Electronic Portfolios for Whom?

The literature doesn't discuss e-portfolio use to meet student needs and concerns but to support administrative efforts to solve long-term curricular issues

By **Javier I. Ayala**

Electronic portfolios are a recent technology wave hitting the coast of higher education. Since 2000, more than 300 articles have appeared on the topic. Electronic portfolios are described as the panacea for potentially problematic issues ranging from student learning to standards, advising, job hunting, and assessment. The surge of attention raises a question, though: Are electronic portfolios really being used in the manner touted?

To date, administrators and other change agents have capably articulated the importance of electronic portfolios;

hence you might infer that the talk is matched with a walk in line with student needs and concerns. I argue that this is far from the case. In fact, much of what passes under the rubric of student needs and concerns in relation to electronic portfolios is nothing more than an attempt to solve curricular issues that have plagued higher education for decades, the least of them being student learning.

Much of the discussion on electronic portfolios centers on providing an opportunity for students to demonstrate their knowledge and skills.

Additionally, many of the benefits associated with electronic portfolios are described as improving student learning. In reality, very few studies include student viewpoints. Of 300 articles I reviewed, fewer than 15 (5 percent) used students' voices to illustrate student concerns and needs. When articles did mention students, electronic portfolios were done unto them and not by them. That is to say, administrators did most of the planning and design of electronic portfolios for students.

As for the learning benefits associated with electronic portfolios, more than two-thirds of the articles I reviewed focused primarily on assessment and accountability issues. These discussions focused on whether assessment would be used for summative purposes. Other studies focused on whether successful portfolio development should be pegged to overall program performance and student archiving systems.

So my questions are quite pertinent:
- Whose knowledge and skills are promoted if portfolios are done unto students?
- If student learning is the primary concern, why do the preponderance of studies focus on assessment and accountability issues?

I would argue that the knowledge promoted under the guise of electronic portfolios is hardly student-centered. Very little research exists integrating student voices into the dialogue of electronic portfolios. The voices that are integrated are primarily those of administrators and some faculty.

The over-emphasis on assessment and accountability issues in relation to electronic portfolios also indicates that student issues and concerns remain at the margins, not at the center of the discussion. Student issues and concerns involve promoting student learning. To date, no discussions mentioning student-centered pedagogy or student development theory have infiltrated the discussion on electronic portfolio development and design.

No doubt many are riding the electronic portfolio wave with no real vision of its optimal development and ultimate value. Once the surge of interest recedes, many folks will tumble, fast. The ones most hurt by this will probably be the students who created electronic portfolios in response to campus or course requirements established without adequate regard to their effectiveness in higher education.

I believe the crash can be prevented—or at least alleviated—by those who headed toward higher ground as the wave came in. These folks can take three steps to make electronic portfolios more meaningful for students.

The first step in making electronic portfolios more student-centered is to slow down the portfolio development process. Slowing down will allow involving more students and faculty in the process, not just the enthusiasts. Both new and critical faculty can provide fresh perspectives and produce a more useful product.

The second step is to democratize the electronic portfolio development process by privileging students' needs and concerns. Electronic portfolios should be meaningful to students. Hence, electronic portfolios should be built on a constructivist knowledge paradigm, not a top-down mandate. Constructivism will not only motivate the key users but also represent the knowledge most useful to all university stakeholders participating in the electronic portfolio process.

The third step is to acknowledge that electronic portfolios might not be necessary for your institution right now. Serious, thoughtful discussion about *why* electronic portfolios are valuable has not appeared in the literature, which means very little debate occurs once administrators decide to move forward. However, such debate is necessary for successful implementation.

The tidal wave of electronic portfolios has hit. Implementers who have not thoughtfully addressed the key issues outlined here will eventually come crashing down. Nevertheless, there is hope. Start by conducting a true assessment of student needs and concerns and finish by critically reflecting on whether electronic portfolios benefit your institution. Electronic portfolios for whom? At the moment, not for students—but they could be. *e*

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