ENGAGING E-PORTFOLIOS IN AN INDEPENDENT LEARNING PROCESS

Jessie Choi [wcchoi@ied.edu.hk], Hong Kong Institute of Education, Hong Kong

Abstract

This study investigates the use of e-portfolios in an independent learning process of learners in English as a second language (ESL). In this study, the instructor uses e-portfolios to manage the self-learning records of learners, to allow learners to interact with peers, and to evaluate performance outcomes. Learners record their self-learning activities using e-portfolios in which they submit and archive the activities they have done. The learners interact with one another through e-portfolios to enhance their learning. By using mixed methodology (survey, interview, instructor's feedback report and analysis of e-portfolios), this study explores how the use of e-portfolios can help in learners' independent learning process in English. The results indicate that learners have a mixed feeling towards the use of e-portfolios to assist their language learning experience. It is still uncertain that e-portfolio meets the needs of learners and provides an efficient and effective way to archive their tasks and facilitate peer feedback. This study also discusses the challenges that users of e-portfolios face in the process of English-language instruction, and the implications of the use of e-portfolios in language learning. It is hoped that the study will enable clearer focus to be given to the use of e-portfolios at both local and international levels.

Keywords: e-portfolios, independent learning, language learning, self-learning

Introduction

Independent learning has been widely promoted and accepted in language environments in recent years (Benson, 2001). It is a well-known fact that learners need to take control of their own learning if it has to be successful. By actively involving in their learning process, learners can enhance their reflective thinking skills, interaction and participation (Schwienhorst, 2007). An important goal of English language education is to develop learners' abilities for pursuing independent learning. As Godwin-Jones (2011) points out, language educator's role is not only providing materials for learning, he/she has to help learners "develop the skills and mindsets that can lead to successful self-guided language study" (p.4).

It has been found that e-portfolios have the potentials of developing learners' independent learning abilities (Herrington et al., 2009; Joyes, Gray & Hartnell-Young, 2010; Little, 2009). E-portfolios can be regarded as a tool "to show the greatest promise in enhancing diverse dimensions of learning and in promoting learners' autonomy" (Chen, 2006, p.69). In line with the developments of Hong Kong Higher Education which aim at the application of more innovative technology-assisted methods of teaching to foster learners' autonomy, the interest in e-portfolio tools and technologies to enhance students' learning experiences has been widening in Hong Kong tertiary institutes. While it is generally agreed that e-portfolios can have a positive impact on learning in many disciplines, the research that has been conducted to date focuses very little on its value to language learning. This study was implemented in an English language classroom at a tertiary institute in Hong Kong with the use of e-portfolios for one of their written assignments. Participants were students enrolled in an academic writing course. The objective the study is to investigate how the use of e-portfolios can help to improve the independent learning

process of learners in English as a second language (ESL). More specifically, the study addresses the following research questions:

- What are the views of the users on e-portfolios in developing their independent learning abilities for learning English?
- What are the challenges users of e-portfolios face in the process?
- What are the implications of the use of e-portfolios in language learning?

Literature review

What are e-portfolios?

Using portfolios is not a new idea in education (Young, 2002). The use of "portfolios" first started in the late 1980s in the writing classrooms of a college, mainly for assessment purposes. With the inclusion of the concept of portfolios in K-12 classrooms, the emphasis of their use was shifted mostly to be "a showcase for learning" (Barrett, 2007), which helped to demonstrate evidence of learners' knowledge, skills and dispositions (Sherry & Bartlett, 2005). The purposes for portfolios kept on changing with an increasing adoption of their use in teaching by educators and government officials (Barrett, 2007). In addition to being dossiers, portfolios were used more as a reflective tool for students' learning activities. Hence, colleges or universities required their learners to use paper formats to record their progress, development and achievements for many years in different programmes. Portfolios were increasingly used as a tool to collect evidence for "learners' progression and achievements to date, and more extended opportunities for reflection and personal development planning (Beetham, 2005).

