

Making Connections: Values, Challenges and Successes in the Implementation of Eportfolios in Teacher Education at a Community College in New York City

Plaisir Jean-Yves

City University of New York, New York, USA

This paper triangulates perspectives on reflective pedagogy (Yancey, 2009), integrative learning (Eynon, 2009) and technology integration into learning and teaching (Wenzlaff, 1998) in order to connect the dots among a set of values, challenges and opportunities that concomitantly emerge from using eportfolios (electronic portfolios) in teacher education at BMCC (Borough of Manhattan Community College) in New York City. The aim of this paper is to share insights that could help to inform and encourage best practices across community colleges and other higher education institutions.

Keywords: eportfolio, teacher education, integrative learning, reflective pedagogy, technology integration

Introduction

In an attempt to facilitate a seamless portfolio development process, some teacher education programs opt for the development of eportfolios (electronic portfolios) systems that are structured by professional standards. This approach enables students to collect and select artifacts for their portfolios and engage in self-reflection in order to show how well they are meeting baseline competencies. The ECE (early childhood education) program at BMCC (Borough of Manhattan Community College) currently uses a customized version of the Johns Hopkins Center for Technology and Education, and this platform has a somewhat rigid structure, which is standard-based. Despite of its rigidity, the BMCC eportfolios are integrative learning tools, enabling students to develop competencies that may be transferrable from a community college to a four-year institution and beyond. Barbara Cambridge (2009), in the introductory chapter of *Electronic Portfolio 2.0*, stated, “Eportfolios accommodate students’ many roles and many sites of learning” (p. xiii). This particular viewpoint of Cambridge speaks in part to the philosophy of eportfolio implementation at BMCC.

General Context for Understanding the Eportfolio Implementation Process at BMCC

There is an evolutionary history in the way an institution sets out to meet its mission, and there are also certain events, decisions and connections in the course of that history which should not be ignored. BMCC is located in Lower Manhattan, which is also known as the world financial center. This college is the only higher education institution in the country that suffered loss of human lives and property during the 9/11 terror attacks.

Plaisir Jean-Yves, Ph.D., Teacher Education Department, Borough of Manhattan Community College, City University of New York.

It serves a diverse group of learners, and nearly two-thirds of its 23,000 students are African American and immigrants from 141 countries. These students are traditionally underrepresented in higher education in this country, and the vast majority of these learners need developmental skills and English-as-a-second-language support in order to stay in college and graduate. Like other community colleges in the US, BMCC functions as a transition college offering associate degrees and instituting articulation agreements with a number of four-year institutions in both the public and the private domains.

In Spring 2006, the Teacher Education Department began experimenting with the eportfolio in its ECE curriculum. From the onset, the faculty decided that they would use this tool for facilitating student self-reflection. After more than three years of eportfolio implementation, the time has come for examining important aspects of this work. The aim of this paper is to connect the dots among a set of values, challenges and opportunities that concomitantly emerge from using this versatile tool in teacher education at BMCC, while also sharing insights that could help to inform and encourage best practices across community colleges and other higher education institutions.

Theoretical Framework

A review of the literature on eportfolios suggests that this tool can support short-term, medial range and long haul learning goals in the development of future teachers. Mary Huber, a senior director with The Carnegie Foundation, and her colleagues stated in a release report that, “An emphasis on integrative learning can help undergraduates find ways to put the pieces together and develop habits of mind that will prepare them to make informed judgments in the conduct of personal, professional and civic life” (Huber et al., 2007, p. 1). This perspective on integrative learning is quite relevant to the themes and rhemes that are explored in this paper. In the past two decades, paper and eportfolios have become an area of interest in scholarly research (Brubacher, Case, & Reagan, 1994; Wolf, 1996; Krause, 1996; Yancey, 1997; Yancey & Weiser, 1997; Lyons, 1998; Barrett & Wilkerson, 2004; Batson, 2002). Eportfolios, in particular, have been widely used in both pre- and in- service teacher education programs across the US (Lyons, 1998; Teitel, Ricci, & Coogan, 1998; Wolf & Dietz, 1998), and the vast majority of teacher preparation programs have chosen to use some types of eportfolios for learning and teaching (Meyer & Latham, 2008; Yancey, 2009). In teacher preparation programs, eportfolios were often used for promoting reflective pedagogy, integrative learning and technology integration into learning and teaching practices (Eynon, 2009; Hughes, 2009; Yancey, 2009; Lyons, 1998; F. L. Paulson, P. R. Paulson, & Meyer, 1991).

