Making Thinking, Learning, and Development Visible Through ePortfolios

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As technologies have advanced, children, families, and educators have become more familiar with different technological devices and tools. Major events, like the COVID-19 pandemic, have also pushed stakeholders to examine the role of technology in teaching and in sharing information about children's learning. The use of ePortfolios offers an avenue for authentically documenting and sharing children's learning in both early childhood settings and home environments. Together, educators and families can understand, value, and support learning experiences in and outside their respective settings.

An ePortfolio showcases learning experiences by making learning, thinking, and development visible, which allows stakeholders to plan and guide future experiences. An ePortfolio can also help teachers, leaders, and families explore and discuss aspects of children's learning experiences, such as

- why and how children develop and learn
- where children are headed in their growth and learning
- what children think and feel about their current and future growth
- what effective strategies, supports, and resources are necessary for their development and learning

What Is an ePortfolio?

An ePortfolio is an electronic container that holds artifacts and documentation to make learning visible. Similar to its hard copy counterpart that may be stored in a box or binder, an ePortfolio provides a means for organizing and showing authentic assessment information. (Formal assessment data can also be added to the ePortfolio if desired.) The teacher and the child review the contents to learn about and reflect on learning, interests, and growth at an individual time point and over time. Moreover, it offers flexibility in gathering and sharing that information with different participants (Theodosiadou & Konstantinidis 2015).

What Technology Tools Are Needed?

Sometimes a program, such as Head Start, may have a platform or app already in place with an ePortfolio option. However, many schools and early learning programs do not. For these programs, a variety of technology tools can be used to create and sustain an ePortfolio system—some are free, and others have small fees. It is possible to create a template using website builders such as Google Sites or Wix. Other hosts, such as Digication or Foliospaces, offer paid services to create templates with certain tools for features such as data analysis. In addition to a platform or program, other tools and resources will be necessary to develop and share an ePortfolio:

- **To record notes and organize documentation:** a laptop, tablet, or desktop
- **To capture images:** a digital camera, phone camera, or tablet camera
- **To capture video and/or sound:** a device with audio and video capabilities, such as a phone or tablet
- **To upload hard copy documentation:** a scanner or any photo-taking device for work samples and notes
- **To edit and/or create a digital presentation:** photo and/or video editing programs, like iMovie or Windows Movie Maker
- **To troubleshoot technical issues:** access to resources such as online guides, message boards, or an experienced person to help navigate setup, use, and unexpected issues

How Do I Create an Effective ePortfolio?

A critical first step to think about is the purpose and intention of the ePortfolio. Is it for children and teachers to reflect on the child's abilities and interests? Is the ePortfolio for families to see their child's learning in action over time? Is it to provide evidence of meeting program or early learning standards? It may be for all these purposes and possibly others. If the purposes are determined in the initial stage, then it will facilitate the process and help make the ePortfolio usable and accessible for everyone.

The more options an ePortfolio platform offers, the more time and expertise it takes to learn. Some ePortfolio systems have different pricing plans with various features. Cost typically depends on how many users there will be, the amount of support the company provides, and how the organization wants to use the platform. Most systems will require technical support to assist with setup and management. Fee-based platforms may include the following resources:

- tabs or folders to organize material
- different visual formats, including those that feel similar to a physical binder or bin
- an online location for uploading and storing artifacts and documentation

It is essential to consider accessibility when sharing ePortfolios. Many platforms offer accessibility options. For example, when teachers post a photograph, these types of platforms allow them to add alternative text (alt text), a short, written description of an image for those using a reader. Other accessibility options, such as reading the order of charts, types of fonts, and headings, are important and might also be included. Another consideration practitioners should consider when designing ePortfolios is color combinations, which are important for users with visual disabilities. If a platform does not have some of these necessary accessibility tools, many external programs, such as Microsoft Word and Adobe Acrobat, offer accessibility checks. An external website, such as Wave (wave.webaim.org), can also be used to do a comprehensive scan.

How Do I Share an ePortfolio with Families?

Because the ePortfolio shows the whole child by sharing a child's interests, strengths, growing knowledge, and areas for future learning, it has a positive impact. It helps families learn about developmentally appropriate practice, become excited about their child's growth in the early learning setting, and connect with their child's growth and learning at home.

The ePortfolio is a flexible tool. Because it is meant to be a living document that can have artifacts and resources added at any time, it can also be shared at any time. A program or teacher may want to set up a regular schedule of sharing.

Sharing ePortfolios is best when the child, teacher, and family can come together to view and discuss its contents. Having a child tell the ePortfolio story from their perspective places them at the center and encourages both teachers and families to understand and appreciate the child fully. Teachers can supplement the child's story and offer additional details during these conversations. In addition, they can use the ePortfolio conference as an opportunity to talk with families about future goals and experiences.

Maintaining Security and Privacy of Digital Content

It is essential to maintain security and privacy policies for digital assessment content, which often includes photographs and personal or identifying information. Most platforms have a built-in privacy policy and security measures, such as user passwords. Educators should share this information with families, so they know the policies, types of information that will be collected, and who has access to the content and information. In addition, it is important to collect media releases. Some programs require these upon registration, and teachers can also use media releases for projects or specific events. In all cases, have a plan of open communication about privacy with families.

Conclusion

The ePortfolio system is an effective way to make children's thinking, learning, and development visible. Therefore, it should be user-friendly and easily accessible for teachers, programs, and families. Key considerations when implementing this approach to assessment include the purpose for using ePortfolios, the type of information and artifacts to collect, the technology already available and needed, and the intended participants. Once in use, educators, programs, children, and families can be proud of the learning accomplishments showcased and appreciate how making learning visible shares the whole story.

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