USING ELECTRONIC REPOSITORIES AS A STUDENT RESOURCE FOR MSE APPLICATIONS

Aaron S. Blicblau

Swinburne University of Technology, P.O. Box 218, Hawthorn, Victoria 3122, Australia; 
ABlicblau@groupwise.swin.edu.au

ABSTRACT

In the majority of engineering disciplines, MSE provides resources and applications with many other areas of engineering, e.g., design, structures, mechanics, and manufacturing. For the students to transfer and implement their MSE knowledge, they must have easy access to all their information. The eportfolio is a repository of the student’s entire academic MSE content and provides a wealth of knowledge applicable to all engineering disciplines. This repository combines not only lecture and textbook material, but also every assignment (in assessed format), all quizzes (with answers) laboratory activities (in audiovisual format), student oral presentations (podcast), and lectures in asynchronous format. This allows all of the data and information accumulated by students throughout their varying MSE course collected in one place, and is able to act as a quick resource and information kit for future use as the eportfolio is quickly accessed. Student and graduate responses have been positive especially for those in the workforce who require immediate and correct information.

INTRODUCTION

The work outlined in this paper provides details of the activities involved with the design and development of an electronic portfolio (eportfolio) approach to the implementation of a repository of both work undertaken in the area of materials science and engineering (MSE) information retrieved in relevant areas by students of engineering at the university at which I teach. Materials science and engineering (MSE) forms a thread throughout many engineering courses, weaving amongst different subjects and interlacing across different year levels. The course content is often delivered in a variety of modes involving lectures, tutorials, presentations, and laboratory experiments. With the implementation of high capacity electronic storage systems, the retention and retrieval of pedagogical documentation has removed the necessity by students to preserve their academic work in paper format. In the MSE course which I teach, I am implementing an eportfolio of all student work and associated reference material.

The field of MSE is ever increasing with a comprehensive amount of resource information. Access to this information is vital for productive outcomes. The days of the tradit-
ional published and written material as the only major source of information has been supplemented by requirements of industry. They now expect graduates with skills (outcomes) not only in their areas of training, but who are also adept with electronic, (e-forms) of communication and presentation. Electronic-portfolios, commonly referred to as eportfolios are a necessary part of an engineer’s toolkit. The eportfolios discussed here are not specifically designed for assessment, but as a repository of information for current and future implementation.

Details are given of an electronic-portfolio, eportfolio, which was developed for use by both junior and senior student. The portfolio encompassed digital, electronic, audio/visual, oral and paper based content. Utilising a variety of portfolio content would enable the student to both learn how to communicate in different media as well as self assess their work in different contexts. Interviews and informal feedback from students and graduates are included in the eportfolio for reflection.

WHAT IS A PORTFOLIO?

A portfolio is derived from…portfolio…Italian portafoglio : porta-, from portare, to carry, from Latin portare + foglio, sheet (from Latin folium, leaf)….a portable case for holding material, such as loose papers, photographs, or drawings. A portfolio may be considered as a sampling of the breadth and depth of a person’s work conveying the range of abilities, attitudes, experiences, and achievements. A student portfolio has been commonly defined as a purposeful collection of student work that exhibits the student’s efforts, progress, and achievements in one or more areas. However, a more appropriate definition is that a portfolio is a collection of evidence that is gathered together to show a person’s learning journey over time and to demonstrate their abilities. This is the approach taken in the work developed in the materials science and engineering subjects to understanding and implementing engineering concepts. When extending the definition to the graduate experience, the portfolio is considered as a way of documenting all aspects of professional and personal growth when progressing through university and their career. However, not all portfolios are the same. Recent work done in developing portfolio concepts for mathematics education, defined three types of portfolios: showcase (which focused on the student’s best and most representative work), teacher-student (the “working portfolio”) and teacher alternative assessment (specific portfolios items are selected for assessment). Each served a different purpose. Selections from each portfolio concept can further be incorporated to design a “holistic” portfolio for engineering applications.

