

## ISSUES AND CHALLENGES OF USING WEB PORTFOLIOS: AN ANCIENT APPROACH IN A NEW ENVIRONMENT

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### ABSTRACT

This paper reports on the initial findings of a doctoral project exploring the use of Web portfolios in the training of pre-service ESL teachers in Malaysia. Web-based portfolios or Web portfolios were introduced in a computer-assisted language learning (CALL) course offered at a teacher training institution in Malaysia. Its use is twofold: as an assignment of the CALL course where students display their understanding of CALL, and as a learning approach that fosters collaboration and reflection. Through focus group interviews, the paper highlights issues and challenges experienced by students throughout their development of Web portfolios in the CALL course. Initial findings suggest that tensions do exist between the use of portfolios as an assessment tool and its use as a learning tool. Conflicting expectations of students owing to their limited understanding of the portfolio concept and their unfamiliarity with the Web as a learning environment are identified as the two main challenges for Web portfolio success in the CALL course.

**Keywords:** Portfolio, Web portfolio, teacher training, computer-assisted language learning.

### INTRODUCTION

Portfolios, in general, have been known to be used since centuries ago. While there has already been a long tradition of their use in various disciplines, the application of portfolios has recently gained popularity in the field of education. Studies have reported that when used as an alternative form of assessment, portfolios create valuable opportunities for students to document and showcase their learning (Barrett, 2000; Barrett, 2011; DiMarco, 2006). However, there are a number of conflicting views with regards to their application. Of particular interest is when portfolios are used both as a learning and assessment tool.

### THE WEB PORTFOLIO CONCEPT

A Web portfolio is defined as an electronic portfolio that is delivered via the Internet and presented as Web pages instead of the other typical formats of delivery platforms such as CD-ROM and DVD (DiMarco, 2006). A Web portfolio also allows users to include artefacts in several media types that are organised using hypertext links (Barrett, 2000). The concept underlying the construction of Web portfolios in this study is derived from the 'Learning Portfolio Model' by Zubizarreta (2004). There are three dimensions to this model: documentation, collaboration and reflection. In this study,

these three dimensions are further developed to include two other dimensions: technology and assessment. The development of Web portfolios in the study was also designed to align well with constructivist approaches in learning where learning is viewed as “an active process of constructing rather than acquiring knowledge” (Duffy & Cunningham, 1996, p. 171).

## **METHODOLOGY**

The participants were first year pre-service ESL teachers enrolled in a computer-assisted language learning (CALL) course in a teacher training institution in Malaysia. Their participation required them to each develop a learning Web portfolio for the CALL course within a seven-week period. Students’ experiences in using Web portfolios as a learning and assessment tool were drawn through focus group interviews. A total of 25 students participated in focus groups interviews and seven focus groups were conducted. The focus group interviews were audio-taped and transcribed.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

As a product and a learning tool, Web portfolios were found to be a unique platform for students to display their learning experiences. Students claimed to have included their assignments from the present and previous semesters. They have also allowed other students access to view their work with an aim of exchanging learning experiences. As an assessment tool in the CALL course, many students commented that they had spent a lot of time using technology to project their personality in their Web portfolios. This resulted in many of them to embark on new learning experiences discovering various Web applications available on the Internet. However, it was found that students had issues in identifying the true value of their Web portfolios. Firstly, students pointed out that the development process was a challenge for them as they were still unclear of the of the learning portfolio concept. They had regarded the Web portfolio more of a storage space rather than a space to enhance their learning experiences. Secondly, students were also found to be unfamiliar with the Web as a learning environment. The students mentioned that they had to spend a lot of time online to complete their Web portfolio and some resorted to asking help from more computer competent course mates because they were unable to proceed on their own. From the feedback gathered, there seems to be more grounds for exploration in terms of the students’ use of Web portfolios. Although there were students who have used their Web portfolios as a learning tool to reflect on their previous work and to learn from their past mistakes, many did not fully explore the dynamic nature of Web portfolios instead used them ‘static’ online space. In other words, characteristics of the ancient form of portfolios were still evident even when used in a ‘new’ environment. Further investigation is also required to ease the tension that exists between the use of Web portfolios as a learning and assessment tool.

## **CONCLUSION**

To conclude, the use of Web portfolios in the CALL course had a lot of potential as a tool students use to display their computer skills and as a unique platform for them to express their individuality as learners. However, there were clearly some issues and challenges when Web portfolios were used both as a learning and assessment tool. As

part of further improvement, it may be worth considering the development process within the CALL course be improved and more practice in the use of Web portfolios be given to students.

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