Teacher education programs have generally structured electronic portfolios around professional standards in order to demonstrate how students are engaging in meaningful learning experiences, baseline achievements and self-reflection on their way to becoming teachers (Paulson et al., 1991; Zamon & Sprague, 2009, p. 176; Yancey, 2009, p. 13). Yancey (2009) observed that, “Print and electronic portfolios historically have featured reflection as their centerpieces” (p. 5). She explained that reflection typically involves both the processes and the various kinds of texts—ranging from concept maps to written texts to streaming video—that learners construct and integrate into their electronic portfolios. The electronic portfolio, in Yancey’s view, has not only shifted the nature of reflection, but also broadened and increased reflective practice.

Yancey (2009) underscored three ways in which the eportfolios and reflective pedagogy complement each other as learning and teaching tools: (1) Students use reflections to make connections among portfolio exhibits,

learning and themselves; (2) Reflective activities enable students to assess their learning and transfer skills into new situations; and (3) Reflective practitioners are able to synthesize multiple sources of evidence and make contingent and ethical sense of them (p. 5). Yancey procured a strong theoretical framework for using the eportfolios to achieve important goals, such as the latter, in the preparation of future teachers.

Initiating portfolios early on teacher candidates' professional trajectory were both a value and a challenge that may help to cultivate habits of mind in becoming teachers (CHEN, 2009, p. 31), reflective practices (Rodriguez & Sjoström, 1991; Fox, White, Kidd, & Richie, 2008; Yancey, 2009; Cambridge, 2009; Rickards & Guilbault, 2009), integrative strategy (Eynon, 2009, p. 66), and technology integration into learning and teaching (Wenzlaff, 1998; Wenzlaff & Cummings, 1996). Achieving these programs and professional objectives can be quite challenging, given that students generally do not possess the theoretical knowledge nor the experiential base to tap as they are creating portfolios on their way of becoming teachers (Krause, 1996; Freidus, 1998; Foote & Vermette, 2001). Besides those complexities, there is the need for faculty members to receive training before they could implement portfolios in their teaching (Harvel, 2008).

The Inquiry About Eportfolio Implementation at BMCC

The notion of inquiry was used as developing in reiterative waves (Yancey & Weiser, 1997; Hughes, 2009) in order to make sense and reflect on the pedagogy that is taking root around the implementation of the eportfolios in teacher education at BMCC. Yancey and Weiser (1997) viewed research as knowledge construction that is grounded in reflective analysis, and this type of inquiry constantly relies on practice as a source for knowing.

As a reflective practitioner, the author drew from the work that the author had done with ECE majors, the rich exchange of ideas, and the back and forth supported that his colleagues and the author had lent each other in implementing the eportfolios at BMCC. As chair of the eportfolio committee in the Teacher Education Department, the author revisited a vast array of correspondences from students and other professors seeking technical support. The author's own students requested feedback from him on their eportfolios, the author's colleagues emailed him their questions or invited him to make presentations in their classes. The author also examined his responses to all of the above. On a semester by semester basis, the author scheduled and provided one-on-one workshops for adjunct instructors about implementing the eportfolio in their courses. In sum, the author used notes from those correspondences, reviewed eportfolio committee minutes, and drew from classroom observations and the author's conversations with students and faculty members in order to answer the following questions:

- (1) How does the BMCC ECE program institute the eportfolios in the education of future teachers?
- (2) What are the principles guiding the eportfolios development process in teacher education at BMCC?
- (3) What are the challenges and opportunities that emerge as we implement this tool in teacher education at BMCC?

