Implementing Webfolios in Principal Preparation Internships: Pluses and Pitfalls*

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Abstract

North Carolina is one of several states that have begun to incorporate the components of the Framework for 21st Century Learning in its focus on school leadership development and support. A principal preparation program in rural eastern North Carolina initiated and designed webfolios for submission of evidences of internship learning experiences. Implementation and evaluation results from the pilot year 2007-08 indicated full implementation by both students and faculty. This paper will describe the process, perceptions, and lessons learned from students in the initial pilot group.

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1 Introduction

Whether stored on paper or in bytes, portfolios provide a means for individuals to showcase work that demonstrates reflection and progress over time (Montgomery, 2001). Webfolios, one format of electronic

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[1]http://ijelp.expressacademic.org

portfolios, reflect the web-based or online version of a portfolio which can range from a simple web page to a complex application with processes such as data entry, storage, retrieval and reporting in a standardized fashion with multiple levels of user access. Helen Barrett, a recognized leader in educational usage of electronic portfolios, provides that interactivity is a key characteristic of the Web 2.0 iteration of electronic portfolios, referring to them as ePortfolio 2.0, blog-folios, wiki-folios, or iPortfolios-where these type of portfolios "have the potential to change with the pedagogy of interaction" (Soloman & Schrum, 2007, p. 173). With the current conversations from national groups such as the Partnership for 21st Century Skills (www.21stcenturyskills.org[2]) that propose a need for the development and mastery of information, media and technology skills and incorporate technology-enhanced assessment, the incorporation of webfolios for online assessment and reflection is an important topic for principal preparation programs to consider in their delivery systems.

2 North Carolina Context

The Department of Public Instruction in North Carolina, like several other states, has begun to integrate the components of the Framework for 21st Century Learning within the public school curriculum (www.21stcenturyskills.org[3]) and its standards for evaluating school leaders. With these new standards, Institutions of Higher Education in North Carolina have been required to revise and revision their principal preparation programs to not only meet the usual national standards but to also prepare future leaders to integrate these 21st century learning skills. One innovation for North Carolina university systems will be the development and implementation of webfolios portfolios in the revisioning of their principal preparation programs.

East Carolina University (ECU) is the largest producer of school leaders in North Carolina. Its output is critical to the state due to its geographic location east of the I-95 corridor where the majority of school districts are rural with high levels of poverty and a growing number of English language learner students (NCDPI, 2007). Upon graduation, most of the students enrolled in ECU's principal preparation program return to their local districts. In conjunction with the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction's (NCDPI) focus on revisioning principal preparation programs, ECU has added an additional assessment tool – the use of webfolios that contain evidences and artifacts of graduates' proficiency at the pre-service level for school leaders. Incorporating portfolios as evidence of student outcomes that align to state and national education standards is a widely used approach to meet the accreditation requirements of programs and institutions (Strudler & Wetzel, 2005). For North Carolina's universities, the requirement of program webfolios per student will be a mandate in the near future. In anticipation of the program webfolio requirement the faculty in the principal preparation program at ECU initiated the use of webfolios fall 2007.

At ECU, as in many institutions, internship portfolios have been used to house artifacts that make connections to standards and student learning (Strudler & Wetzel, 2005). Therefore, the internship was a logical place for the initial integration of webfolios due to the fact that a portfolio was an existing requirement that could seemingly become an electronic folio. In addition, the internship had requirements for students that called for collections of artifacts and evidences that met the North Carolina School Executive Standards.

3 Method

This descriptive study presents the initial implementation process of selecting and using a webfolio for a principal preparation internship. In addition the evaluation of the implementation process will be described.

3.1 Sample

Faculty (n=12) supervising students completing the internship and all interns (n=79) for the school year 2007-08 used webfolios. One of the intern supervising faculties was also the coordinator of the webfolio

[2] http://www.21stcenturyskills.org/
[3] http://www.21stcenturyskills.org/

implementation. The year-long internship was completed by students completing their final year in the Masters of School Administration 2007-2008.

3.2 Facets of Implementation of the webfolio

Selection of webfolio tool. There are two venues to webfolio development: off-the-shelf tools such as Microsoft Office and Web-based systems such as TaskStream (Strudler & Wetzel, 2005). After researching available venues the faculty selected TaskStream as the webfolio application. One reason for the selection of TaskStream was the technical support offered by the Web-based system. The support was immediate and uninterrupted. Another reason for selecting this application was the cost factor. At the time the faculty decided to take initiative and use webfolios there was (and still is) no funding for the implementation of this innovation. TaskStream did not incur any additional costs to the department or the faculty. The cost associated to this Web-based system was to the students upon subscription. In order to not overburden students, the faculty decided not to require textbooks and in place of the textbook students subscribed to TaskStream. A final consideration that led to the selection of TaskStream was the fact the Web-based system provided storage and tools to manage and generate reports specifically aligned with accreditations standards. This also meant that there would not be a need for a technology commitment from the university to maintain files.