With the emergence of information age, the use of technology has been increasing in higher education. This development has brought about the integration of the portfolio with technology (Benson, 2009). The process of moving from print portfolios to electronic ones has emerged in many higher education institutions (Ayala, 2006). According to the Pennsylvania State University (Carliner, 2005), e-portfolios are "personalized web-based collections" of previous work with "reflective annotations and commentary related to these experiences". Similar to the paper ones, e-portfolios allow learners to showcase their skills and capabilities as a way to review the developmental possibilities. In other words, they can be used as a "show-and-tell platform (Cohn & Hibbitts, 2004) of academic institutions, which can enable learners to make informed decisions about their work and to demonstrate their achievements. The digital format makes it easier for learners to organize, archive and distribute their work. Learners can also easily integrate multimedia materials and share their work with peers, teachers and others (Wade, Abrami & Sclater, 2005). Consequently, the increasing interest in the potential for e-portfolios has been prompted in many institutions.

According to Barrett (2005), there are basically 2 types of academic portfolios based on the purposes of usage, namely, assessment and learning portfolios. Assessment portfolios focus mainly on the products or outcomes the learner has made to meet the requirements of a course or a programme. The assessment portfolios are viewed as something the learner is required to do, so the sense of it as a learning tool is not strong. Learning portfolios, on the other hand, are collections of work and artefacts assembled by the learner to show their process of learning. The focus of this type of portfolios is to enhance learning and demonstrate the development of the learner over time.

E-portfolios and independent learning

The increasing adoption of online learning mode has resulted in a greater demand for the development of online learning tools in a variety of contexts. There are thus numerous types of online tools which have emerged to facilitate learners and instructors in their language learning and teaching (Godwin-Jones 2010; Warschauer 2010). Language learning has long been regarded as an academic field that widely uses information and communication technologies. Most recently, the use of e-portfolios has been pioneered in language classrooms with the involvement of learners and instructors. Since the notion of using e-portfolios is strongly aligned with the educational philosophy of making learners 'active decision-makers in directing, planning and reflecting on their learning experiences' (Bennett, 2007, p.4), it can be used an independent learning tool to promote language learning.

A widely adopted belief driving language education is that learners should be able to learn independently (Gow & Kember, 1990). The limited contact time and the large class size often undermine the effectiveness of language learning and teaching. To enhance the development of student language skills, language educators have to create a learning environment that can foster autonomous learning of learners, in which learners can learn outside the classroom intensively and extensively. The traditional modes of learning, such as using tutorials or lectures, may not be adequate to assist learners in improving independent learning skills. It is thus crucial to provide more support for the development of students' independent learning skills in the language learning context. This implies that learners have to take "active" responsibility for their learning (Broad, 2006) and develop a lifelong learning culture.

Using e-portfolios to enhance learner autonomy

According to Moore (1973), the essential element of independent learning is promoting learner autonomy, which is about "the will and ability to exercise powers of learning, to overcome obstacles for oneself, to try to do difficult learning tasks, and to resist coercion" (p.667). The theoretical rationale for the promotion of learner autonomy bases on the ideology of constructivism which emphasizes the important role of the learner in the learning process. To achieve effective learning, learners have to take control of what they learn and how they learn. The teacher has to help learners be "effective without reliance on teacher structure" (Andrade & Bunker, 2009, p.49). As Zimmerman (2000) states, learner autonomy is about the combination of ideas, emotions and arrangements made by the learner in attaining the targets he/she set (p.14).

In this situation, the use of e-portfolios can help support and promote learner autonomy as it is learner-centred. They can enable students to fully engage in the learning process when they are developing their e-portfolios. They are useful for students to collect, store, update, and share information (Stefani & Denier, 2005). In the whole learning process, the learner has to take the full control. As a result, e-portfolio has a potential to enhance "learner autonomy". In other words, e-portfolios can provide more opportunities for the engagement of learners, which according to Yancey (2001), "the engaged learner, one who records and interprets and evaluates his or her own learning, is the best learner" (p.83). This is consistent with the above-mentioned constructivist theory, which argues that other than being a passive receiver of knowledge, the learner has to be active, finding their own knowledge and taking control of their own learning process. When they are more familiar with the process, they will understand that they need to focus on their own individual needs and to choose the ways they prefer to learn in order to bring out the best results of their learning.