Major Findings Concerning the Implementation of the Eportfolio in Teacher Education at BMCC

Implementation Strategies

The BMCC electronic portfolios are implemented in 10 courses taken within the ECE program. There are

no free standing technology courses for students to take for creating their eportfolios. By the same token, there are no computer laboratories and technical support earmarked exclusively for ECE majors and faculty to carry out activities related to the creation of eportfolios. ECE instructors reserve computer labs and set aside time out of their course schedules to introduce students to the electronic portfolio. In 2006, there were about 500 students and faculty who created eportfolios in the ECE program. Currently, there are over 1,300 ECE majors who have initiated electronic portfolios in coursework ranging from introductory and curriculum to capstone courses. ECE majors at BMCC collect artifacts and reflect on one or two professional standards in every course, beginning with the introductory courses and ending with the capstone courses. The ECE program seamlessly incorporates the eportfolios into its course syllabi, and instructors incrementally use this tool to guide student reflections on professional standards throughout the ECE curriculum. Students use their portfolios to reflect on five professional standards or principles established by the NAEYC (National Association for the Education of Young Children).

At the beginning of the eportfolio development process, students create their homepages, which contain introductory statements and photographs describing who they are as learners. Next, they compose statements of varied lengths to articulate their own philosophies of education, and some choose to write about education philosophies, great thinkers, reform movements or people in their own lives who inspire them to become teachers. As students progress from their introductory courses to the curriculum and field experience coursework, they collect and store work samples to document how they are achieving program objectives in those courses. This collection of evidence includes a broad array of artifacts ranging from activity plans, PowerPoint presentations, papers and photographs to student journal entries, field experience logs and observation reports from field supervisors. While some students scan and upload revised or graded work samples into their portfolios, others store unrevised and unmarked pieces of work in their eportfolios.

The guiding principles that inform students about the selection and compilation of work samples into the eportfolios are the NAEYC professional standards that those artifacts address. Perhaps, the reflections that students do on the following NAEYC principles (Retrieved from <http://www.naeyc.org>, 2003) constitute the most critical aspect of the portfolio development process:

- (1) Promoting child development and learning (Standard 1);
- (2) Building family and community relationships (Standard 2);
- (3) Observing, documenting and assessing to support young children and families (Standard 3);
- (4) Teaching and learning (Standard 4);
- (5) Connecting with children and families (Standard 4a);
- (6) Using developmentally effective approaches (Standard 4b);
- (7) Understanding content knowledge in early education (Standard 4c);
- (8) Building meaningful curriculum (Standard 4d);
- (9) Becoming a professional (Standard 5).

Another significant aspect of the electronic portfolio development process is the kind of learning community that this tool helps to foster inside and outside of the ECE program. The BMCC eportfolio system is an interactive structure that enables students to send links to and request feedback from their instructors, classmates, family members and friends on the quality and content of their portfolios, if they choose to do so. In addition, the BMCC electronic portfolio also allows students to map out their professional development plans

and organize their work in preparation for transfer to four-year institutions and beyond. These activities carry a high premium in teacher education at BMCC, because the overarching goal of the ECE program is to develop students who will continue their education, especially in a number of four-year colleges where the program has articulation agreements.

Core Values and the Development of Teacher Education Portfolios at BMCC

Although teacher education portfolios can be used as assessment tools, the teacher education faculties have not used them for that purpose. The eportfolios are not assessed or used in any shape or form for program completion. The students retain full control of access to their portfolios and they decide whom they want to send links to and request feedback from instructors, peers and others on their portfolios. The amount of time and work students spend on their portfolios is not recorded, but faculty members assume the portfolios will be important items as students move forward and document achievements in their learning. Interestingly, BMCC students do not receive any grades for creating their portfolios. Albert Einstein was said to have a poster on his dormitory door at Princeton University that reads: “Not everything that counts is countable, and not everything that is countable (necessarily) counts”. This saying has much relevance to the values of the epistemology that is evolving around student eportfolios at BMCC. The ECE program does not require students to develop portfolios as an exit strategy, but the program integrates this tool to promote course learning outcomes and professional competencies around NAEYC standards. From this perspective, grading and using the eportfolios as graduation requirements might suggest some kinds of finality about student learning. Grading the eportfolios like this could send a counterproductive message to students about lifelong learning.

