Effectiveness of Choice and Voice

 in the Development of ePortfolios

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**Review of the Literature**

Creating an ePortfolio in high school is an opportunity for students to travel into the world equipped for the 21st century. The school systems of the past have been shown to stifle student learning and squelch creativity by trying to maintain a rigid, traditional, lecture style of learning (Hutton, 2014). The video lecture by Hutton, et al. (2014) demonstrates the value of student choice, voice, and ownership in a non-traditional school setting that he developed. Students are given choices in deciding what they want to learn, when they want to learn, what they will do for homework, the hours set, and even play a role in choosing school personnel. Credit is given to students for cooking, working, and tending to family matters in a real work setting. As a result, students as young as 13 are proficient at chosen jobs and advancing their own learning. What is the impact of giving students voice and choice in the development of their ePortfolio? How does empowering students in grades 9-12 to use their own choice and voice in creating their ePortfolio improve the quality of their work? The evidence from different studies point to student choice in the creation of their ePortfolio, as a way to boost their interest, increase motivation, along with allowing a personal expression of creativity. Technology has significantly changed the appeal, usefulness, need and ability of students to present themselves in a digital format on this new, albeit forced, technology frontier. With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, more schools have progressed to an online format for teaching and learning. Remote and blended learning are becoming the new normal in many areas. This upward trend in the use of technology has reinforced, and even opened the door for, the acceptance of online formats as useful, and necessary.

# What Determines the Content of an ePortfolio?

The content of ePortfolios can vary, along with the audience and purpose for creating it. High school students creating an ePortfolio will usually have close initial guidance as well as an outline, provided by a teacher, facilitator, or instructor. Examples of existing ePortfolios are accessible to students to observe the different styles, types, and uses for ePortfolios.

## Audience

Determining the audience for the ePortfolio is an important dynamic to ensure relative content that supports the desired outcome. One possibility, is that it will be used to transport high school information to a college setting, displaying and highlighting important events throughout the high school years. Another option is preparation for the workforce. Each has an audience with different agendas and expectations.

College or higher education. Students that are planning to attend college or further academic pursuits, will want to highlight academic accomplishments and endeavors. Special awards, goals achieved, extra-curricular activities, fine arts skills, athletic prowess, and academic awards may be displayed.

Workforce. Students graduating with the intention of transitioning directly to the workforce will have their focus on different aspects of their high school education. More emphasis would be placed on the classes, activities, and job experience that relates to the desired job acquisition. Classes such as Agriculture, Welding, Engineering, Nursing, Auto-Tech, and Fine Arts would be more interested in the display of experience in the related field.

# Choice in Content

In a recent research study conducted over the Digital Leading and Learning Program (DLL) here at Lamar University, it was shown that the COVA approach has a positive impact on the learners in the program (Harapnuik, Thibodeaux, & Cummings 2018). Learners in the DLL program begin by building a basic ePortfolio at the beginning of the Master’s degree program. Learners are given the opportunity to choose a project to implement a disruptive change in their educational environment, by creating an innovation plan related to their field. During the course of the DLL Program, the learner adds to the ePortfolio in each class. The content is determined by the specifics of each plan, requirements set forth by the program, and learner choice of detailed graphics, videos, sources, and style. As a result, learners have the freedom and responsibility of ownership to motivate them to higher levels of creativity. Their ePortfolio shows a digital representation of the learner’s project, as well as the flow of the program. Using this method of having the learner connect to real-world plans and problems, in an authentic learning environment has a positive outcome (Harapnuik, et al., 2018).

## Empowered with COVA

Allowing the students: Choice, Ownership, Voice, in an Authentic learning environment is referred to as the COVA approach. (Harapnuik, et al., 2018). When students learn using a hands-on approach, have the freedom of choice, know that they have ownership, and rest in the confidences that they are able to decide how to let their voice be expressed, continued interest and success is very likely. Ownership, or agency as it is called, is having the freedom to design and develop the ePortfolio in the way that the learner considers most optimal.

Teachers with ePortfolios . A mixed methods study of a group of 29 high school teachers, by Kilbane & Milman (2017) showed a positive outcome for those teachers that created an ePortfolio. Teachers that created an ePortfolio had higher levels of learning, a better grasp of technology, and an increased level of understanding to pass on to their own students. Not only that, but teachers showed a higher level of confidence in themselves and their own skills. Dweck (2015) explains the impact of a teacher’s Growth Mindset that allows for failure as a learning tool instead of an end to learning. That in turn has been shown to transfer to the students by promoting the idea that while a failure may have occurred, the learner is just “not there yet” in regard to learning. Improvement in learner perspective has been noted.