Using e-portfolios to promote lifelong learning

Proponents of independent learning emphasize that the central aspect of "independent learning" is that it can help learners develop high-level skills (Zutshi, Mitchell & Weaver, 2011), allowing them to be permanent learners who can design their own learning plans and make use of learning tools for accessing information and sharing their work or experiences with others (Sanchez-Villalon, Ortega & Sanchez-Villalon, 2010). The identified high-level skills are self-management skills, critical thinking and creative thinking (Zutshi, Mitchell & Weaver, 2011). It is evident that these skills can be the personal tools for achieving lifelong learning and technology can offer learners possibilities of constructing their knowledge for lifelong learning (Sharples, 2000). E-portfolios can be used to boost confidence of learners in their studies and enhance their self-esteem (Young, 2002), which can help to promote life-long learning among learners. It has been found that e-portfolios can provide learners with their own skills to manage their lifelong learning (Joyes et al., 2009).They enable students to have reflection on their learning, interact with peers and instructors, archive their work and showcase their credentials or achievements (Stefani & Denier, 2005). In the process of making their own e-portfolio, the concept of ownership, which is important for learners, can be cultivated since the e-portfolios can help to record their learning processes. The notion is strongly linked with the philosophy of making learners a competent lifelong learner.

Methodology

Participants

29 students, enrolled in a second-year course in The Bachelor of Education (Primary) and The Bachelor of Education (Music) programmes at a teacher-education institute of Hong Kong, were invited to incorporate the use of e-portfolios in their study for an academic English course during the second semester of 2011-12.

Tasks

One of the tasks of the academic English course was the submission of written descriptions and reflections showing the independent learning activities learners had engaged in for English learning outside the classroom setting. The task was re-designed to have learners use their portfolios as a tool for gathering their written records for the independent learning activities and a commitment to a process of critical reflections. Students were encouraged to engage in the process of selecting, organizing, writing and reflecting.

In total, four e-portfolio tasks for the independent learning activities were required for each student. Students could choose their own activities but they had to have at least one task for the following topics:

- Report of an English lecture or workshop they had attended
- Report of an English learning activity which they had participated (e.g. watching a film)
- Critique of an educational website

In order to prevent students from completing all tasks only near the end of the course and to encourage peer review and revision in the process, the students were asked to submit one task per week starting the fifth week of the course. The work produced by the students would receive comments from their group members (which were 3-4) and their instructor. It was believed that with the provision of peer and instructor's review and revision process, the students could "achieve greater learning effectiveness" (Goodyear et al., 2001, p.66).

Procedures

Students were introduced to the concepts and expectations during the second week of the semester. It was hoped that such a tool would act as a repository and would help students present and review their work and provide feedback.

In the process of preparing for their independent learning activities, students had to select and participate in their chosen activities. Options were given to students. They then recorded their activities in a presentable e-Portfolio. Students posted work once every week (since the fifth week of the course) they did for the Independent Learning Activities in their own custom made e-Portfolios in Mahara, an e-portfolio system with the ability to display learning evidence in a number of different ways and was provided by the Institute. A pre-designed e-Portfolio template was delivered to students to customize and personalize during the demonstration lesson. The work posted could include videos and audio files, PowerPoint slides, essays and reports written, reviews of reading material read in English and websites of educational organizations done as an independent learner.

Their peers and instructor commented on their work after posting and the students were encouraged to reflect on the work they had produced, comments received and to analyse their strengths and weaknesses and plan methods to improve. They were allowed to continually edit work until they felt they could demonstrate to an outsider their best work. As they went through this process, they would be enhancing their ability to communicate in English.

