
TOWARDS EMPLOYABILITY: THE ePORTFOLIO AS A LINK BETWEEN RPL AND PFL

David John Hornblow (*The Open Polytechnic of New Zealand*)

Abstract: In this work in progress, the researcher is exploring the suitability of ePortfolio development as the process and content of an applied management course towards a bachelor's degree in business. Students undertaking the course are typically adults in full-time employment. The researcher posits that the design of the course should be consistent with a concept of learner-worker employability and an approach to learning that is reflective, contextually relevant, framed appropriately, and deep rather than surface. There should be aspects of richness and reach. Also, the model should recognize prior learning (RPL) and enable preparation for future learning (PFL). It should be consistent with enlightened research on formative, summative, and - in particular - sustainable assessment. The researcher considers the worth of Howard Gardner's (2007) 'five minds for the future' conceptualization as a framework for the development of ePortfolios and concludes that it holds much promise. Essentially, the conceptualization can provide an ongoing link for the ePortfolio developer between RPL and PFL.

Keywords: employability, ePortfolio, RPL, PFL

Introduction

The concept of *employability*, or *employment security*, has been defined as "being qualified for currently available work, whether with a present employer or elsewhere" (Sheckley, Lamdin, & Keeton, 1993, p.4). Typically, it applies to the sustained well-being of learner-workers in increasingly complex, uncertain and dynamic environments.

Certainly, learner-workers live in a world of accelerating change. No longer can they sit back and take life as it comes. No longer is it business as usual. The knowledge and skills of yesterday are not the knowledge and skills of today or tomorrow. Redundancies threaten. With support from employers and educators, learner-workers need opportunities to reflect, be proactive, and be opportunistic.

An applied management course that is part of a business degree programme can provide appropriate opportunities for learner-workers. The learning can be both for employability and academic credit. It can be 'deep' rather than 'shallow' (Marton and Saljo, 1984). This means that the learner-workers will be aware of the understanding that develops while they are learning rather than being mindless about purpose and strategy. Importantly, they will be interested in the course content rather than being anxious about material of little relevance.

Such considerations are basic to the design of a rich and rewarding course of study for a learner-worker. They lend themselves to ePortfolio development.

The ePortfolio as a basis for course design

As a product of the electronic era, the ePortfolio accompanies opportunities in education for *richness* (that is, the overall quality of information) and *reach* (the overall number of people involved in the exchange of information) in contrast to richness *or* reach (Weigel, 2002, pp.41-44). This means that rich information can now be shared by many different types of people in a wide variety of locations. The possibilities are as wide as the imagination. It is a matter of taking opportunities that are appropriate to contexts and circumstances.

Gone is the need for learning exclusively within the classroom that is based on simulated exercises and contrived case studies. Through electronic and other means, the thrust of education can be on real-life projects (including the development of ePortfolios) in the real world. This 'bricks and clicks' approach enables learners to make meaningful contributions to work – and life in general – while earning academic credit. Also, crucially with a supportive ePortfolio, it prepares them for future work.

The fit is good for the design of the applied management course in question.

Reflective learner and teacher approaches

From facilitator of learning (or a researcher) perspective, a ‘practise what we preach’ or a ‘reflections on reflections’ approach is appropriate. The facilitator can develop his or her own ePortfolio in parallel with course members and have a set of reflective questions.

Drawing upon the research of, for example, Black & Wiliam 1998, Boud & Falchikov 2006, Bransford & Schwartz 1999, Doyle 2004, and Gardner 2006, it is suggested there is much to be gained by conceptualizing education as an ongoing process that enables an adult learner – including the teacher as learner - to undertake reflected and recorded excursions from *recognition of prior learning* (RPL) to *preparation for future learning* (PFL).

RPL, in relation to this consideration, is “a process that enables people of all ages, backgrounds and attitudes to receive formal recognition for skills and knowledge they already possess” (Simosko, 1991, p.11). Also it can be portrayed as in Figure 1 (Hornblow, 2002). It is a spiral concept of life-long learning opportunities.

PFL is transfer of learning in specific and/or general and simple and/or complex ways (Bransford & Schwartz, 1999, Doyle, 2004). It is a process of learning that is sustained beyond the short-term (and the context of a learning institution if that is where it occurs) and is applicable to real-life settings and situations.