Students that create an ePortfolio. According to research, students that have ownership of creating their own ePortfolio develop a deeper awareness for the responsibilities associated with setting and meeting goals. Higher cognitive skills are noted from students that engage in the process of creating their own ePortfolio. Accomplishing jobs set before them helps build a better connection in the mind, as to what is relevant. That, in turn, translates to a higher awareness of how ownership impacts them on a personal level (Shroff, Deneen & Lim, 2014; Thibodeaux, Harapnuik, Cummings, 2019).

# The Value of Ownership

Studies conducted by Thibodeaux, Cummings, & Harapnuik (2017) point out the increase in the feeling of ownership when the learner feels empowered and in control of their own education. The use of ePortfolios affords the freedom of choice, as well as the use of learner voice, in a constructivist environment. As the learners personalize their ePortfolio, manage their time, and control their environment, the level of engagement increases. The ability and attitude of the teacher to break away from the traditional mode of lecture style teaching plays a large role in student ownership. Autonomy or self-ownership has been shown to yield positive, long-term results on student growth in regard to their own education (Buchem, Tur & Holterhof, 2014). Research studies by Buchem et al. (2014) show that both teachers and students feel that ownership and personal control increase the level of motivation and engagement for the learner. Ownership is vital to the long-term success and the immediate productivity of the learners.

## Equity in Assessment

An article by St. Amour, N. (2020) notes a shift in recent years, in the discussion surrounding the needs of students and new ways of teaching, by The National Institute for Learning Outcomes. But as far as assessment, the shift to assess students in an equitable way was not taking place at a fast pace. In 2017, an initial report on an equitable assessment model, by the institute, showed that assessing students by various methods would yield more reliable results. To date, the institute has continued to release case studies from several American universities. In an effort to validate student learning in more equitable ways, the use of ePortfolios has been instrumental in allowing a voice for the small demographic groups. Communication, writing, and critical thinking skills can be assessed in the construction of an ePortfolio instead of just by standardized testing. The executive director of the institute views teacher modifications of student expectations, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, to allow equity by all learners in a positive light.

Expression in a foreign language setting. Theater type activities have been used in the creation of authentic learning environments for learning a foreign language. A study of a video project, conducted in Malaysia, shows the results to be successful, with Russian language learners (Larisa, N., 2011). The project depicts the positive outcome of student written and created videos, in the target language, using real world scenarios. Students used their own life experiences and the Russian vocabulary they learned to create their videos. As a result, students used their own voice, critical thinking skills, and communication with team members to improve their language skills and build confidence. Some students reported learning tolerance, follow-through skills, and how to be a valuable team member, in addition to the vital role of time management. The overall outcome supported student ownership as crucial for improving engagement and learning.

Creating a persona. In a study conducted by Ramirez, K. (2011) the opportunity for students to depict their online persona via ePortfolio in a classroom and theatre is explored. Students are empowered to craft, reflect, and present themselves through various platforms on digital media. Recorded and shared video presentations can be uploaded, collaborated about, commented on, and revised. Frequent reflection and critique are required to create and maintain an online persona. Every student creator has the ability to choose an audience. Multimedia productions only exist in the digital world and are considered flexible, interactive, audiovisual performances in the ePortfolio persona. Asynchronous performances allow students more time for deeper reflection.

# What is the downside?

 Unfortunately, for some students, the call of the internet frontier is too distracting. One study by Homayoun (2019) looks at the way that students can lose track of their work and mismanage their time. A study of high school students brought to light the lack of simple organizational skills: digital documents on the desktop of a technology device, no use of folders, inability to locate assignments, and limited knowledge of available apps and time management skills. Without monitoring or self-regulating, students will often start surfing the internet and waste valuable time. Homayoun et al, 2019.

# Conclusions

As the evidence from various studies depicts, the COVA approach to ePortfolio creation is successful. Student-centered learning and ownership lends itself to higher levels of interest and motivation as students realize that they have ownership of their own learning (Yastibas & Yastibas, 2015). ePortfolios have the greatest opportunity to alter education as we know it now. The use of technology, assessment abilities, self-reflection, collaboration, and the ability to create and maintain an ePortfolio are parts of the way students, as leaders, and teachers, as facilitators can embrace education. A future idea to explore is to learn how adults that created ePortfolios in school are using them now. Are they still using them? Which careers paths are most likely to utilize an ePortfolio? According to Thibodeaux (2019), students that are empowered to take ownership of their own learning, will be more vested in the outcome. Reflection and critical thinking play an important role in the development of the student learners as they practice autonomy.

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