Data collection and analysis

In order to find answers to the research questions, the study employed four research techniques, namely online questionnaire survey, face-to-face in-depth interviews, analysis of the elements in the e-portfolio tasks and instructor's reflective report. All the students of the courses were invited to complete an online questionnaire which provided quantitative data on their views and perceptions of the use of e-portfolios. 10 students were then randomly selected for the face-to-face in-depth interviews which qualitative data and more in-depth information were provided. The online questionnaire and in-depth interviews were administered in the students' classroom by the course teacher. Frequency and percentages were calculated on the obtained data from the questionnaire. Content analysis was carried out for the qualitative data from the interviews. Additionally, students' e-portfolio tasks were checked to find out the elements used to present the assignments and instructor's reflections report was assessed to supplement the findings from the questionnaire and interviews.

Discussion of findings

Questionnaire findings

Twenty-four participants completed the online questionnaire. The response rate was 82 %.

Usage

Section A (Questions 1 to 6) assessed the ease of e-portfolio use. Respondents reflected that doing assignments in the e-portfolio format was difficult for them as only 17 % of the respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement "Doing assignments in the e-portfolio format is not difficult for me". 46 % chose either "agree" or "strongly agree". They were divided on the greater sense of control over their e-portfolios when compared with traditional paper ones (33 % of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed while another 33 %

chose "disagree" or "strongly disagreed"). About half of the respondents found that they had a lot of technical problems when creating their e-portfolio assignments (54 % of the respondents either agreed or strongly agreed) and it was time-consuming to create assignments in the e-portfolio format (50 % of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed). Only 21 % of the respondents did not have technical problems when using e-portfolios and only 17 % indicated they would like to use e-portfolios rather than paper ones. When asked if they preferred using paper portfolios rather than e-portfolios, 50 % of the respondents either agreed or strongly agreed. Nevertheless, 37 % of the respondents found that it was easy to submit the assignments in e-portfolio format. An interesting finding is that among the six questions in this section, 5 of them received most of the responses for the "neutral" answer (except for the one asking if respondents faced a lot of technical problems).

Satisfaction

Section B (Questions 1 to 6) investigated respondents' satisfaction with the learning experience using e-portfolios. Some of the respondents pointed out that they were happy that they could do their e-portfolio assignments at the time convenient to them (37 % of the respondents either agreed or strongly agreed).They did not think that e-portfolio was a great tool to archive their assignments or peers' feedback in e-portfolios was more interactive than using a word document (43 % of the respondents chose "disagree" or "strongly disagree"). Moreover half of the respondents did not regard that e-portfolio was a good language learning tool (50 % of the respondents chose "disagree" or "strongly disagree"). They were divided if the feedback from the instructor could help them improve their work (38 % of the respondents agreed while another 38 % chose "disagree" or "strongly disagree"). Another 42 % of the respondents had "neutral' view on this aspect. Similar phenomenon of having most of the responses on "neutral" to the questions of the section was found (4 out of the six questions had most of the responses on "neutral" – except for the questions asking about the usefulness of instructor's feedback and checking if e-portfolio was a good learning tool).

Usefulness

Section C (Questions 1-8) examined the usefulness of e-portfolios. Nearly half of the respondents found that the usefulness of e-portfolios was on the instructors' feedback to their assignments and the use of multi-media materials in e-portfolios (46 % of the respondents either agreed or disagreed). Moreover, they reported that e-portfolios could encourage the interaction between them and other learners or between them and the instructor (42 % of the respondents chose "agree"). However, the respondents were divided when asked if e-portfolios were useful for encouraging reflections on their writing tasks (33 % agreed but 26 % disagreed or strongly disagreed; and 42 % opted for "neutral") and a useful way to practice writing (21 % agreed but 38 % disagreed or strongly disagreed; and 42 % opted for "neutral). They were also uncertain if feedback from their peers was useful (29 % agreed but 34 % disagreed or strongly disagreed; and 38 % opted for "neutral") and e-portfolios can stimulate them to learn English (42 chose "neutral", 42 % disagreed or strongly disagreed but 17 % agreed). When asked if they had stronger confidence in using English after publishing assignments in their e-portfolios, 42 % of the respondents either disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Effects

Section D (Questions 1 to 6) concerned the respondents' reflections on the changes of their learning style after using e-portfolios. After using e-portfolios for submitting their assignments, respondents found that they could complete assignments before the deadlines (43 % either agreed or strongly agreed) and made changes after reading the feedback from the instructor

(46 % agreed). They were not certain if they used more visually attractive materials (38 % agreed while 21 either disagreed or strongly disagreed; and 42 % chose "neutral"), paid more attention to the presentation of their assignments (33 % either agreed or disagreed; 16 % either disagreed or strongly disagreed; 50 % were neutral), or made more changes to their assignment after reading feedback from peers (25 % of them agreed but 26 % either disagreed or strongly disagreed; but 50 % were neutral). Nearly half of the respondents didn't think that they made plans about when and how to do the e-portfolio assignments (42 % either disagreed or strongly disagreed).