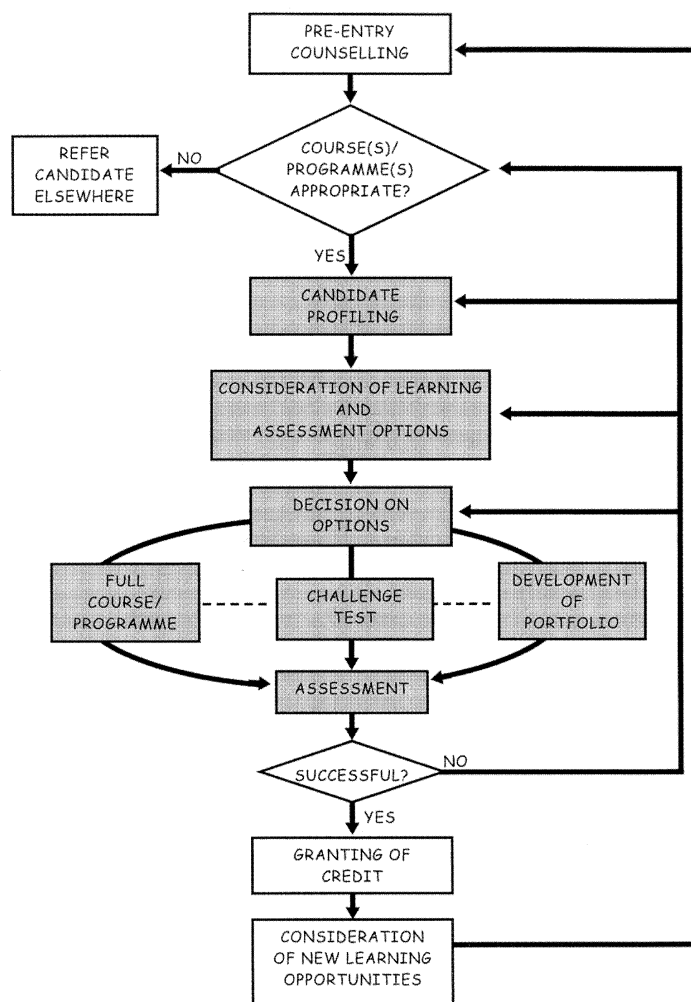


Figure 1: Flexible Assessment Model

Five minds as a framework

Having an appropriate framework for the ePortfolios is vital. Krueger (1990) and others have found that adult learners need and welcome support in planning and framing their learning.

It is suggested, for example, that the ‘five minds’ of Howard Gardner (2007) can act as a framework for ePortfolio organization that is amenable to improved employability. In his conceptualization, the ‘disciplinary mind’ relates to mastery of a major school of thought (such as science, arts, economics, politics, or ethics) and at least one professional craft. The ‘synthesizing mind’ evidences an ability to integrate ideas from different disciplines or ‘territories’ or ‘worlds’ into a coherent whole and to communicate that integration to others. The ‘creating mind’ indicates a capacity to uncover and clarify new problems, questions, and phenomena. The ‘respectful mind’ shows an awareness of and appreciation for differences among human beings. The ‘ethical mind’ is a signpost to fulfilment of responsibilities as a worker and a citizen.

For the learner-workers of the applied management course, evidence relating to each of the five minds can be accumulated.

Other frameworks could be used of course. However, Gardner’s conceptualization is timely, well justified, and appropriate to employability. It is noted with interest that Stefanakis (2002) has used Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences (from which the ‘five minds’ stem) as a conceptual basis for ePortfolio development by children.

Alignment with enlightened theory and practice

Do the critically reflective approach and the use of a framework such as Gardner’s for ePortfolio development align well with the research referred to in the introductory paragraphs of this paper (namely, Black & Wiliam, 1998, Boud & Falchikov, 2006, Bransford & Schwartz, 1999, Doyle, 2004, and Gardner, 2006)? Are there indications that the teaching and assessment (and more importantly the learning) will be appropriate and enriching?

Black and Wiliam (1998), in a review of hundreds of articles, identify many issues that had not been fully addressed in assessment practice such as focusing assessment on learning, separating grading and feedback, and using self and peer judgements. Certainly, through the development of an ePortfolio, there is a focus on real-life learning. Also, there is a separation of academic grading and overall purpose.

