E-Portfolios in Teacher Education Using TaskStream

Tim Hall
Teacher Education Department
(317) 788-4923
thall@uindy.edu
Beth Kiggins
Center for Instructional Technologies
(317) 788-6154
kiggins@uindy.edu
George Weimer
Teacher Education Department
University of Indianapolis
1400 East Hanna Avenue
Indianapolis, Indiana
(317) 788-3256
weimer@uindy.edu

Having strong commitment to authentic assessment and use of digital student teaching portfolios for teacher candidates does not by itself result in a successful digital portfolio program. Teacher Education faculty at the University of Indianapolis supported two years of pilot E-portfolio development with limited success due principally to training and support issues. Requirements of software for each pilot were ease of use, true cross-platform (Mac/Windows) compatibility, and reasonable cost.

During academic year 2002-2003 one faculty member and one instructional design staff member conducted a two-semester portfolio pilot using DreamWeaver 4 with a small number of volunteer teacher education candidates. DreamWeaver 4 was installed on computers in a Mac/Windows lab; there was no direct software cost to pilot participants. Though all candidates produced successful browser-based portfolios, surveys of the volunteer student attitudes indicated use of DreamWeaver was unnecessarily difficult and time-consuming.

Teacher education faculty decided to find another medium for digital portfolio building and settled on Lectora published by Travantis Corporation. The software promised to have a slight learning curve and to be truly cross platform, though a Mac version of the software did not exist at the time of the pilot. The second pilot was begun during 2003-2004 using the Lectora software. The department purchased software licenses for the small number of pilot participants. Once again the chosen platform proved unsuccessful. The learning curve was less severe than DreamWeaver 4 had been, but there were certain limitations with Lectora regarding the manner in which files could be dropped into the development screen resulting in user frustration. Once again surveys of participants and support staff indicated that the chosen approach must be modified.

Not lacking perseverance, Teacher Education faculty and staff from the U of I Center for Instructional Technologies examined remaining options, which included HyperStudio and PowerPoint as well as several other proprietary software titles. HyperStudio is not currently supported by the publisher. PowerPoint had limitations and lacked flexibility for the goals set for the project.

TaskStream (http://www.taskstream.com) seemed to fit all of our criteria: cross-platform usability, affordability, ease of use, and flexibility. TaskStream (TS) had the additional ability to store remotely selected student assessments through all four years of the teacher education curriculum, have faculty align assessments to appropriate national and state content area standards, and finally aggregate data for individual certification and institutional accreditation support, including NCATE. Primary benefits for TS were the cost and technical support concerns. Students purchase an affordable license code, either from the campus bookstore or directly from TS online, and data are stored on password-protected TS servers, which are accessed via the Web. Graduating students have the option to purchase a 2-year professional-use license for a nominal fee. Work they have submitted during their four-year college program can be downloaded and kept on the Author's computer using a feature called "Pack-It-Up." There was no need to install software or configure on-campus servers. Therefore we had no need to request the software through budget or support processes.

The TaskStream Web site includes the following tools for our candidates and faculty to use:

Standards Manager
Web Folio Builder
Web Page Builder
Unit Builder
Lesson Builder
Rubric Wizard

Message Center (E-mail)
TS Instant Messenger
Discussion Board
Calendar
Announcements

An additional Cybrary is a searchable collection of user-submitted lesson plans that have been screened by TS staff for completeness and quality. Searches may be by grade, subject, or key-word, or they may be searched by author's name.

It was necessary to create a Directed Response Folio (DRF) for our campus. This defines what could be described as an organizational chart for the institution – citing schools, departments, and instructors that use the TaskStream. The institution can either establish a *manager* to add the instructors and the students or allow everyone to self-enroll. Having tried the *manager* role for the first two semesters, the university will seriously consider a self-enrollment process in the fu-ture – primarily due to the time involved in having the campus TaskStream administrator manu-ally enroll everyone. Generally, faculty members are enrolled as reviewers, evaluators, and au-thors; students are enrolled as authors only.

An Author can request feedback from any Reviewer in his/her group on Web folios, Web pages, and/or other TaskStream work that he/she has created. For each request, the Author may select which Reviewer from whom he/she would like to request feedback. The Author can also use the comment area to engage in a dialogue with his/her Reviewer(s). The Reviewer receives requests for feedback from the Authors in his/her group. The Reviewer can then comment on any of the submitted work.