Suggestions

Section E (Questions 1 to 5) asked for the respondents' suggestions for improving the future implementation of e-portfolios. The respondents suggested having more training sessions for using e-portfolios (63 % of them either agreed or strongly agreed) and giving more time for completing each assignment (72 % of them either agreed or strongly agreed). Their opinions were divided when asked if the suggestions, such as allowing more varieties in the form of e-portfolio assignments, asking the teacher to grade the assignments or requiring students to revise and repost their assignments after getting feedback from peers or the teacher, would be useful (nearly half of them opted for "neutral").

Focus-group interview findings

10 participants were randomly selected to participate in an in-depth interview to provide their opinions on seven aspects of the use of e-portfolios: liking for e-portfolios and the reasons behind, advantages and disadvantages of using e-portfolios, difficulties they encountered and suggestions for the use of e-portfolios. Categories in Table 1 list interviewees' opinions on these aspects.

Table 1: Participants' responses to the focus group questions (N =10)

Responses	Number of times reported
Liking for e-portfolio	
Yes	5
No	3
No opinion	2
Reasons for liking	
Makes assignments attractive and detailed	2
More interesting	4
Easy to use	1
Can share my work with others	1
Reasons for not liking	
Needs to learn a lot of functions	1
Wastes time to learn how to use the system	2
Inconvenient	1
Not user-friendly	2
Advantages of using e-portfolios	
Allows sharing of information	3
Offers opportunities for interaction and comments	4
No need to print the assignments out	1
Can submit the assignments before deadlines	1
Improves assignments after getting feedback	2

	User-friendly and easy to use	3
	Environmentally friendly	1
	Could use pictures and videos	2
	Can upload my work at any time	1
Disadvantages of using e-portfolios		
	May have no feedback as peers choose not to comment	1
	Wastes time to learn how to use the functions of the software	1
	Not sure if other people can see my work	1
	Increases workload as uploading photos and designing pages are required	1
	Faces technical problems	3
	Troublesome to hand in my work using the system	1
	Not user-friendly	1
	Not enough background styles for use	1
Difficulties using e-portfolios		
	Don't know much about the functions of e-portfolios	3
	Difficult to use the software	2
Suggestions for future implementation		
	Provides more training sessions	1
	Allows more time for completing each assignment	2
	Uses other systems instead, such as facebook, blogs, or e-learning platform	1
	Simplifies the steps for posting material or makes the system user-friendly	2
	Reduces workload	1
	Gives more guidelines and support	1

The data from the in-depth interviews supplemented and confirmed the questionnaire findings. Regarding the liking for e-portfolios, the opinions were divided. The major reason for supporting the use of e-portfolios was that it was interesting to work with. The advantages reported by most of them were having interactions and sharing information with others. However, the user-unfriendliness and the ample time spent on learning the system discouraged them from using e-portfolios. It is therefore not surprising to find that most of them pointed out the major disadvantage of using the system to produce e-portfolios was that they had to face a lot of technical problems and the major difficulty was also about the use of the Mahara system. In addition, interviewees provided suggestions by which the instructor might improve the use of e-portfolios: allowing students to have more time to complete each assignment; making the system more user-friendly; simplifying the steps for posting material. Moreover some of them suggested having more training for students, reducing the workload, giving more guideline and support and exploring the use of other platforms or systems for posting students' work.

Instructor's feedback

Even though the questionnaire survey and focus group interviews showed that participants still had reservations about the use of e-portfolios as a tool for submitting their independent learning activities, the instructor, who is the writer of this paper, was positive about the e-portfolio use.

