

Principal's Sabbatical Report

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How are e-portfolios used as a means of recording and reporting on student achievement in Primary school settings?

How is student engagement in learning and plain language reporting to parents enhanced by e-portfolios?

Acknowledgements

I must firstly acknowledge the St Patrick's Kaiapoi Board of Trustees for supporting my application for sabbatical leave.

I also acknowledge my very capable Deputy Principal and Leadership team for maintaining the superb teaching and learning culture in the school in my absence.

Acknowledgement must also go to the Ministry of Education for allowing me to have an in depth look at an area that will move my school forward in teaching and learning and, for the opportunity to reflect on my practice and return to school refreshed.

Lastly, I thank the many Principals I interviewed (formally and informally) for their willingness to openly share their journey in dealing with e-portfolios.

Executive summary

To assist students in becoming inquiring, confident and self-monitoring learners responsible for their achievements, we have to embrace how they live in today's world.

Today's students live, learn and socialize through technology and they expect instant communication and information. E-portfolios are an excellent vehicle to engage them in their learning while providing them with the feedback they desire to enhance their success in education.

Purpose

The purpose of my sabbatical was to look at how and why e-portfolios are being used, with a special interest in using them for reporting evidence of learning.

Key Questions:

1. How are e-portfolios being implemented in schools and for what purpose?
2. How are the students up-skilled to enable them to show evidence of learning in an e-portfolio format?
3. What impact has e-portfolios had on the teaching and learning culture of the school?
4. Who has responsibility for the implementation and sustainability of e-portfolio use?

5. What are the benefits of reporting students' learning to parents through the use of e-portfolios?

Rationale and Background information

St Patrick's Kaiapoi has been part of a Ministry of Education Information Communication Technology (ICT) contract since 2009. This has enabled us to vastly change our teaching and learning programme while updating the St Patrick's curriculum to produce students '*who will be confident, connected, actively involved, and lifelong learners*'. (NZC, 2007. P.10) We have concentrated intensely on pedagogy to enhance students' achievement and worked with a facilitator from the Consortium of Professional Learning (CPL) focusing on the teachers' and students' capabilities matrices to inform our practice. In 2010 we implemented a Learning Management System, Ultranet. This has become an integral part of 'what we do', however we have not utilised the uSpace folio tasks, as we want to investigate how this can be used to best celebrate students' achievements and support our reporting to parents. We want to develop our Learning Conferences so they are student led and believe that using the folio tasks in Ultranet will support this. With the introduction of National Standards, we are looking at whether to include this reporting in the folio tasks or leave it separate and provide evidence of achievement and student choice of work in the folio tasks and uSpace page.

Methodology

My plan of inquiry involved a variety of methods to gather information on the use of e-portfolios:

1. I accessed a range of readings and research that emphasised use of e-portfolios in Primary schools.
2. I read through and watched many blogs and on-line presentations on the Virtual Learning Network (VLN).
3. I followed a number of online forums related to reporting to parents and celebrating learning.
4. I visited a limited range of Primary schools in New Zealand and Australia and discussed my key questions with the Principal and/or teaching staff.
5. I spoke to children to get their input into how effective they thought using an e-portfolio was.
6. I spoke to Principals at the CCPPA (Canterbury Primary Principals' Association), NZPF/APPAA (New Zealand and Australian Primary Principals' Associations) and CCPPA (Catholic Canterbury Primary Principals' Association) Conferences and Professional Development days.

Findings

How are e-portfolios being implemented in schools and for what purpose?

"An e-portfolio is an electronic format for learners to record their work, their achievements and their goals, to reflect on their learning, and to share and be supported in this. It enables learners to represent the information in different formats and to take the information with them as they move between institutions."
(Banks, 2004. p.3)

With this definition in mind, I witnessed and read about a variety of tools used to present e-portfolios.

- Wikis
- Blogs
- Google apps
- MyPortfolio
- Ultranet
- KnowledgeNet

Many schools used wikis and blogs to effectively engage children in writing about their learning and allow them to receive feedback from parents, teachers and children in either their class or whole school community. Most schools had these attached to their school website. Of the schools using Ultranet, one had totally changed their e-portfolio so tasks in relation to the National Standards were placed in subject folders within folio tasks. Feedback written by teachers was in each child's folder for every task. This school had e-portfolios as the only way of reporting against the National Standards. Therefore, the e-portfolios were very comprehensive. Most schools had halted any progress they had planned in using e-portfolios when reporting against the National Standards became compulsory. These schools are still deciding what place, if any, e-portfolios will have in their plain language reporting to parents. The majority of schools with Ultranet were yet to embark on using the folio tasks in uSpace but allowed children access to the uSpace page to blog about their learning and give feedback to classmates on their online presentations. Their parents also had access to the page and could leave comments regarding the learning tasks uploaded.

How are the students up-skilled to enable them to show evidence of learning in an e-portfolio format?