Furthermore, other workers in various fields of education maintain that portfolios provide information about student progress and encourage students to be responsible for their own learning, in the area of music education portfolios are utilised as a resource and learning process. In this way they feel as though they take more responsibility in their learning and assessment processes. Portfolios are seen to assist students in developing skills necessary for life-long learning; and enable thinking skills with multidimensional forms of evaluation.

especially in the engineering field, portfolios are produced for a variety of purposes. A well designed portfolio serves four main purposes: it allows academic staff to employ it as a tool for assessment and feedback, it assists prospective employers to evaluate the quality of their new employees, it supports students in developing an ongoing understanding of their achievements, and importantly, it utilises the portfolio as a lifelong resource of information and knowledge garnered over the students’ learning experience.

ELECTRONIC PORTFOLIOS

By collecting electronic versions of various forms of text, video, audio and graphic material
into one electronic repository, the ecollection or eportfolio, becomes a digital container designed to support a variety of educational and industrial purposes within different spheres of education and industry.\textsuperscript{5,16}

In particular, electronic portfolios are a creative means of organizing, summarizing, and sharing artefacts, information, and ideas about teaching and/or learning, along with personal and professional growth.\textsuperscript{17} When the British Educational Communications and Technology Agency (Becta) commissioned a study to investigate the potential of eportfolios to support learning, they concluded that eportfolios benefit learning most effectively when considered as part of a joined-up teaching and learning approach to include online repositories of data. In Australia, the Carrick Institute for Learning and Teaching (a government funded body to improve and assist the learning and teaching in the tertiary sector) commissioned a study, commencing in May 2007 and ending in June 2008, with the objective to examine the different approaches to portfolios for students.\textsuperscript{18} Their research brief is to investigate eportfolios, in Australian higher education with a view to identifying the scope, penetration and reasons for their use and the potential risks associated with different approaches. This project has only recently commenced and the results will be available in due course.

**IMPLEMENTATION OF e-PORTFOLIOS FOR FIRST YEAR STUDIES**

Of the over 400 students enrolled in first year engineering at Swinburne University of Technology (SUT) approximately three quarters are enrolled in the subject HES1230 Materials and Processes, a first year course in materials science and engineering. The engineering disciplines at SUT comprise mechanical, civil, electronic and electrical (EE), and product design engineering (PDE). Only the students enrolled in EE do not have MSE as a compulsory subject (but is available as an elective). This subject, HES1230, is only one of eight which the students must complete to pass their first year. In this context, it may not appear to be important to the students.

The subject content is based on a traditional mechanical properties approach which is common to most disciplines of engineering, and most importantly, easily understood and grasped by the students. The subject delivery mode incorporates both assessable material in the form of test or quizzes (computer based) laboratory work (background information and experimental results), and a variety of information sources involving lecture, laboratory and tutorial material, together with assorted assignments involving project based work.

All of the students’ ongoing work and assessable content within the materials subject is uploaded onto a computer website or learning management site, e.g., BLACKBOARD\textsuperscript{®}. The contents of the Blackboard site comprise the basis of the eportfolio. They are able to both transmit and retrieve their information electronically, and have a complete copy of all their subject material. The students are also able to download and store the information for later referral and retrieval. Although the eportfolio is used for assessment by faculty, it is finally employed by students as a storage and data bank for information retrieval in MSE.

At the end of first year, the contents of the MSE subject disappear, and often are not accessible for future implementation. During the second and later stages of the engineering course many other subjects are taken by the students which have both large and small references to application and implementations of MSE.

**EXAMPLES OF IMPLEMENTATION OF e-PORTFOLIOS IN LATER YEAR ENGINEERING STUDIES**

Mechanical engineering (ME) and product design engineering (PDE) students complete a subject in materials and manufacturing during both second year (HES2281) and third year (HES3281). Shown in Figure 1, is the relation...
amongst subjects’ content and the variety of information and data sources available. Much of the content relies heavily on previous knowledge. This is where the students’ eportfolio or repository of information comes into its own. The basic resources need for understanding the topics in second and third year MSE are grouped and available as an electronic resource for all students to access. For example in the second and third year subjects, HES2281 and HES3281 topics associated with steels, polymers and ceramics experiments on heat treatment and tensile testing are available in the form of notes and WWW resources and a variety of electronic information and data sources, not only on the Blackboard site. Since all Blackboard sites are erased after the completion of a subject or unit, the students are required to collect all their information save it their own data storage facility via a DVD, USB, or portable hard disk. In this way the information is not lost once the students complete these studies and students have access to the information in their own time. For example kinks to materials information databases are collected for future access (although subscriptions will be required for professional database sights).