Regarding the advantages of the use of e-portfolios, the instructor shared similar views with some of the students: it facilitated the interaction between students and between the instructor and students; and could make students' work more interesting and attractive by using multi-media elements. This technology could also be used to encourage the sharing of work and self-reflections for further improvement. The e-portfolios can archive all students' assignments so

that students could keep track of their own learning progress. Based on the instructor's observation, students were reserved about the use of e-portfolios because firstly they were not familiar with the technology as it was the first time they worked with it. In addition, the course evaluation system, which only offered pass or fail grades, might affect students' motivation for making their assignments in the e-portfolio format as some of them pointed out in the interview: "It's a waste of time; especially this is a non-credit bearing course" (original wordings).

The most challenging aspect for the instructor in using e-portfolios was to provide technical help and monitor the progress (including giving individual feedback for improving the work) of nearly 30 students. The effectiveness of using e-portfolios might be enhanced if the class size could be reduced.

The other aspect that the instructor concerned was about students' motivation, which directly affected their interest in using e-portfolios. As shown in the questionnaire survey and interviews, many of the students could not see the benefits of using e-portfolio format for making their tasks. This explains why they found that it was a waste of time and unworthy using e-portfolios. The use of pass/fail grade for the course might be a factor affecting students' motivation and involvement.

As for the learning results, students who completed the tasks regularly and revised their work based on the advice of the instructor and peers could improve both of the writing and design quality of their work. However, language improvement might not be so obvious over that short period of time.

Having implemented e-portfolios for one semester, the instructor is planning to use the technology with her other classes in the same kind of assignment or other assignments. She will assign more tasks that can enable students to interact with others, share their work and encourage their reflections. Last but not least, the instructor will help students to understand the value of using e-portfolio for their future needs, hopefully an e-portfolio culture could be cultivated.

Analysis of students' e-portfolios

The number of assignments posted by each participant was calculated (the required no. was 4 but some submitted more than the requirement). The peer feedback for the assignments of each participant and the elements used to present their assignments were also checked. Table 2 lists the elements found, which include the number of assignments submitted and the number of peer feedback each participant received for their assignments. It also shows if videos, images or links were used in their assignments.

Table 2: Elements found in students' e-portfolios

	Number of assignments finished	**Number of peer feedback**	**Video**	**Image**	**Link**
Student 1	4	0	No	Yes	No
Student 2	4	7	No	Yes	No
Student 3	4	2	Yes	Yes	Yes
Student 4	4	6	No	Yes	No
Student 5	4	6	Yes	Yes	No
Student 6	2	0	Yes	Yes	Yes
Student 7	4	2	Yes	Yes	No
Student 8	2	0	Yes	Yes	No
Student 9	4	0	Yes	Yes	No

Student 10	4	5	No	Yes	No
Student 11	4	2	Yes	No	Yes
Student 12	4	3	Yes	Yes	No
Student 13	4	3	Yes	Yes	Yes
Student 14	5	0	0	Yes	Yes
Student 15	0	0	0	0	0
Student 16	4	0	No	Yes	Yes
Student 17	6	0	No	Yes	Yes
Student 18	4	3	Yes	No	Yes
Student 19	4	3	No	Yes	No
Student 20	4	2	No	Yes	No
Student 21	4	2	No	Yes	No
Student 22	4	1	No	Yes	No
Student 23	4	0	No	Yes	Yes
Student 24	4	0	Yes	Yes	No
Student 25	4	0	No	Yes	Yes
Student 26	4	2	Yes	Yes	Yes
Student 27	4	7	Yes	Yes	Yes
Student 28	4	7	Yes	Yes	Yes
Student 29	4	2	Yes	Yes	No

In general, most of the participants could manage to submit the required four assignments. Two of them did more than the requirement. Nearly all of them included images in their tasks. Videos were provided by most of them as online lectures or movies were the popular chosen topics. Some of them gave linkages for readers to get more information as they were evaluating a website. Peer feedback was comparatively scarce. Some of them received no comments for their tasks. This reflected that students were either not keen on giving comments or did not know how to comment on others' work.

