

## TWELVE TIPS

# Twelve tips for introducing E-Portfolios with undergraduate students

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## Introduction

There is no standard definition of an E-Portfolio just as there is no standard E-Portfolio (Madden 2007). E-Portfolios can be described in many ways, such as ‘an archive of material, relating to an individual, held in a digital format’ (Madden 2007, p 5). E-Portfolios have a range of purposes which include personal development planning, showcasing work, reflection and assessment (Stefani et al. 2007). An E-Portfolio therefore provides a personal repository. This information can then be used and re-used in a variety of ways.

E-Portfolios are receiving recognition and are being considered important by those in education and employment, including policy makers. The Secretary of State for Education and Skills has described E-Portfolios as

‘personal online spaces for students to access services and store work. They will become ever more useful as learners grow up and start moving between different types of learning and different institutions’. (Kelly 2006, unpublished)

The Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) in its briefing paper stated that:

‘lifelong and personalised learning policy drivers propose that all learners should be able to develop, record, re-purpose and transfer a wide range of information about themselves electronically, as they progress through different levels and episodes of learning, training and employment’ (JISC 2006, p 1).

At York St John University, potential benefits were identified of using E-Portfolios with occupational therapy and physiotherapy undergraduate students. There is a professional requirement for graduates from these programmes to engage in continued professional development (CPD) and to keep records of this activity (HPC 2006). Clinicians must be prepared to produce a reflective account of their CPD (HPC 2006) at intervals during their career in order to maintain their registration. E-Portfolios appeared to offer an innovative approach to meeting registration requirements for clinicians. In order for these benefits to be realised it was important that during undergraduate studies, students develop the skills and discipline of keeping a portfolio. They also needed to become experienced with reflective practice, a common element to

E-Portfolios and an accepted necessary skill for healthcare professionals (Clouder & Sellars 2004).

A fellowship award from the Assessment of Learning in Practice Settings (ALPS) a Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England), was offered to trial the use of an E-Portfolios in January 2008. E-Portfolios were introduced to three different cohorts; in-service (part time) occupational therapy students at level 1, in-service (part time) physiotherapists at level 1 and full time occupational therapy students at level 3. Students used their E-Portfolios to reflect on both placement and classroom experiences as well as to plan for and submit assessments. Students’ experiences were collected and analysed as part of the project evaluation. This article arises from the experiences of the staff and students involved in the trial.

The E-Portfolio system used in the trial was PebblePad™, although the findings are expected to be relevant to people implementing and using a range of E-Portfolio systems. Although occupational therapy and physiotherapy students were used in this trial, their experiences are common to other healthcare professionals who are required to keep a portfolio for CPD and registration with the Health Professions Council. The following 12 tips should be relevant to all healthcare professions.

## Tip 1: Identify the added value of using an E-Portfolio

It is considered that portfolios can be used productively for a number of purposes, such as for learning development, assessment, to present work and as a form of repository (Baume 2003). The importance of reflective practice to learning is generally accepted and portfolios provide a forum for these skills to be practiced and displayed (Baume 2003). There is learning potential in the use of portfolios, particularly those which incorporate reflection. What is the added value in these being electronic? Reasons for using an E-Portfolio will be similar to using any other portfolio and therefore it is important to be well informed by the extensive literature on this topic (e.g. Baume 2003; Pearce 2003; Hull 2005). This does not mean however that an E-Portfolio is merely a computerised version of a paper folder. An E-Portfolio offers many more options in

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the way it can be used. For example links can be made to web sites or presentations and information can be edited and shared easily. The question to ask when considering adopting an E-Portfolio is what added value the electronic portfolio can bring to the group of students. Once this has been established the way the E-Portfolio will be introduced and used will be clearer.

## Tip 2: Consider the long and short term use of an E-Portfolio

E-Portfolios can be used effectively within modules to support learning and assessment within a specific time frame. However for healthcare professionals there are considerable long-term benefits in using an E-Portfolio throughout their careers to record and engage in CPD. The uses of an E-Portfolio are broad and varied including reflecting on experiences, planning actions, developing CVs and presenting information to an audience. Learners need to have the opportunity to develop the practices and skills to keep an E-Portfolio in order for them to be able to continue to make use of it in the work place.

## Tip 3: Consider when and how the E-Portfolio is introduced

In a study which introduced an online portfolio in post graduate medical training Kjaer et al. (2006) identified that a considerable investment of time was required during the introduction phase. Introduction essentially involved enabling learners to understand the expected outcomes as well as becoming proficient with the technical use. The timing of the introduction needs to be carefully considered. For an E-Portfolio to be used throughout a student's undergraduate studies, early introduction would seem desirable. However, during induction students are likely to need to learn about other forms of information technology (IT) systems, such as virtual learning environments and e mail. In order for students not to feel overwhelmed by new systems it may be preferential to delay the use of an E-Portfolio. Technical proficiency may not necessitate formal training, due to the intuitive nature of many systems; however, if this is the case, students will need time to practice using the system. Participants in Kjaer et al.'s (2006) study identified a lack of time within the working day as a significant barrier to success.

## Tip 4: Enable students to develop a personal learning space

One of the advantages of E-Portfolios is that they provide a personal learning space for the learner and with it a sense of ownership (Stefani et al. 2007). Other electronic methods of learning within Universities are commonly controlled and monitored by the University and are often a method of sharing information to the student, for example virtual learning environments. In contrast, the E-Portfolio remains private unless the learner allows access to another person. The learner can then define who can view and what can they see. This gives the opportunity for the student to use their E-Portfolio

however they wish which may include the development of personal and sensitive content (Ellaway & Masters 2008). Creativity has been identified as essential, although often restricted in academic work (Light & Cox 2001). E-Portfolios can enable students to be creative yet prescriptive practices led by the tutor can contradict the learner led philosophy.