**e-PORTFOLIO FOR MATERIALS INFORMATION APPLICATIONS**

The majority of engineering subjects require input from a MSE database. By effectively organizing their eportfolios students access their information efficiently and can demonstrate its relevance to a particular topic or theme. For example, design can be construed as mechanical design (mechanical engineering, civil engineering) or product design which may be considered as industrial design with its human centred approach to design. In both instances having a resource of materials design information stored in an eportfolio with quick access, enhances the knowledge base of students and may be utilised as an auxiliary from of prerequisite data for further design considerations.

In the area of Mechanical Engineering design, for example, students are expected to develop procedures for fatigue design based purely in mechanical or civil structural principles. However, their previous work in MSE triggers an alternate approach utilising principles of fatigue based fracture mechanics. This information is stored in their eportfolio, so acting as a resource for additional approaches to machine and structural design. The students are
often unaware of these resources, and when they are reminded of their storage in their own electronic repository, they are often amazed and surprised at the amount and variety of information which they have at the press of a mouse key!

Similarly, in Civil Engineering subjects which is concerned with design of concrete and steel structures, it is assumed that students have an understanding of the concepts of various strength definitions of materials, especially concrete and reinforced concrete. The recommended practice handbook of Reinforcement Detailing by the Concrete Institute of Australia, assumes many strength definitions, and detailed design criteria, all of which are available and stored as electronic resources and are collected by students in their eportfolio.

In the senior subjects of the mechanical engineering course, all the areas listed in Table 1 require input of some form of MSE data. These include basic concepts of modulus of materials, glass transition temperatures of polymers, surface engineering characteristics of tribological materials and a host of other materials and manufacturing characteristics. Fortunately, for the students, this information is stored in their electronic repository and can be retrieved (in the form of notes, electronic resources, class exercises, laboratory results, or assignment based material). Often the students are unaware of their resources and their fast path to information retrieval.

**CAPSTONE PROJECT WORK AND MSE RESOURCES IMPLEMENTATION**

Within the mechanical engineering course, in the subject concerned with the capstone project (HES5103), there may be as many as 30 individual research projects spread over a variety of topics. An example of some of the topics requiring major and minor input for the MSE eportfolio repository for the 2007 academic year is shown in Table 2. Within the majority of the research topics, there again has been considerable implementation of MSE knowledge. From the requirements of the capstone project the students come to realise that utilising their eportfolio, which contains links to WWW materials, design and manufacturing databases, they students can access current, important, and relevant published information. This is available via their university computer network which they can open and download onto their own desktop. This information can be saved to the students’ own electronic repository (e.g. R/W DVD, USB key, portable hard disk, etc.).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MSE concept implementation</th>
<th>Senior Mechanical Engineering Subjects</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Manufacturing Processes</td>
<td>HES4330 Thermodynamics 2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mechanical properties</td>
<td>HES5320 Solid Mechanics</td>
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<tr>
<td>Physical Properties</td>
<td>HES4350 Mechanical Systems Design</td>
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<tr>
<td>Environmental Properties</td>
<td>HES4250 Design for Manufacture</td>
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<tr>
<td>Electrical Properties</td>
<td>HES5102 Research Project</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chemical Properties</td>
<td>HES5310 Machine Dynamics 2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Aesthetic properties</td>
<td>HES3360 Human Factors</td>
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<td></td>
<td>HES5103 Advanced Research Project</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>HES5340 Fluid Mechanics 2</td>
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<td></td>
<td>HES5350 Product Design</td>
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</table>
The students slowly realize the benefits of collecting information, storing it in electronic form, learning to access these resources, and then utilising them when appropriate for academic or work related purposes. This eportfolio is portable and can be taken with them when they graduate and commence employment.

