

ePortfolios for music educators: Parameters, problems and possibilities

Peter Dunbar-Hall, Jennifer Rowley, Michael Webb and Madeleine Bell

University of Sydney, Sydney, NSW, Australia

peter.dunbar-hall@sydney.edu.au

ABSTRACT

This paper discussed the introduction of ePortfolios into a music education degree program. The methodology used to design a suitable ePortfolio, the content required for inclusion in ePortfolios, and problems that the designers had to address are explained. As the project proceeded, issues not originally expected developed: how ePortfolios would be integrated into students' academic work; how ePortfolios would be used to demonstrate students' music and teaching abilities outside university contexts; ePortfolios as response to government imposed teacher accreditation expectations; ePortfolios as demonstration of student multiple identities; and issues of technology students needed to develop and refine. Through these issues, ePortfolios were shown to be more than demonstration of training, and have become a way to interpret many of the implicit expectations of music education training.

INTRODUCTION AND THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The ability to design, produce, and utilize a personal ePortfolio is increasingly becoming a requirement of music educators, therefore of their pre-service training. Rather than assume that an ePortfolio is an electronic version of a printed curriculum vitae, this paper proposed that due to the specifics of music as a performative, creative, and pedagogic undertaking, relevant technology provides a range of ways for students to comprehensively present themselves in potential professional situations. Additionally, the fact that many music education students maintain music and music teaching profiles outside those of their studies means that they have a wider range of aspects of themselves to demonstrate in ePortfolios than students in some other teaching disciplines. These issues were investigated through explanation of the introduction of ePortfolios into a pre-service music education degree program at an Australian university.

The introduction of ePortfolios into this Music Education degree program fulfilled a number of aims. It implemented a university-wide policy that all students will utilize ePortfolios, and a faculty policy by which technology was integrated into all areas of this undergraduate music education degree. ePortfolios are not only outcome based – they can assist students to acquire and develop skills in information technology, and through their use of multimedia, lead towards understanding and manipulation of current film-making techniques (Ruby, 2008). They provide a way to link student learning to university-wide generic skills-graduate attributes and to government imposed accreditation standards for teachers. The decisions they

require allow students high levels of creativity and independence in presentation of themselves as reflective musicians and educators. They raise issues of professional identity and self-reflection, and allow discussion of other areas of pre-service preparation, in this way becoming a medium for teaching and learning in themselves.

PURPOSE OF THE PROJECT AND METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this project was to assess the viability of and introduce the use of ePortfolios as a regular component of pre-service music education training. This initial purpose created a subsequent set of aims, best expressed as questions:

- what would be the benefits of ePortfolios for students?
- what problems would students need to address in creating ePortfolios?
- what content would be mandated and why?
- what electronic format would be adopted as the preferred model?
- what would be implications for teaching and resources in this degree?
- how would ePortfolios influence the nature of the degree program?
- how would ePortfolios be assessed?
- how would ePortfolios be integrated into student workload?

The methodology that emerged from this statement of purpose was a type of grounded theory “inductively derived from the study of the phenomenon it represents” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 23). As “analytic interpretations” of each issue were made, they were used to “focus further data collection” that in turn was used to “inform and refine . . . developing analyses” (Charmaz, 2000, p. 509). Methodology was based on studying the possibilities offered by ePortfolios to be able to utilize their potential as (1) demonstration of student skills, (2) response to professional requirements, and (3) a site of learning and thus of teaching.

To assess their uses in similar contexts and to identify potential problems, literature on ePortfolios was considered. Literature reviewed indicates an exponential increase in their introduction into higher education (Batson, 2002), and their advantages. Batson (2002, p. 1) for example, noted that “Electronic portfolios have a greater potential to alter higher education at its very core than any other technology application we’ve known thus far.” Other research indicates that ePortfolios are common in degree programs leading to professional accreditation, such as training in health

education (Garrett & Jackson, 2006; Lewis et al., 2009; McCready, 2007) and teacher preparation. The field of teacher preparation is the most advanced in thinking about ePortfolios and there is significant literature on their use with pre-service teachers (Adamy & Milman, 2009; Imhof & Picard, 2009; Lin, 2008; Penny & Kinslow, 2006). However, research on music education and ePortfolios is limited. A number of studies investigated the implementation of ePortfolios and problems they pose, including access to adequate storage space, server reliability, security, and privacy of data (Batson, 2002; Lorenzo & Ittleson, 2005a, 2005b; Sherry & Bartlett, 2005; Wetzel & Strudler, 2005).

The aims and objectives of the degree program, university generic attributes, and official government accreditation parameters for teachers, constituted the initial data of the project, as they mandate the content and format of ePortfolios, providing the basis for other content. Collecting these was the first step of the process. From them, other issues emerged, consideration of which became a subsequent methodological stage. In this second stage, more conceptual issues were canvassed, including how ePortfolios would be integrated into students' studies, how they would reflect the nature of the degree program (which includes high levels of musical creativity and participation in non-Western music activity). From these, other areas developed: ePortfolios as representation of music educators' multiple identities; and ePortfolios as demonstration of students' development as educators over the four years of the degree. Through these areas, ePortfolios began to be seen as conceptual sites and to take on a role as a medium for teaching and learning, rather than acting solely as representation of what students had achieved or could do. The methodological question of electronic format was solved by the institutional decision to use Pebblepad as the preferred mode of student ePortfolios (see Pebblepad, 2009). In this form, ePortfolios would be archived centrally and remain accessible to students after graduation.