Discussion

This study has shown that students had reservation on the use of e-portfolios. This result may be due to the unfamiliarity with the technology and the unwillingness to work more for a non-credit bearing course using the e-portfolio format. Since the study was conducted for only one semester, more research on the use of portfolio and its effectiveness are needed to provide more reliable information (Garis, 2007).

Though the results of the questionnaire and interview show that students are reserved about the use of e-portfolios, they generally found that e-portfolio tasks were more attractive and interesting as they could use videos or images; they could interact with other peers or their instructor. The findings suggest that it is feasible to integrate e-portfolios into English learning courses if students and the instructor are more technically ready by having more training sessions and support in the process.

The negative attitude of students on the use of e-portfolio shows that they did not successfully encourage students to engage more in their learning process as some of them still questioned the usefulness of replacing paper portfolios with e-portfolios. They could not realize the value of making e-portfolios for their future needs. This explains why there were only a few of them who stated that they liked using portfolios. More practices or trainings should be provided to cultivate the intrinsic form of motivation among the students.

Another reason for having such a lukewarm attitude on the use of e-portfolios was that students would rather spend more time on their other major subjects which offered credits or grades that were influential to the completion of their programs.

Nevertheless, the comments from the instructor and students support the use of e-portfolios as a tool for facilitating two-way interaction and building an online learning community, which students can share and reflect on their work. E-portfolios can help to reduce the barriers and fear of interacting, thus improving the interaction between learners and learners and also learners and the teacher. The greater conveniences and flexibility of e-portfolios can free learners from any "physical, spatial or temporal boundaries" (Tosh & Werdmullre, 2004). By interacting continuously, an online learning community can be established by learners and the teacher sharing ideas, resources and knowledge. Further, learning with e-portfolios provides a collaborative learning community to engage in in-depth reflection occurring in the online collaborating process which learners can have a clearer understanding of their learning. This can in a way encourage learner autonomy by establishing the ownership of learning. The instructor then has a key role to play in helping students to adapt to the new learning environment and be able to take lead in their own learning process (Chau & Cheng, 2010).

With reference to the above, it can be concluded that the students of this study are not intrinsically motivated to complete the e-portfolio tasks. They cannot associate the completion of the tasks in e-portfolios with self-betterment and their future studies or careers. They are not keen on doing the tasks, giving commenting or doing revisions. This is a sign that they are not ready to be an independent learner. As intrinsic motivation can affect goal achievement (Lai, Chan & Wong, 2009), the major challenge of using an e-portfolio system is to help students develop their autonomy and competency by making them as an intrinsically inspired learner.

Conclusion

This study was the first attempt to implement an e-portfolio system in an English enhancement course in the Hong Kong Institute of Education. The main purpose of the study was to find out the perceptions of students on the use of e-portfolios. Although the instructor's feedback and the analysis of the students' work show that e-portfolio could serve as a tool to incorporate multi-media elements and encourage feedback and revision, the major findings indicate that participants still had reservation on the use of e-portfolios in the English course because they were not familiar with the technology and could not see the real value of creating assignments using e-portfolios. The need to use e-portfolios faced two challenges: First, unlike what had been expected, learners could not easily manage the technical skills of using e-portfolio technologies, and consequently, more difficulties and negative feelings arose than expected. Moreover, not all learners understood and shared the belief in developing learner autonomy and consequently did not perceive its importance to improving their learning. The lack of the motivation might possibly be due to an increased workload which they were not prepared to cope with, especially in a non-credit bearing course. Whatever the reasons are, the reactions of learners are a good indication that motivation is a significant factor for a successful use of e-portfolios. It is imperative to ensure that learners understand the importance of having learner autonomy in their learning environments.