The above piece of wisdom by Albert Einstein, when coupled with Cambridge’s perspective on the ubiquitous nature of the eportfolios, and alluded to earlier in the theoretical section, constitutes a strong theoretical underpinning for the decision of the teacher education faculty not to grade or use student portfolios as exit strategies in the ECE program. The eportfolio is one of many tools that the faculty hopes that will ease students’ transition from BMCC to four-year institutions. That is a far different orientation from developing student portfolios as exit strategies from the program.

Another major assumption of the faculty in the ECE program is that students will continue to build their portfolios when they transfer to four-year institutions. Both the faculty and the students view the electronic portfolio as a tool for initiating and sustaining repertoires of reflective practice that educators of young children need to have, as well as for mediating ongoing conversations back and forth with colleagues at four-year colleges, field experience sites and other stakeholders, who need to align resources and best practices in the development of future teachers. There is a constant unfolding of challenges and opportunities in this kind of dialectic toward connecting diverse communities of learners and decision-makers through the implementation of the electronic portfolio at this community college.

The Electronic Portfolio as a Tool for Integrative Learning and Parallel Practice in Teacher Education at BMCC

The portfolios that students have created invariably reflect the premises of parallel practice, specifically through student reflections on NAEYC principles. On the one hand, the students are making connections across courses in the ECE curriculum, and they appear to be learning the way they will hopefully teach. They are collecting and attaching artifacts to their reflections on NAEYC standards. On the other hand, more instructors

are receiving formal training and implementing the eportfolio into their courses. The author's colleagues are being encouraged to develop assignments targeting specific learning outcomes and particular NAEYC standards stated in their course syllabi. By and large, the eportfolio serves as a catalyst for gauging the many layers of reflections and professional competencies that instructors and students are systematically developing as they are connecting pieces of the ECE curriculum together. There are, however, challenges that evolve in tandem with the development of the eportfolio at BMCC.

Some Challenges Associated With the Electronic Portfolio Development at BMCC

Faculty development, as a criterion for transformative learning (Cranton, 1996; Harvel, 2008), is a critical area in the creation of eportfolios at BMCC. When we instituted the eportfolio in 2006, all the fulltime faculty received formal training, but the adjunct faculty did not. The program developed a strategy whereby members of the eportfolio committee serve as point-persons to provide one-on-one workshops to part-time and new fulltime instructors. Another challenge relates to the coherence and integration of the eportfolio in course syllabi without encroaching upon academic freedom. The platform currently in use is standard-driven, and there are specific sets of NAEYC principles assigned to every course in the ECE curriculum. Some of the instructors in the program do not like the idea of incorporating those standards in their course syllabi, raising concerns about their academic freedom. There are also those who feel that the grades, comments and feedback they wrote on student work should not be reflected on the artifacts that students compile and exhibit in their portfolios.

Moreover, the question that who owns the eportfolios is a key in getting faculty involved and on-board in the implementation process. Worth noting, the eportfolios are password protected and can only be seen if the students send links to allow their instructors to view these databases. The program procures students free storage space on a server to keep their portfolios for a long time after graduation, but only program administrators—not instructors—can access student passwords. Furthermore, they can copy with their portfolios on a CD-ROM or a portable drive, but those folios remain the college's property. The students cannot delete their eportfolios on the program's server.

