

E-portfolio and Narrative Organization

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Abstract

This poster identifies core issues that learning designers need to consider when they plan to utilize an e-portfolio for learning purposes. These issues include questions as why should one use an e-portfolio? Another important question is of course what an e-portfolio is in the first place? Yet another question to be dealt with goes to how an e-portfolio is used? The poster starts by reviewing specific learning and sociological theories to identify two main reasons for using e-portfolios in today's educational institutions. Firstly, the e-portfolio is a tool for collecting learning products across classes, courses and programs and a tool for reflection with the aim to construct a meaningful whole out of all the smaller pieces of learning and/or learning products. Secondly, society needs the educational institutions to prepare students to construct a meaningful life in a world that's often experienced to be chaotic whether we regard it postmodern or not. The poster introduces theory beyond the traditional portfolio theory, that is theory on technology and media, to help bridging the theoretical gap between traditional paper based portfolios and e-portfolios based on interactive flexible hypermedia. The poster thus researches e-portfolios from one specific perspective: The student is seen as the architect and creator of his own portfolio and a narrator of his own learning and identity since the poster suggests that the structuring and re-structuring of an e-portfolio may be interpreted as creation of a narrative by the student.

Keywords

E-portfolio, learning design, adult learners, narrative organization.

Introduction

We live in a complex and perhaps even hyper complex society. Changes happen fast and to an extent that has not been seen in pre-modern societies. The individual is facing a growing diversity in all areas of life and infinite choices to make; who he wants to be, what he wants to be, what he wants to do, where he wants to go, etc. There is no such thing as a stable identity. He must become actively engaged in these continuing decisions, constantly develop and thereby create his own biography. I will return to these issues and deepen the theoretical insight. At this point I just turn to a pedagogical tool that supports construction of meaning from a series of apparently isolated pieces, the learning e-portfolio, to start investigating the potential of the e-portfolio in supporting individuals in construction of more stable knowledge and a more stable identity. A portfolio can be oriented towards processes as well as products. Ellmin (2001) describes the purpose of portfolio as a visualization of learning and results, as an elucidation of development needs, as a visualization in relation to one's own learning, and as consciousness-raising regarding ways of learning and thinking. Portfolio is seen as a way of supporting reflexive thinking or meta-cognition, i.e. knowing about knowing or cognition about cognition. The learning researcher Knud Illeris (1999) suggests that meta-cognition implies the idea that across the different learning processes an overall, general kind of learning exists, that places the other learning processes in an overarching perspective. This suggests that in order to support meta-cognition in the use of portfolio weight must be put on particular learning processes as well as on an overarching perspective.

Narrative Organization

Although the section above is concerned with understanding what a portfolio is it does not lead to a specific definition. It merely suggests that portfolio is seen as kind of a briefcase that looks different according to purpose, content and structure. But how can we understand the construction portfolio itself? One possible way is to look at portfolio from a narrative perspective. According to the American psychologist Bruner (2004), the

human being is born with a primitive predisposition for narrative organization. As newborns we organize our perception of the world in a distinct narrative way. We learn in and about the world through construction of narratives and we organize our understanding of the world by means of narrative structures.

According to Bruner (1999) human beings organize and handle their knowledge about the world in two prevalent ways, which they also use to structure immediate experiences. These are the logo-scientific way of thinking and the narrative way of thinking. They are basically different regarding causality. The logo-scientific way of thinking sees causality as a matter of truth between incidents, for example 'if x then y', whereas the narrative way of thinking focuses on a probable causality and particular connections between incidents, for example 'the king died and then the queen died' (Bruner 1986). According to Bruner (1999) the individual constructs a version of himself in the world by his narratives. The British sociologist Anthony Giddens (2004) also describes narratives as important for the individual's identity in that he says that a person's identity is dependent on the person's ability to keep a special narrative going. Thus, narratives are important for the individual's ability to create and re-create his identity. The changes in self-perception that the student goes through in an education can be seen as changes in the narratives that the student tells about himself.

A way of understanding portfolio in an educational context could be as a narratively organized archive containing interactions with and in the world, an archive that contains products from the beginning of an education (and perhaps products from earlier education), ongoing products, descriptions of planned products as well as reflections upon all elements. By placing and organizing content in a portfolio the student is given the possibility of reflection upon what he does as well as what he thinks and how he thinks. In other words, the portfolio becomes a space for initiating a movement from a practical to a discursive consciousness when the student not only places final products in his portfolio but also reflections on why and how the product turned out the way it did. With the words of Paulson, Paulson & Meyer (2003 p. 62) 'Portfolios can become a window into the student's heads, a means for both staff and students to understand the educational process at the level of the individual learner.' By visualizing products, processes and thoughts it becomes possible to discuss them and reflect on them and thereby gain insight into patterns of thinking and acting. This insight can be used to deliberately repeat or change patterns.

Supporting Narrative Organization

To sum up issues of importance to the designer these theoretical assumptions suggest that the designer should make room for the learner to create a narrative – that is allow the learner to arrange and re-arrange his repository representing interactions with and in the world instead of only allowing a strictly temporal organization of the repository. The designer should also consider how the learner can be allowed to experiment with parallel competing narratives organizing the same interactions in and with the world differently. Thus, further into the understanding of portfolio support of learning I will return to the ICT and media perspective to develop the understanding of the material from which the portfolio is constructed further.

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