Online Digital Portfolios – The Strathcona Experience

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Has communication really advanced?
Have you ever played Chinese whispers in class, a game that involves whispering a secret message to one member of the class who then whispers the same message to another member and so on until the message has been discreetly passed to the whole class? Inevitably the message changes considerably throughout the telling and re-telling until it is totally unrecognisable. This is an example of how we have lost the ancient art of oral tradition, an art form that enabled ancient stories to be pass down from generation to generation; word perfect without the need for formal documentation.

Before texting, twittering, chatting and emailing we wrote letters, we spoke to each other and most importantly, we listened. In fact going back to pre-history times (over 4000 years ago) before the Egyptians invented that revolutionary technology called papyrus paper and ink, oral tradition was our main form of communication and the way humanity maintained important ancient historical stories.

We may have lost the art of oral tradition, but we now have new ways of telling our stories to potentially an unlimited audience.

Web 2.0 communication
It is interesting to reflect on how technology has changed society. One such change in recent years has been the use of Web 2.0 technologies to enhance communication. Initially the Internet was a one-way communication tool, today it is very much a collaborative instrument which is the essence of what Web 2.0 is all about. The classic example of the power of Web 2.0 is the growth of the largest encyclopedia in the world, Wikipedia.

Wikipedia is a community creation with over 340 million users each month. It is based on a simple Web 2.0 model of one person writing something, others improving it and making it better over time. Jimmy Wales, one of the founders of Wikipedia, says that this resource aims to provide everyone on the planet with free access to the sum of all human knowledge.

New Web 2.0 applications are constantly being created and some of them are ideal learning tools with many of them being available at no or very low cost. Examples include:
- **Stixy**: an online and shared in real-time sticky note application (www.stixy.com), great for brainstorming as a class;
- **Pic Lits**: a tool for online annotations (www.piclits.com);
- **Exploratree & Mindomo**: two online mind-mapping programs (www.exploratree.org.uk & www.mindomo.com);
- **Bubble.us**: an online brainstorming application (http://bubble.us)
- **Jing**: a tool for capturing and communicating what is on a screen (www.jingproject.com)

Wikipedia is the most well known and is Web 2.0 on a very large scale, what this article is about is Web 2.0 on a small scale, where individual school students can establish their own Web 2.0 portfolio sites for their own communities, share information in a safe and potentially private context and tell their stories to people they know who are interested.

Digital portfolios
Student portfolios have been an established education concept long before the Internet existed. The traditional portfolio consists of a large folder with samples of writing, paintings, drawings, mathematics samples and projects. In many cases the traditional portfolio is gathered over the period of a normal school year and taken home for parents to read and reflect on over the Christmas break. Today we have a wide range of Web2.0 tools that enable the traditional portfolio to become an Online Digital Portfolio (or ePortfolio) that can potentially be accessed by parents, students and teachers 24/7 and maintained over many years.

During 2007, Strathcona Baptist Girls Grammar School (an independent girls school in Melbourne) investigated various digital portfolio models with an aim to introduce each student from Years 5 to 8 with their own online portfolio at the start of 2008. They applied for and received a Federal Government grant through the AGQTP (Australian Government Quality Teachers Program) with the assistance of the AISV (now called Independent Schools Victoria). After looking at a range of online tools, they decided to establish a free and private education based Wikispaces account for each student as the platform for their digital portfolios.

Wikispaces
Wikispaces is a web hosting service run by a small company of 8 employees based in San Francisco called Tangient. Despite its size, it has about 3.5 million registered members and hosts about 1,300,000 individual wiki sites. They pride themselves on providing a simple environment in which to establish and maintain wikis for educational or corporate use (www.wikispaces.com/about).

When Strathcona were looking for an environment that enabled simple tools for online publication, wikispaces lived up to its aim of being simple to use and they offered generous free access for educators and very importantly for many schools they provide a privacy option. This allows access to students sites only if invited by the students and approved by the organiser (teacher).

Why go digital?
Online digital portfolios support the notion that most of today's students in the western world do not think of technology (especially the Internet) as "technology" they see it as an essential part of life. Ian Jukes (educational futurist) says about today's teenager, '... *there's never been a time in their lives when computers, cell phones, video games, the Internet and all the other digital wonders that increasingly define their (and our) world haven't surrounded them*' (Jukes 2006, p.1). This is not a new phenomenon, Marc Prensky back in 2001 wrote that the current generation of students expect to be able to communicate with anyone or anything, anytime and anywhere (Prensky 2001).