Implementation process. The faculty coordinating the implementation of TaskStream translated the existing internship portfolio outline into a Web-based format. Faculty and students received instructions on utilizing webfolios in many ways that included handouts, demonstration, overview sessions in computer lab, and individual appointments. During the year-long internship students met once a month for internship seminars and webfolio instruction. In addition, faculty would provide individual help during their school observation visits. Change is complex and takes time (Hall & Hord, 2001) and this case was no different. Faculties were willing to try the new Web-based application yet many times commented on the challenge to learn a new venue. Students also made similar comments along the way in addition to expressing difficulty in accessing the internet in many rural areas of the eastern part of the state. The key to the success of the implementation was appointing one faculty to facilitate the process. It was comfortable and important for all of those involved to turn to a person that would be available to help and in this case it was the university faculty. As the year progressed, the familiarity with the application helped with the process of uploading evidences and artifacts. By the end of the school year all students completed their webfolios and all faculty evaluated the webfolios via the Web-based system.

4 Results

Upon completion of the internship, students and faculty were asked to complete a survey on the use of webfolios adapted from a survey developed by Dr. Helen Barrett at the University Of Alaska Anchorage School Of Education. In addition, the webfolio application also allowed for several reports to be used in comparison to student and faculty perceptions.

4.1 Reports of usage

Students reported spending an average of 132 hours on the development and completion of their webfolios during the internship with a reported average of 4.4 hours per week. From a TaskStream report, students typically shared their work 24 times during a 9 month period with the faculty supervisors assigned to support and evaluate their internship experience.

4.2 Student reports on the process

Several different survey questions were incorporated in the evaluation process to gather feedback regarding students' perceptions of the incorporation of the webfolios. Following a five point Likert scale with lower responses indicating less agreement, the interns' responses indicated that the primary purpose of the webfolio

was to serve as a formal summative assessment of their internship experiences, artifacts and process (Table 1).

Average Ranking of Importance of the Primary Purpose for the Webfolio

To implement a growth plan for the internship	2.7
To develop a reflective school administrator	1.7
To support formative assessment	3.4
To provide an assessment management tool for formal summative assessment of the internship	3.6
To create a presentational portfolio showcasing educational leadership	2.8
N=74	

Table 1

Students were asked to provide feedback to the question "Now that you are finished, how do you feel about your webfolio?" These narrative responses were analyzed and placed into response categories as presented in Table 2. With the exception of 5 respondents, students' narrative responses could be categorized as very positive toward the webfolio usage. The second largest category of student responses to this item also indicated a strong preference for this electronic method of reflection and demonstration of their work.

Counts of Categorized Responses of Interns towards their Webfolios

Student expressed relief, satisfaction, or gave positive feedback about the overall experience	33
Student expressed the idea of learning a lot or the experience as a good tool for the future.	3
Student expressed preferring the webfolio over a traditional method.	13
Student expressed preferring the traditional portfolio method.	2
Student expressed a variety of negative issues regarding the experience.	3
No Response	20
N=74	

Table 2

Regarding the application of the webfolio in actual practice, students were asked to respond to the item "In the future, how do you think you will use or adapt the webfolio?" Narrative responses were analyzed and placed into response categories as presented Table 3. The majority of the students' responses were categorized as indicating that the webfolio would be used primarily as a reference/resource in seeking a leadership position in the schools.

Counts of Categorized Responses of Interns towards Future Usage of their Webfolios

Student expressed they didn't know how they will use the webfolios in the future.	13

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Students expressed to burn their portfolio onto CD or publish it on to the web	4
The student expressed they will use the webfolio as a reference, resource, or in the interviewing process.	26
Student expressed the desire to continue to add to the portfolio.	6
Student expressed the idea of continuing reflecting and developing their professional growth plan using the portfolio method.	17
No Response	8
N=74	

Table 3

4.3 Resources that Support Webfolios

With the transition to a webfolio, there was a need to identify areas of support for the application to support its implementation and success for the students. Table 4 provides the interns' responses to a survey question that highlights the most frequently indicated response for each item. Interns indicated that the full time availability of laptop computers, handouts provided by the University Supervisor and one-one meetings with the university supervisor as the most useful resource in the creation of their portfolios. The usage of the online tutorials offered by TaskStream was the least useful.