Candidates and faculty are presently allowed to store 100MB of data on the TS server. Video files as large as 50 MB are currently supported. Additional storage space is available from Task-Stream for a nominal fee.

Benefits

We have used TaskStream in multiple sections of two courses during the 2004-2005 academic year: The freshman "Exploration in Education" course is an exploratory course for prospective teacher candidates. In that course each student submits a beginning philosophy of teaching paper. "Technology in Education I" is the entry-level educational technology course. Students in that class submit two assignments, a WebQuest, and a final standards-based Student Choice assign-ment. Generally students report that the software is easy to use. The interface is generally user-friendly, and except for an occasional jargon term that may be confusing, the site is very easy to navigate. With only one year of use, we have not yet created any reports, but that feature prom-ises to be useful.

The TaskStream term for students is "Authors." Instructors are "Reviewers." There are at least two ways authors can submit class work for review. Reviewers have the option of commenting and then returning work to the Author for revision, or evaluating the submission according to a predetermined rubric (designed using the TS Rubric Wizard). In the case of a student submission

that is determined by the Teacher Education faculty to be part of the candidate's final portfolio, the work is submitted to the Directed Response Folio (or DRF) described above. At our institution we have created a Unit Assessment System Directed Response Folio (or UAS DRF) where the candidates sends specific assignment for each designated course for evaluation by a reviewer and eventual inclusion into the student's portfolio. The UAS is based on the INTASC (Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium) principles.

TS offers excellent telephone support via a toll free mentoring telephone number. Print documentation is available online. It is thorough and well-written.

Cost for the Teacher Education department is minimal, as the students purchase the license on a schedule determined by the department. We had no support issues from our computing staff, since there is no local installation or software support required.

Potential Problems

We experienced several difficulties implementing the TaskStream plan. Our first consideration was in the manner of requiring students to purchase the TS license. Our campus bookstore served as reseller for the licenses that are packaged with brief user instructions and a key code for the student. Our plan is to begin with first year students this year, add sophomores, then juniors and seniors in subsequent years. The dilemma was how to have the TS licenses packaged. At the time of this writing the student cost directly from TaskStream for a one semester license is $25; one year is $39; two years is $65; three years is $85; and four years is $99. (TaskStream specifies that one semester is five months duration.) Our concern has been to provide student licenses at the most reasonable rate without wasting money for students who may not complete the program. Our solution was to ask first year entering students to purchase a one-year license. We continue to debate the best plan as we move forward.

The ease of use of the TaskStream student interface is somewhat balanced by difficulties encountered administering the system from an enrollment and grouping standpoint. Our campus TS administrator has needed TS mentoring services several times in order to set properly the enrollments and groupings for our Unit Assessment System and various courses. We have modified somewhat our requirements as we moved through the first year. This will result in our having slightly less data to aggregate when our first reports are created. We view this first year as a time of learning and exploring, making adjustments as we need in order to maximize benefits of using TS within our program. We feel this is good advice to any institution intending to use a standards-based portfolio system of any type. We also learned too late in the game that TaskStream suggests having students self-enroll rather than having the campus TaskStream administrator enroll and group them.

The issue of support for instructors and students deserves comment. For TaskStream to reach maximum potential as an instrument for program improvement requires integrating it into courses during each year of the teacher education program. The department has been working for several years to maximize effective integration of technology into all teacher education methods courses. The process has occasionally worked well, but there is an amount of resistance from some instructors who feel hampered by not having ample, available, and working technology

resources on campus to use with their classes. It appears to us that in order to begin using Task-Stream effectively, a certain initial amount of time for each course should be spent in a computer lab environment with someone who has experience using TaskStream, who can guide both the students and the instructor/s in use of the program.

Conclusion

After two years of unsuccessful pilot programs for e-portfolio development within the Teacher Education Department at the University of Indianapolis, implementation of an INTASC standards-based assessment system including digital portfolio building using TaskStream seems to hold potential as a means of continual program improvement. Despite some difficulties, the affordability and general ease of use have encouraged us to believe we made a wise decision to implement the program.

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More information on the INTASC Principles may be found at:
http://www.ccsso.org/projects/Interstate_New_Teacher_Assessment_and_Support_Consortium/