Opportunities Arising From the Implementation of Teacher Education Portfolios at BMCC

The Chinese character for education carries a double entendre: It means both challenge and opportunity. Arguably, educational challenges are often accompanied by opportunities for new learning, the stretch of creativity and reflection on the process of knowledge construction. The eportfolio implementation process has enabled BMCC's ECE program to re-adjust its syllabi with hopes of making learning and teaching more transparent. Instructors are invariably talking with one another about ways to develop their courses to achieve targeted learning outcomes, and the students use eportfolios to document what and how they are learning. In addition, there is a good deal of formal and informal conversations as well as an unprecedented cross-fertilization of ideas among colleagues within and outside of BMCC around the eportfolio development process. Two of my colleagues and me were awarded a small grant from a FIPSE (Fund for Improvement of Postsecondary Education US Department of Education) project with an invitation to join a seminar at LaGuardia Community College, where we shared best practices with other professors from both public and private colleges and universities that are implementing eportfolios throughout the Mid-Atlantic and Northeastern seaboard states. Our participation in the "Making Connections" seminar at LaGuardia has been beneficial to his colleagues and the author as we collect more tools, insights and wisdom to rethink pedagogy and carry out a forthcoming study

on student perceptions of teacher education eportfolio implementation at BMCC.

Implications for Teaching and Learning With Eportfolios in the Academic Community

This paper argues that the implementation of the eportfolio creates both a weblike and a spiraling effect on teacher education at BMCC. Whereas the spiraling effect is primarily manifested through the refinement of pedagogy, the re-adjustment of goals and values of faculty in the ECE program, the webbing effect is felt throughout the challenges and transfer issues that the faculty and students face in the construction of eportfolios for future endeavors. It is equally important to note that both types of effects somehow overlap and create a (tertiary) ripple effect on each other. In that sense, both the spiraling and the weblike effects are dynamic in and of themselves, and they also operate in ways that are both cyclical and linear. In clear terms, there are new challenges and triumphs that emerge when a program decides to institute eportfolios. For this reason, there is a need to conduct research on how this tool is impacting different areas of the program. The results of the study will help the program to re-adjust its goals and assessment approaches. The ECE program at BMCC is not exempt from this recommendation.

The BMCC motto, “Start here, go anywhere” implies that this college is conscious of its transfer facilitation role. Suffice it to say that every community college has its own set of values, ethos, goals and strategic vision to uphold, preserve, achieve and refine as it thrives to accomplish its institutional mission. What also matters is that community colleges can learn from one another despite of their different philosophies, traditions, cultures and modus operandi. While community colleges may be operating in different places at different times, they are not necessarily so different that they should not continue to explore ways to connect with one another and share best practices.

The portfolios that students have created, nonetheless, need to be studied systematically. While the ECE program hopes that students will transit with their eportfolios to four-year institutions, and that these tools will be useful after graduation, but there are no data confirming those expectations. If the eportfolios are to be used for sustaining achievements and ensuring success in the students’ journey to becoming certified teachers, it makes sense to find out what values four-year institutions and employers are ascribing to these tools that reflect who the students are in many ways. To achieve this objective, there needs to be ongoing conversations between BMCC’s early childhood professors and their counterparts at the four-year institutions with which they have articulation agreements. Further research is also needed to examine the impact of eportfolio implementation on articulation agreements and alignments of learning outcomes between community and senior colleges.

Conclusion

The BMCC eportfolios are arguably a standard-based structure that is used for both integrative learning and reflective practices. This tool is instituted in the ECE program and its primary purpose is the promotion of student reflection. Interestingly, instructors in the program do not utilize student portfolios for summative assessment and grading. Likewise, they do not judge the students’ reflective writing on the NAEYC professional standards, given that students’ reflections are occurring in a spiraling manner and that new artifacts are continually being collected and selected for the portfolios from one course to the next. Equally noteworthy is the assumption that students and their professors are invariably making connections in a weblike manner as they construct knowledge through interactions with diverse groups of professionals, colleagues at four-year

institutions and other stakeholders. Some of those types of learning somehow make their way fully or partially in the forms of course assignments, artifacts and reflections on the student portfolios. Additionally, there is a good deal of measurable and non-measurable kinds of professional competencies that are being constructed and refined through those different levels of interactions. Furthermore, new challenges and opportunities constantly emerge in the creation of portfolios to demonstrate how well program goals are being achieved. Lastly, it is arguably extremely difficult, if not impossible, to develop systematic assessment measures and grading systems to adequately capture and account for all those kinds of knowledge constructions that are evolving through the digital portfolio implementation.

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