## Tip 5: Use a function of an E-Portfolio to submit an assessment to maximise motivation

Gibbs (1995) identified assessment as having a key role in focussing and guiding students in their studies. Making the use of an E-Portfolio a requirement of an assessment can also be beneficial in increasing students' motivation to learn to use their E-Portfolio effectively. This will enable students to become more familiar with the different functions and may lead to increased use for a variety of purposes, which they may identify themselves, after the assessment. An example is that students could submit a webfolio in PebblePad™ as evidence of learning within a particular module.

## Tip 6: Assessment guidelines should be transparent but not too prescriptive

In any form of assessment, it is advisable to make assessment transparent in terms of the outcomes which are being assessed and the criteria used (Race 2005). Regarding portfolios for assessment purposes, Baume (2001) identifies the need to give as much clarity to students as possible regarding the structure and size of a portfolio and what to include. However, E-Portfolios are consistent with the growth in personalised and holistic approaches in education (Ellaway & Masters 2008) which offer more sophisticated methods of combining and presenting a range of sources of information (Stefani et al. 2007). Assessment guidelines need to be written with the functions of an E-Portfolio in mind and traditional marking criteria, such as word allowances used in paper-based assessments may not be appropriate.

## Tip 7: Provide students with clear guidance on confidentiality and the use of digital media

Healthcare students may use E-Portfolios to record and reflect upon their learning from clinical settings. Students may store digital media, such as photographs and electronic documents in their E-Portfolio but this can raise potential risks if consent is not acquired or patient confidentiality is breached. It is easy when using E-Portfolios for students to share this digital information either for the purposes of assessment, as evidence of CPD activity or for fun through social network sites, for example YouTube. It is important that clear guidance is given to students on confidentiality, and that it includes the do's and don'ts of sharing electronic information with third parties even if that is the tutor. Such guidance may also remind the

healthcare student of Codes of Ethical Practice and their own personal and professional identity in the virtual world.

### Tip 8: E-Portfolios do not teach reflective practice

Learning from experience and reflective practice has received much attention over many years in the literature with regard to cycles (Kolb 1984; Gibbs 1988) and processes (Mezirow 1981; Schon 1991). Many healthcare professionals endorse the use of reflective practice to learn from experience. E-Portfolios often include reflective practice. In Kjaer et al.'s (2006) study participants used the reflective element of their E-Portfolio to rethink and analyse situations they experienced. In order to benefit from this facility, students need to develop an understanding of reflective practice and the skills necessary to engage in the process effectively. They will need to be guided to develop their ability to be a reflective practitioner in order to engage fully with their E-Portfolio.

### Tip 9: Use the E-Portfolio to give feedback

Receiving feedback on work produced is considered to be very important for promoting successful learning (Race 2005). The sharing of work through E-Portfolios and receiving feedback or comments can be instantaneous (Ellaway & Masters 2008). Student's motivation is raised if feedback is given early and is constructive. It is possible within an E-Portfolio for the student to store the electronic feedback and can be used by the student when reflecting on their progress.

### Tip 10: Ensure that students can access their E-Portfolio

It is easy to think that all students have access to a computer. However, when encouraged to use E-Portfolios in clinical settings access to a computer may not be straight forward. Many clinical settings still have a limited number of computers which are often used for patient record keeping and may not have internet access. Reflecting on practice is often most useful when an event is fresh in the student's mind. If a computer is not available at the desired time, a student may prefer to use more traditional method to record their experience, such as a note book and pen. Mobile devices are being trialled in areas by students on clinical placements as an ALPS (CETL) project. Mobile learning is increasingly part of the student experience (Gray 2008) and affords learners new opportunities within different contexts (Ellaway & Masters 2008). Mobile devices can provide access to online resources including an E-Portfolio.

### Tip 11: Make use of internal support available within the institution

When implementing new IT tools, such as an E-Portfolio, it is important to separate out the support roles for pedagogy and technical help. There is a risk that academic staff who tries to

implement E-Portfolios with students on their own will be inundated with technical queries from the students which can be very time consuming. Academic staff are advised to enrol the help of existing support services, such as IT technical departments, learning technologists and student support services (student IT trainers). These services can then support students on how to use the software from a technical basis leaving the academic staff to guide the student with the pedagogical use of the E-Portfolio.

### Tip 12: Do not reinvent the wheel

Although not common place, many higher education institutions have used E-Portfolios for some time. Experiences and recommendations are easily available and we recommend that practice is shared amongst the E-Portfolio user community. Useful resources for sharing practice are listed below:

- E-Portfolio.ac.uk <http://www.eportfolios.ac.uk/>
- HEA Health Network Group <http://www.health.ac.uk/>
- JIS C <http://www.jisc.ac.uk/whatwedo/themes/elearning/eportfolios.aspx>
- Pebble Learning. <http://www.pebblepad.co.uk/default.asp>

## Conclusion

E-Portfolios are an emerging tool to support health care professionals engaged in continual professional development and to record their learning. Increasingly in a range of educational settings, E-Portfolios are being successfully used as an effective pedagogic tool. These Twelve Tips address the important practical issues to consider when introducing E-Portfolios with students. As with any new learning tool, careful consideration should be given to the planning and implementation to ensure that these resources are successfully used to enhance learning.

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