Drawing upon the findings of Black and Wiliam and further evidence from a variety of countries and contexts, Gardner (2006, p.197) (‘J’ not ‘H’, note, in this instance) argues the case of ‘assessment *for* learning’ rather than ‘assessment *of* learning’. He finds the use of ‘for’ rather than ‘of’ “a compelling conceptualization” (ibid.). The ‘for’ in this specific instance relates to the workplace and real-life development for employability. This is in contrast to the assessment ‘of’ learning typical of ‘3-hour examination’ approaches. As stated by Doyle (2002, p.370): “If knowledge is encoded and stored for the end-of-course examination questions, or to address an essay topic, then they are the future uses knowledge will be available for.”

Boud and Falchikov (2006, p.399) make a case for ‘sustainable assessment’ to build on ‘formative’ and ‘summative assessment’ to foster longer-term goals. They propose that “students need to become assessors within the context of participation in practice, that is, the kinds of highly contextualized learning faced in life and work”. ePortfolio development as the basis of the applied management course measures up very well. The focus is on life-long learning. It is an ongoing critically reflective practice.

Conclusion

Reflections captured in ePortfolios represent a deep rather than shallow approach to learning. They are compatible with formative, summative, and, importantly, sustainable assessment.

At the start of the course, the facilitator can provide an environment in which the students can reflect on their past and present: Who am I? What is my experience in formal education and training? How do

I like to learn? What is my experience in life in general? What is my experience in business? What is my experience as a manager? What is my plan of action for completion of the course? During the course, the focus of learning is on real experiences in a real world. Using Gardner's (2007) framework, for example, a learner-worker's ePortfolio could provide evidence of disciplinary, synthesizing, creating, respectful, and ethical minds. By the end of course, it can be expected that the students will have developed abilities and attitudes that they can transfer to business and life and use on an ongoing basis.

The conceptualization of education as reflective and recorded excursions from *recognition of prior learning* (RPL) to *preparation for future learning* (PFL) holds promise. It is compatible with the employability interests of the learner-workers.

References

1. Black, P.; Wiliam, D. (1998). *Inside the Black Box: Raising Standards through Classroom Assessment*. London: King's College.
2. Boud, D.; Falchikov, N. (2006). Aligning assessment with long-term learning, *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, Vol. 31(4), pp. 399-413.
3. Bransford, J.D.; Schwartz, D.L. (1999). Rethinking transfer: A simple proposal with multiple implications, *Review of Research in Education*, Vol. 24, pp. 61-100.
4. Doyle, M.S. (2002). *Learning to Transfer: The Distance Learner and Transfer of Learning*. Ph.D. thesis. Wellington: Victoria University of Learning.
5. Gardner, H. (2007). *Five Minds for the Future*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.
6. Gardner, J. (2006). Assessment for learning: A compelling conceptualization. In J. Gardner (ed.), *Assessment and Learning*. London: Sage.
7. Hornblow, D. (2002). *Recognition of Prior Learning in New Zealand: What Has Been, What Is, and What Might Be*. Working Paper No. 8-02. Lower Hutt: The Open Polytechnic of New Zealand.
8. Krueger, B. (1990). Sinclair Community College. In A. Mandell & E. Michelson, *Portfolio Development and Adult Learning: Purposes and Strategies*. Chicago: CAEL.
9. Marton, F.; Saljo, R. (1984). Approaches to learning. In F. Marton, D. Hounsell, & N. Entwistle (eds.), *The Experience of Learning*. Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press.
10. Sheckley, B.G.; Lamdin, L.; Keeton M.T. (1993). *Employability in a High Performance Economy*. Chicago: CAEL.
11. Simosko, S. (1991). *APL: Accreditation of Prior Learning: A Practical Guide for Professionals*. London: Kogan Page.
12. Stefanakis, E.H. (2002). *Multiple Intelligences and Portfolios: A Window into the Learner's Mind*. Boston: Harvard Graduate School of Education.
13. Weigel, Van B. (2002). *Deep Learning for a Digital Age*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Author

Dave Hornblow
The Open Polytechnic of New Zealand, School of Business
Private Bag 31914
Lower Hutt
New Zealand
dave.hornblow@openpolytechnic.ac.nz