Class Notebook. With advice and support from the Centre for Educational Development, Isabel planned a layout and structure for the e-portfolio. It was set up with pre-defined sections that would enable students to add their evidence, thoughts and reflections easily. Isabel pre-populated the common areas as outlined below and each student had an individual portfolio area which was set up to contain sections for each task.

The '**Welcome**' section

This introductory page (appendix 1) was written by Isabel and it set the tone of the overall assessment, being informal and personal while at the same time stressing the importance of engaging with the electronic portfolio and treating it as a space to record their notes, archive their work, engage with feedback, reflect critically on their progress, and also 'showcase' their skills.

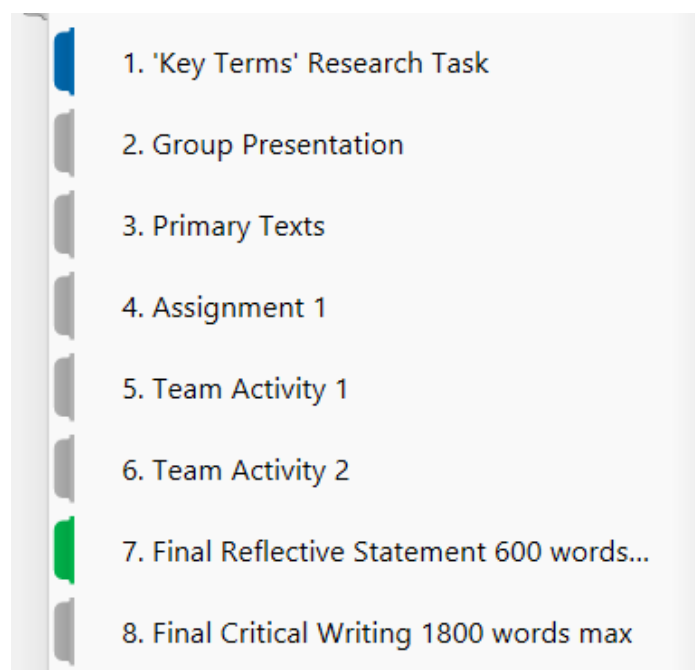
Collaboration space/ Group Presentations

A very important aspect of the e-portfolio was the 'Collaboration Space' section. At the beginning of the semester students were allocated to a presentation group, and urged to make use of this space to interact with the other members of their team, to record evidence of their research, to upload the final 'product', and finally, to record feedback after the presentation was delivered in class.

Contents and course resources

This section included a descriptive account of how the module would be assessed, giving an overview of the 2 summative assignments and details of all formative activities for the module. It had an essential section entitled '**Guidelines: Structure and Content**', written by Isabel which gave clear details of how to use the e-Portfolio with recommended structure and content for the portfolio. Isabel also devised a comprehensive bespoke marking criteria (appendix 2) to give students a clear understanding of how their portfolios would be marked.

She set up an individual portfolio area for each student containing sections for each task (image 1).
Image 1



Training

A few days before the training session, all students who had enrolled to take the module were added to the system and automatically sent an email describing how to login to the shared area.

A workshop was organised to provide guidance on the preparation of the e-portfolio. This session was facilitated by the Centre for Educational Development and was delivered in a computer suite during the first week of teaching. The purpose of this session was to introduce the students to the system and give them the basic skills and knowledge to use it for their assessment work throughout the duration of the module. This session included a clear explanation of what an e-portfolio is, the pedagogical evidence highlighting the benefits of using an e-portfolio for critical reflection to students, technical support to login to their e-portfolio for the first time and enable the e-portfolio on their own devices, if they wished.

A copy of the training presentation is available to download in the additional resources below.

Teaching, Learning and Assessment Design

This course was delivered three hours a week in two sessions (2 hours + 1 hour) over a 12-week semester. Although some introductory seminars were tutor-led, the majority of classes took the form of student-led discussions. At the beginning of the course, students were divided into smaller work groups (of 3 – 5 students depending on class size) and were required to prepare presentations to serve as the basis of these discussions. Students were advised to meet with the other members of that group outside class time and to contribute fully to the work of the team. After delivering their presentation, groups were given the opportunity to revise it and forward it to Isabel so that it could be uploaded for the benefit of all students on the course.

Students were assessed via a written assignment submitted in week 7, which made up 30% of the overall module mark. They were also required to submit the e-portfolio in week 12, which was worth 70% of the total module mark.

The use of explicit grading criteria was very important as this meant students were clear from the outset what was expected of them and how they could achieve a high overall grade. The standard and effort required as described in detail and guidelines on the criteria that would be used for each of the grades made the grading process both transparent and consistent.