SYNTHESIS OF FINDINGS

In this section of the discussion, after reporting on the mandated content of ePortfolios, we investigated three conceptual areas that emerged from the project: (1) how ePortfolios could be integrated into student workloads; (2) how ePortfolios could address expectations of teacher accreditation bodies; and (3) how ePortfolios could be a medium for expressing multiple identities.

Mandated content

Realization was made that ePortfolios, through their use of documents, images, and sound and film files could comprehensively show the range of students' universities studies as musicians and music educators. Therefore, it was decided that a student would include the following in an ePortfolio:

- sound/film file of a performance
- sound file of a musical composition and/or arrangement
- pages of the score of an original composition and/or arrangement

- a film clip of each of an example of teaching, and leading an ensemble
- film clip of music activity outside university settings
- film/sound files of experience in non-Western music activity
- pdfs of official documents (including reports on Practice Teaching, Result Transcripts)
- pdfs of successful lesson plans.

Integrating ePortfolios into student workloads

ePortfolios were introduced into the degree program incrementally, that is students were encouraged to collect evidence as it occurred. In this way, implicit learning early in the degree is supported and linked to more explicit learning in subsequent years of the degree. This provided a means of making clear the links between seemingly disparate component areas of the degree, and of creating summative statements of study. An initial step was taken by setting assignments around ePortfolio components in a small number of subjects. For example, students were required to write guided reflective journal entries for a WebCT site; these would become the basis of each student's ePortfolio statement of personal philosophy. Classroom management plans and personal profiles were written by students. As with reflective journals, these were positioned as discrete tasks that would eventually contribute to complete ePortfolios. While students were in schools on Practicum, they were encouraged to collect relevant sound/film files for use as demonstration of their skills and abilities in schools. At the same time, students were set the task of compiling logs of their music and teaching activities outside their university studies. Again, these logs were positioned as potential components of ePortfolios. The use of recorded/filmed material in this way led to improvements in students' sound/film production skills – an unforeseen advantage of the introduction of ePortfolios. Through setting individual tasks as assignments in subjects, students were developing components of their ePortfolios. As these tasks began to increasingly appear throughout the subjects of the degree, the idea that ePortfolios were an ongoing project requiring continual input was introduced to students. Additionally, this could be used to reinforce for students the incremental, developmental nature of pre-service preparation.

Accreditation

In addition to presenting an academic profile of each student, ePortfolios needed to show the range of music and music education students had become experts in during their studies, and how these addressed the expectations of the NSW Institute of Teachers, a government body responsible for the official accreditation of teachers in schools. Through this last aspect of the ePortfolio, another way was provided through which the ePortfolio could be strongly integrated into the degree program.

So that students graduating with this Music Education degree can be employed in schools, the degree program

is accredited by government authorities. To gain accreditation, the degree must produce teachers who:

1. Know their subject and how to teach it;
2. Know their students and how they learn;
3. Plan, assess and report effectively;
4. Communicate effectively;
5. Create and maintain safe and challenging learning environments;
6. Continue to improve their knowledge and practice; and
7. Are actively engaged in their profession and wider community (NSW Institute of Teachers, 2009, 3).

These added to the parameters for deciding what would be included in ePortfolios. Table 1 provides examples for the types of materials students could use to address each of these expectations.

Table 1. Accreditation criteria and ePortfolio inclusions

The ePortfolio as a medium for expressing multiple identities

An aspect of ePortfolios that emerged as the project proceeded was that of their use to demonstrate the multiple identities of a music educator. Similarly to other forms of music scholarship, such as ethnomusicology, music education can be typified by its reliance on practitioners working in different roles, of students becoming aware of this, and of being confident to manipulate this as a teaching device and a self-learning site. For example, music educators act as creators of music (arrangers, composers, improvisers); performers; leaders of ensembles; pedagogues; researchers; organizers of time, space and equipment; event managers; financial planners; counselors (Gee,

2000-2001; Hill, 2006). By preparing documentation on themselves in these roles for ePortfolios, students could engage in autoethnography (Reed-Danahy, 1997), reflect on themselves and move towards defining their own “academic voices” (Potgeiter & Smit, 2009).

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR MUSIC EDUCATION

The initial aim of this project was to introduce ePortfolios as a means for students to demonstrate professional skills they had acquired as music educators during a four-year degree program, and how these skills responded both to professional accreditation criteria and university expectations of graduates. As the project unfolded, other issues began to develop through which ePortfolios became a means for investigating deeper issues related to pre-service preparation than the merely methodological.

Among these was how ePortfolios could become a medium for unifying the disparate areas of pre-service preparation. Additionally, what began as an outcome of students’ studies became a means for understanding the developmental and incremental nature of pre-service training, a medium for learning and self development, a tool for reflection, a setting for investigation of multiple identities, and a means of drawing together the disparate strands of a degree program. These issues are student-related - in response to them, ePortfolios demonstrated a potential to influence the design and delivery of teaching. Through these professional, methodological and conceptual areas, ePortfolios can make factors of pre-service preparation explicit; simultaneously they have the potential to raise and investigate implicit elements of the preparation of music educators.

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