Frequencies of Usefulness of Resources for Creating Portfolios

	Did Not Use	Use-But Was Not Useful	Somewhat Useful	Very Useful	Could Not Have Completed Portfolio Without It
Full time use of laptop computers	17	2	2	20	30
Handouts provided by university supervisor	2	2	14	40	14

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Seminar Sessions in computer lab	13	8	21	18	9
One-on-one meetings with university supervisor	7	1	15	36	13
Internet-based tutorials offered by TaskStream	49	6	10	5	2
Help from a friend or relative	36	3	9	17	6

Table 4

4.4 Student suggestions for improvement

Students were also asked to provide feedback concerning improvements for the webfolio development process for the next group of interns. While the majority of the students expressed positive or encouraging remarks (*I feel that this tool has been excellent in being able to collect, organize, and present an accurate reflection of my internship experience.)*, the most frequent concerns focused on technology issues (e.g., *Computers have different formats (home/school).Some items have to be scanned. What is posted on one computer may appear differently on another. Hard copy is always better.*) and suggestions for an examination of ways to streamline the process (e.g., *would have liked a strong rubric for journals and cover sheets and more technology support as I began setting up the webfolio.).*

Students were asked to provide suggestions for improving the webfolio process. Their narrative responses were analyzed and placed into response categories as presented in Table 5. The majority of the students indicated an opinion that the process will improve with future implementations and the need for streamlining information and continued professional development on the application.

Counts of Categorized Responses of Interns towards Problems with their Webfolios

Students expressed the process will improve with time and the need for streamlining information.	11
Student emphasized importance of time management	6
Student expressed the need for more presentations and professional development for interns.	9

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Students expressed the need for interns to be tech savvy and keep hard copies.	6
Student expressed they like the webfolio.	4
Students expressed need for additional formative assessments or possible change of formats.	4
Student emphasized the professors and site supervisors make the difference in successful experiences.	4
No response	30
N=74	

Table 5

In addition, students were asked to provide information about specific problems that they encountered with the webfolio process. Their narrative responses were analyzed and placed into response categories as presented in Table 6. The overwhelming majority of students indicated that technology issues were the greatest source of problems.

Counts of Categorized Responses of Interns towards Problems with their Webfolios

Student expressed information confusion or frustration with process not being stream lined.	1
Student expressed technology issues as problem or general future of technology in general.	23
Student expressed the need for more support and training.	9
Student expressed difficulty with time constraints and workload.	2
Student expressed the process had no problems.	9
Student expressed the need for more prompt feedback from professor or site supervisors.	1
No response	29
N=74	

Table 6

5 Lessons Learned

Overall, interns indicated positive opinions about the usage of webfolios and viewed the application as an important part of the evaluation of their internship experience and see value in its use towards seeking employment as a school leader. Technology support was often cited as a key variable in the implementation of the project and the usage of a primary contact for support and the ongoing training sessions on an individual or small group basis were cited as important to their successful completion of the process.

While the interns' feedback provided one view of the webfolios introduction, a discussion of the lessons learned from the faculty viewpoint offers additional areas of focus.

5.1 One point contact and time

Initially, the idea of implementing webfolios was widely accepted by the faculty. Once the idea became a reality, faculty hesitated. After discussions on postponing the implementation one additional year, faculty decided to continue as planned with the condition that one faculty among them coordinate implementation and instructions for use with students and faculty. Having one faculty coordinating the process was an

effective tool for full implementation. One reason was that students and faculty felt they had a point person to contact with problems. Another reason was that one faculty could keep ongoing notes of implementation issues and incorporate needed changes for the second year of implementation. A lesson learned was that even though there was no monetary investment in implementing webfolio there was a large and unexpected time commitment from the faculty coordinator who also was also supervising interns. Therefore, having one point of contact for the application is helpful but release time might be needed.

5.2 Change takes time and courage

All faculty need to be familiar with the application and its usage and support. In this pilot study, faculty was learning to use webfolios alongside students but the learning perspectives were different. Students learned to create webfolios while faculty learned to review and provide feedback. Therefore when students looked for their supervisors for technical support the standard approach was to connect students with the coordinator. A lesson learned from to allow time for practice and to provide very clear expectations and processes for the use of the online tool.

5.3 Technology issues

Many students completing the principal preparation program at this institution live in rural regions of North Carolina where access to the internet is difficult. Therefore, faculty and students addressed obstacles in order to access adequate levels of technology and support. One particular obstacle was encountered at the monthly seminars held at a local high school. Meetings were typically held in the media center where access to the internet was limited due to the small number of computers and in addition the need for a password to access the internet. Thanks to the collaboration with the school administrators the faculty was able to obtain a temporary password to log on to the internet however there were small numbers of terminals to access. A lesson learned from this is the need to meet in a location where Wi-Fi is accessible and where each student has access to a computer. At this point, the faculty is strongly recommending students to bring their laptops with them. In addition, the meeting locations must have computer labs with internet access.

6 Conclusion

The principal preparation program in this study initiated and designed webfolios for submission of evidences of internship learning experiences during the pilot year 2007-08. Implementation and evaluation results from this pilot year 2007-08 indicated full implementation by both students and faculty. To evaluate this pilot implementation the student interns and faculty shared their perceptions of the process they experienced. Many lessons were learned regarding technical issues that were then incorporated the next year 2008-09. Current students will also be evaluated and perceptions will be compared to that of this initial pilot group.

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