Students received support for their work via both peer- and tutor-feedback.

- Presentation groups met with Isabel in advance of preparation for bibliographical, structural and content guidance.
- Presentations were subject to feedback from peers and tutor.
- Individual appointments were scheduled to discuss plans for assignment 1 in week 5; individual feedback on these was available by week 8. This meeting also allowed for feed-forward regarding assignment 2.
- Critical reflection on progress and feedback was an integral component of this module and formed part of the E-portfolio evaluation.

Student Engagement

The assessment methods in this module received positive feedback from students who felt that it improved their learning experience as well as their assessment performance. Motivation and satisfaction was increased as evidenced by student comments in their final reflective commentary and also module evaluations. Students of this module are generally very engaged in this course as this is an optional module which they choose if they have an interest in this area. The module has and continues to receive very positive feedback from students at mid- and end-of-module student surveys. The end of year comments report on student surveys, highlighted students' comments on the use of the E-portfolio when asked to *Identify any good practice on the module that could be adopted on other modules.*

See selected comments below:

"I liked using the portfolio – it is a good way to organise my thoughts and to show my progress."

2nd Year Student (Spanish) on 'World as Stage' module

"There is a good balance between class engagement and class teaching. This module is a great way to motivate people to do the amount of work required to do really well in the module. E-portfolio is brilliant, takes the pressure off one massive assignment."

2nd Year Student (Spanish) on 'World as Stage' module

The students in this cohort commented favourably on the use of the electronic portfolio for a reflective commentary and they liked the ongoing formative nature which they felt contributed to their summative assessment grade. With the exception of one student, who was absent most of the year due to personal issues, all students in the class realised or exceeded their potential as compared with their performance on other modules in their degree course. First class students continued to perform at first class level, but it enabled strong and engaged students who would regularly achieve 2.1 to demonstrate first class ability; this enhancement in attainment was replicated with other grade classifications.

There were no issues with time-management or completion of the tasks. In fact 2 students commented positively to Isabel in a feedback session that they could see the value of both the reflective process and the practical elements of using an e-portfolio and the habits that they developed for performance in future modules.

Successes | Challenges | Lessons Learned

Research has highlighted tangible benefits of e-portfolios in relation to efficiency, enhancement and transformation (JISC, 2008). Our study suggests that e-portfolios can contribute to efficiencies in sharing and retrieving information, timely feedback which supports reflection and improvement/development of ideas. The design of the assessment tasks and the ongoing tutor feedback enabled students to act on this immediately and feed forward engaging them in a continuous process of reflection and improvement.

In this study the use of an e-portfolio, supported collaboration between students and gave a uniform structure to the presentation of their work. It made the administration related to assessment, marking and moderation more efficient also.

Students developed digital skills and used online communications to facilitate their group work. The quality of evidence was noted by both Isabel and the students. The facility to link to evidence and use multi-media (sound/ images as well as text) enhanced the commentaries.

Isabel was somewhat constrained by regulations agreed at School level regarding the maximum number of assessed components for optional modules at each level; agreed weightings; and also word count. While this is important to ensure parity in terms of the work load expected of students across modules, it was a challenge to implement when she stepped outside the conventional assessment structures. It required more creativity at a micro-level of assessment design and marking criteria to realise the objective of using a reflective portfolio while at the same time respecting existing regulations.

Scalability and Transferability

This study addresses the current challenge of responding to the movement away from traditional examinations towards other appropriate modes of assessing learning outcomes in higher education. It demonstrated that an e-portfolio can be used effectively for both formative and summative assessment of research-led language modules at undergraduate level.

As described above these methods of assessment could be applied to a variety of disciplines and replicated, with the following guidelines:

- Allow time prior to teaching to ensure that module tutors have adequate knowledge/ receive training to enable them to use OneNote Class Notebook.
- Have support from Centre for Educational Development/ IT to facilitate the enrolment of students and provide an introduction to the pedagogical use of e-portfolios immediately teaching begins.
- Give sufficient guidance and explanations to students on how to develop their individual portfolios over the duration of the module.
- Be clear about expectations, be specific about how they should interact with the e-portfolio, how and when to add background evidence, preparatory work, their written accounts, presentation work, how to communicate and work with their group members online.
- Use a clear rubrik and make it available to students from the outset to give them an understanding of the standard, amount of work that is required to achieve the learning outcomes to the level they are aiming for.
- Give an indication also of the hours outside of class that they may need to devote to the e-portfolio work.

The use of an electronic portfolio as described in this study could be applied to any discipline where critical and creative thinking and ongoing refinement and development of ideas is important in relation to the module learning outcomes.