As it is, we have to take steps towards pushing teachers from being "knowledge providers" to becoming facilitators who know how to promote learner autonomy in e-portfolio education. The importance of this change is often overlooked as making the shift from teacher as knowledge provider to facilitator is regarded as reducing a teacher's power and authority. The teacher may feel threatened by the use of e-portfolios; however, it is important that they can move forward by

managing the skills. Increased understanding of the skills and competence in its use will help to develop one's motivation to try incorporating it in their teaching. Having a positive attitude towards the use of technology and merits of learning autonomy increases the motivation and the willingness for the change as a facilitator, thereby making the implementation of e-portfolio approach more likely to be successful.

The key to successfully integrate e-portfolios into English courses lie in the readiness of both the participants and the instructor. The student participants should be technically ready to develop their own e-portfolios and psychologically ready to establish their ownership of learning. In addition, the instructor should be technically ready to design a learning environment that can meet students' needs and psychologically ready to switch from a teacher-centred approach to a learner-centred approach. To achieve a better outcome, it is important that both should work hand-in-hand to support the use of technology in learning.

The governments and international educational units around the world, such as The European Institute for E-learning (EIfEL), are striving to help individuals, especially younger generations, and job seekers to establish e-portfolios (Atwell et al., 2007). Since the development of e-portfolio competencies has been an important policy implemented by most of the countries, the findings of this study may be of an interest and a reference for them.

Implications for using e-portfolios in language learning

In this study, e-portfolio was used as a tool to archive students' assignments and allow them to have reflections on their work based on the feedback from their peers and the instructor. The results of the study echo those of Chau and Cheng (2010) that there are still challenges for students, teachers and institutes if long-term positive effects for using e-portfolios are to be yielded. Thus the findings of this study have some implications for the implementation of e-portfolios in an English language learning environment for both learning and showcasing purposes.

In order to improve the learning process with the use of e-portfolios, the first and foremost thing is to provide more training practices for both students and teachers. Techniques on the use of tools, design of pages, uploading of multi-media elements should be provided. It would be more useful if the training sessions could be given in the orientation period of the Institute, which means before the start of the first semester. As such, students and teachers could have more time to explore the use of e-portfolios. Afterwards, more practices or demonstrations could be provided in lessons and a hands-on lesson should be included to detect the problems students have before they start using the tool. Continuous technical support or training is also needed. One important element of training sessions is to impart the concept of the importance of e-portfolios for future learning and career development. This is crucial as this study shows that students will not be fully involved if they cannot cultivate their intrinsic motivation. As reflected by most of the students in the questionnaire survey and interview, there was little value of using e-portfolios for making their assignments and their opinions were divided about the use of a grading system for their e-portfolio assignments. Although giving marks and grades could be a way to induce forced learning, learning effectiveness will be much enhanced if learning motivation is initiated by students themselves (Losier & Koestner, 1999). Hence, the teacher should introduce the benefits that e-portfolios can bring to users and the rationales for using them from time to time during the course (Brophy, 2004).

As the use of e-portfolios in this study was not only for showcasing students' work, it was also for students to reflect on their English writing work based on peer feedback. Therefore, instead of providing the relevant technical skills, the teacher should also provide some guidelines or

training to present useful and "quality" criticisms, and thus can facilitate the process of commenting and revising. Similarly, to enrich students' feedback, sample "quality" comments and "revised" work should also be available for students to understand clearly the types of comments that can be helpful to writers and the ways to make a good use of "quality" comments. As Fitze (2006) states, communication technological tools can help to create an environment that promotes language learning.

As the students of this study have showed concern about the time constraints of the assignments in the e-portfolio format, teachers, when planning for portfolio assignments and workloads for their students, have to ensure that sufficient amount of time can be given to students to complete their assignments in this "new" format and that students will not be overloaded with the work. This will help to reduce the pressure on students and the chance of developing negative attitudes towards the use of e-portfolios. It is also hoped that by creating an environment that students feel comfortable with, they can take more initiatives in their own learning. Consequently, they can be more responsible for their learning (Jacobs and Farrell, 2001). The study reveals the value of using e-portfolios to help with English language learning and encourage collaboration, as well as transferring the autonomy of learning to the hands of learners. As a result, it provides evidence of implementing the use of e-portfolios in the higher education context. What was revealed by the analysis of this study in relation to the implementation, benefits and limitations is of greatest interest to the globalized world.

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