**BENEFITS OF THE ELECTRONIC PORTFOLIO**

Electronic portfolios help students document their learning achievements, as well as their other scholarly activities including research and community involvement. The reflective process of portfolio development can promote better understanding, develop fresh thinking about their life, and encourage personal and professional growth [17].

The benefits associated with an electronic portfolio have longevity way beyond the end of the engineering course or the student’s university studies [9]. The Payoff with utilising eportfolios includes [11,20,21]:

- the development of skills in electronic/digital technology, so important for today’s graduates;
- evidence of learning and competency;
- improved tracking of student performance for purposes of accreditation and program improvement.
- increased opportunities for students to reflect and learn, better student understanding of teaching standards
- better staff/faculty access for assessing student work
- increased communication between staff and students
- incorporation of digital artefacts to take advantage of work already completed; as well as allowing the repository to be portable in the form of digital media
- portability storage of portfolio data and information allowing transport and usability in a work environment
- giving students a chance to compare their reflections to the standards and performance indicators, and set learning goals for the future, i.e. what is required for students to have achieved the purpose of an eportfolio. This is the stage which

**Table 2. A selection of mechanical engineering capstone projects requiring MSE data and information.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Project Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Formula SAE - Design of Chassis, Anti-Roll Bar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analysis of DFSS and MDO to Design of Crash Structures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bonding trials using Paralyne</td>
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<tr>
<td>Burr formation in grinding</td>
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<tr>
<td>Coronary artery bypass grafts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Design of Bubbling Unit for CSIRO Aluminium Cold Model</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Femoral neck prosthesis stress analysis and modelling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Investigate the use of different shaped WC particles in laser cladding</td>
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<tr>
<td>Laser Hardening</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple Recycling of ABS</td>
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<tr>
<td>Study of Scaffold Conformal Cooling Channels for Moulds using Thermal</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
turns eportfolio development into professional development and supports lifelong learning.

It is these last two points which are of most significance. The portability and storage lends itself to data retrieval in any situation, both within the academic environment and at a later stage in the workforce. The development of lifelong learning skills carries over into both the work environment and the student’s personal environment. Moreover, in the academic environment, student feedback on the usefulness of the eportfolio has ranged from ignorance of its usefulness to definitive comments about providing a seed for knowledge in many other areas of engineering.

As just one example of the usefulness of the eportfolio, was the situation recently when an ex pupil, wanting specific information about mechanical/fatigue behaviour of metals, contacted a faculty member for specific knowledge. The ex-pupil acknowledged that their eportfolio proved a useful starting point, and avoided many pitfalls, but they now required specific information. The ex-pupil was directed to one of their experiments on fatigue which gave a WWW resource for specific guidance and information. This is just one of many such examples. In other instances, students who are employed during their vacation often are involved in design or manufacturing industries. The feedback comments from their employers often emphasise how quickly and accurately the students employ their MSE knowledge for design, specifications or manufacturing process. The students attribute this in part, to their easy and quick access to information from their eportfolio required in the relevant industry.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Activities have been described which implemented an electronic portfolio for materials science and engineering. The students are able to utilise these resources throughout their academic career, calling up information and relevant to a host other courses which they take and require relevant information. This repository of MSE data proves to be of great use when the students undertake and complete their mechanical engineering capstone projects, many of which require MSE information.

The eportfolio has proved useful after they graduate and are part of the workforce as first step in obtaining relevant information for their particular work environment. The overall feedback from the students has been positive in the sense that they now have a portable electronic repository of information, data, and WWW links, which they can quickly and easily access both for their university studies and work environment.

Informal feedback from staff and students indicate that when the students approach their project supervisor about obtaining information, they are guided to their eportfolio as a repository of information to start their work. The students are often amazed and surprised at the wealth of data and electronic resources which they have accumulated over the course of their studies which are available to them. To formalise the unofficial feedback, future work will develop exit surveys which involve a formal assessment of the relevance of eportfolios to the graduating students, their employers, and the students as employees after a two or three year period-similar to a graduate program implemented by many large organizations.

REFERENCES

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15. S. Wray, Teaching portfolios, community, and pre-service teachers’ professional development, Teaching and Teacher Education 23, 1139 (2007).


Footnote: An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 2008 ASEE Conference in Pittsburgh, PA.