The importance of up-skilling students was an issue in most schools. Those who found it easy had introduced a "buddy" system with senior and junior students where the senior student taught the junior student skills at a timetabled session once a week. Other schools had 'technicians' from each class who met once a week with the IT teacher and then transferred the skills they had learnt to the children in their classroom. Some schools had the class teacher teaching the skills in a class lesson. Up-skilling teachers was equally important and most schools were working through intense IT professional development alongside the implementation of e-portfolios. Being flexible appeared to be an important attribute for all.

What impact has e-portfolios had on the teaching and learning culture of the school?

An underlying theme through all the schools was the realization that students were empowered. They actively engaged in anytime, anyplace learning through their e-portfolios. Significant gains in literacy were reported in most schools and a greater understanding and engagement in learning was a common comment from principals. The students I spoke to appreciated having the choice about how to record and present their work and who to share it with. Another positive side effect was that the learning culture within classrooms was consolidated with students often logging in at home to friends e-portfolios to comment and engage in further discussion over the work presented. One principal commented that children were thriving on the feedback they

received, especially from their peers. The e-portfolios gave students the ability to reflect deeply about their learning. Students had a greater understanding of where their learning was at.

Teachers commented on having a real insight into each child's learning and improved relationships with students due to the increased feedback and two-way communication. Most teachers were enthusiastic and very positive about students' increased engagement in their learning. Some teachers had their own e-portfolio and used this to collate professional notes, reflect on their practice and provide evidence of achieving professional standards. They saw this as a challenging way to refine their practice.

Who has responsibility for the implementation and sustainability of the e-portfolio use?

The responsibility for the implementation of an e-portfolio varied depending on who had the 'passion'. It was no surprise that the most successful sustainability was in schools where the implementation included communication with the Board of Trustees, parents, teachers and children before the introduction of the e-portfolio. Here the e-portfolio was embedded in the teaching and learning in the school. I spoke to one principal who was new to the school and thought the e-portfolio being used was not effective. She didn't really know anything about the e-portfolio being used or how it was being used. In other schools where the use of portfolios wasn't as effective as when it was introduced, the lead teacher or teacher in charge of IT who had introduced the e-portfolio had left the school and no-one had taken charge of ensuring its use continued.

What are the benefits for reporting students' learning to parents through the use of e-portfolios?

Getting parents on board was an issue in most schools. Although initially the parent community in one school was extremely enthusiastic, as time has gone on they don't use their logins but view their child's e-portfolio when the child shares it with them. Most schools stated parents have a login that is not frequently used. The main benefit stated in schools was the instant feedback children received from parents about their learning. Most parents are aware of their child's achievements and know they can contact the school to find out information.

Some principals stated parents appreciated being able to instantly go on line at any time to read their child's e-portfolio. The majority of schools were not yet using the e-portfolio to report progress against the National Standards.

Implications for St Patrick's Kaiapoi

Before embarking on e-portfolio use we will develop a set of protocols with clearly defined procedures so parents, students and teachers agree on the terms for using e-portfolios in our school. We will educate staff, parents and students on learning outcomes and success criteria so everyone has the same understanding when interpreting the information they see in the e-portfolios. To allow for creativity and flexibility in our e-portfolios we will ensure students have the opportunity to select material they want in their e-portfolios. Students will be taught how to critically reflect on their work and the work of others' so their comments to each other will be

useful for improving learning outcomes. A reflection time will be timetabled into class programmes so children have time to develop the skill of reflecting on their own learning. We will continue to have our Mactime sessions to support teachers in IT professional development. We will not try and integrate our National Standards reporting to parents with our e-portfolios at this stage. We will provide evidence through the e-portfolios but keep our formal written reports at mid year and end of year.

Implications for other readers

Why are you considering e-portfolios?

A constructivist pedagogy must be the driving force for implementing e-portfolios. Be careful to not just jump on the e-portfolio bandwagon before you re-look at your school curriculum and make sure this is what your school community values. If you are looking at National Standards consider if this is the best tool to report formal data to your parent community.

Are your teachers digitally prepared?

Most Principals reflected that if they were to start on the e-portfolio journey again the main thing they would do is provide more support for their teachers. Teachers need to be inspired to develop a passion for adopting e-portfolios. It is essential they have a good understanding of learning intentions and success criteria and they teach these skills and the skills of critical reflection to students.

Do you have the hardware and infrastructure to support increased internet use?

The limited responses from schools who had some staff negative about using e-portfolios all cited frustrations with networks, internet speed and limited wifi. Without the appropriate infrastructure, using e-portfolios will be doomed from the start.

Do you have a system secure enough to prevent data being accessed by anyone without the appropriate access level?

Security of student data is imperative. Using wikis and blogs without proper firewalls can compromise students' safety. Research the safety of your e-portfolio system and other options before you start implementation.

Conclusion

E-portfolios are used to effectively engage students in their learning. They can be used to provide evidence related to teacher directed tasks and to celebrate learning success using teacher or student selected material. To have the greatest impact on learning they should allow for flexibility and creativity. Students should have the opportunity to self select material they want included in their e-portfolios. For implementation of e-portfolios to be successful the whole school community has to be educated about learning intentions, success criteria and providing effective feedback. Today's learner lives through technology and as their engagement in learning is enhanced through e-portfolio use, they will gain a further understanding that learning is something that *they do*, not something that is *done to them*.

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