References

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Additional Resources/ files

CED: <https://sway.office.com/8yAJ6hbsctfmbDbj?ref=LinkStudent>

HEA: <https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/teaching-reflective-writing-presentation>

JISC: <https://www.jisc.ac.uk/full-guide/e-portfolios>

EPortfolioHub Ireland: <http://eportfoliohub.ie>

Appendix 1

/qubstudentcloud-my.sharepoint.com/personal/1267086_ads_qub_ac_uk/_layouts/15/WopiFrame.aspx?sourcedoc={b8d6f6fa-3137-452a-9bc5-0bb4035}

The screenshot shows a OneNote interface with a purple header bar. The header bar contains the text 'Isabel Torres > World as Stage' on the left and 'World as Stage' on the right. Below the header bar is a ribbon with tabs for 'Draw', 'View', 'Class Notebook', 'Print', 'Tell me what you want to do', 'Open in OneNote', and 'Give Feedback to Microsoft'. The main content area is titled 'Welcome' and dated '26 September 2017 15:32'. The text in the main area reads: 'Dear student, Welcome to the 'World as Stage' OneNote E Portfolio! This electronic portfolio is a very important part of your *World as Stage* optional module and provides a space for you to record your notes, archive your work, engage with feedback, reflect critically on your progress, and also 'showcase' your skills. If you haven't used a digital portfolio like this before, it may be a learning curve, but an extremely valuable experience in terms of personal and professional development. A very important aspect of the W.A.S. Portfolio is the 'Collaboration Space' section. At the beginning of the semester you will be allocated to a presentation group, and you should make use of this space to interact with the other members of your team, to record evidence of your research, to upload the final 'product', and finally, to record feedback after the presentation has been delivered in class. Please also note that all student presentations as well as presentations delivered by me will be uploaded regularly to the 'Contents and Course Resources' section for you to consult. You should use the 'Overview' and 'OneNote Help' sections to familiarise yourself with the Onenote environment. More specifically, guidelines regarding the structure of the portfolio, organisation of content and assessment criteria are included under the relevant tabs. I hope that you will find this information useful, but please don't hesitate to contact me directly if you have any further queries. I look forward very much to reading your World as Stage E Portfolios at the end of semester and, of course, learning loads from them! Isabel'.

Appendix 2

In developing your E portfolio you are creating your own learning story.

- The portfolio is designed to operate (a) as **process-oriented** (enabling you to reflect systematically on your own learning/feedback and to present a coherent analysis of performance), and (b) as a **product** of your experience of the module (functioning as an archive that records your record of work and showcases your achievements).
- This double focus is complementary and overlapping (a) progressive learning measures sustained effort over the course of the module, as well as critical/reflective engagement with content and feedback. It will, therefore, include work that is produced 'naturally' over the course of the module; (b) the focus on a summative piece of work measures the level of proficiency that has been obtained by the end of the course.
- **As you can see from the grid below, the content of the E portfolio is driven by both the content of the Course Outline, but also by your own interests as they are stimulated by / and extend beyond that.**

CONTENT	Essential	Milestone Date	Additional Material
'Key Terms' Research task	Evidence of Research; Outcome	Week 2	Critical review of work; Correction (as appropriate). Week 3
Presentations on primary texts	Evidence of independent and collaborative work; Outcome	Week 5 [Groups 1,2 and 3] Week 9 [Groups 4 and 5]	Critical Engagement with feedback on presentation; Correction (as appropriate). Week 6 [Groups 1,2 and 3] Week 10 [Groups 4 and 5]
Primary Texts	Evidence of primary and secondary reading	<i>El perro del hortelano</i> (by wk 5) <i>El castigo sin venganza</i> (by wk 7) <i>El Alcalde de Zalamea</i> (by wk 9) <i>La vida es sueño</i> (by wk 11)	Examples might include but are not limited to the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review of film/TV adaptations; • research on contemporary stage adaptations; • Translations • Images (as appropriate)
Assignment 1 [1000 words max] See course programme for details.	Include finished piece in the portfolio	Week 7	Record of research/reading and/or planning work related to assignment 1. Week 7 Record of /engagement with tutor feedback. Week 11
Team Activity 1	Evidence of preparation for class 'court case'	Week 7	Critical reflection on the exercise Week 8
Team Activity 2	Evidence of preparation for class debate	Week 9	Critical reflection on the exercise Week 10
Final Reflective Statement: 600 words max.	Evidence of reflective engagement with course content and activities	Week 12	
Critical Writing: See 'Evaluation Overview' for word limits	A 'showcase' exercise – see 'Evaluation Overview' for choices available	Week 12	