An online portfolio uses electronic technologies, allowing the developer to collect and organize multimedia artifacts (audio, video, images, text). '*It is not a haphazard*

collection of artifacts (i.e., a digital scrapbook or a multimedia presentation) but rather a reflective tool that demonstrates growth over time' (Barrett, 2000). Artifacts that are not already in a digital format such as painting, ceramic work, handwriting and poster projects can be either scanned or videoed. If videoed, an audio commentary can be recorded explaining the significance of the work and why it is included in the portfolio. Simple video editing programs such as iMovie for Mac computers or Moviemaker for Windows based machine allow for very quick and simple video and audio productions to be constructed and exported in a format appropriate for Internet based communication such as online portfolios. More sophisticate video editing software such as Apple's Final Cut and Adobe's Premier allow for an unlimited range of video production possibilities. Video literacy is becoming as important as most other literacies. Many schools are realising the importance of teaching video communication within a range of disciplines, not just in Media and Information Technology subjects.

It is important that all students and teachers involved in using digital portfolios are aware of how to manage the memory size of their artifacts. Lessons in compressing digital images, audio and video files are vital. There is generally a limit of server space provided for each portfolio and viewers of each site will be frustrated with downloading unnecessarily large files. It is recommended that students compress all still images to under 100KB in size when uploading to the Internet. Video footage should be in a low-resolution format such as a mpeg4 with a frame size width of about 320 pixels. Audio files should be in a mp3 format.

Types of Portfolios
There are four main types and styles of portfolios *Reflection*, *Demonstration*, *Development* & *Assessment*.

A reflective portfolio is used to consider what was learned, how concepts were learned and what could be improved in future learning experiences. They can be constructed and developed while learning tasks are occurring but are more likely to be used after a particular unit of work is complete as part of the evaluation process. Reflective portfolio can be used to record, demonstrate and reflect on learning across a range of areas over a long period of time. They are an ideal platform for documenting progress throughout an interdisciplinary unit of work (McKenna, 2009).

A portfolio for demonstrating learning is aimed at a collection of artifacts and commentary that explains and displays what has been learned in a specific unit of work, subject or experience. A demonstration portfolio is usually constructed as the project or unit of work was being undertaken so that the process of learning can be explained as well as the product being shown or included (McKenna, 2009).

A portfolio focused on development aims to support decisions about future learning. This type of portfolio contains artifacts which demonstrate samples of student work which may need improving, video or audio of students engaging in particular activities in which they may fail to meet expected outcomes. This type of portfolio can be used with the student, teachers and parents to identify patterns of learning difficulties that are causing issues. They can help to enhance the discussion of strategies for change (McKenna, 2009).

An assessment portfolio is aimed at providing evidence of learning. It is the assessment, therefore it needs to meet the learning objectives and criteria of the

specific unit of work or task as set by the teacher. Meaning is seen to be constructed through the process of building the folio itself (McKenna, 2009).

At Strathcona, students and teachers have been encouraged to apply aspects of all four type of portfolios for their students. One example has been regular reflective times, where five minutes before the end of a particular lesson, each students is asked to stop what they are doing, log onto their portfolio and answer the following three questions:

1) What have you learned this week that you didn't already know?
2) What issues did you have, and how did you solve them?
3) What do you need to know more about?

By the end of each unit of work the portfolio becomes a powerful reflective tool that demonstrates learning over time. It also becomes an effective resource to guide formative assessment and even a discussion starter for parent interviews.

Conclusion
The big issue for many teachers is finding the time to experiment and become familiar and confident with the new tools that appear to be bombarding us from all sides. Rather than become overwhelmed, take on board one new idea at a time. Also, don't see these new tools as add-ons to an already crowded curriculum, see them as potential replacements for tried and tested procedures and new ways of doing things you already do in the classroom.

We may have lost the art of oral tradition but we do have some great new tools to communicate stories and most importantly aid learning and teaching.

Reference

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About the author

Dr Tim Kitchen is the Head of Learning Technologies at Strathcona Baptist Girls Grammar School in Melbourne and he is on the committee of management for VITTA. Tim has a strong passion for encouraging ICT use (in particular multimedia) in all levels of education and promoting effective teaching approaches. He is a regular presenter at a range of state-wide, national and international education conferences and he writes for a range of educational textbooks and journals.

Outside of ICT in education, Tim has a strong passion for interfaith dialogue and coordinates the eastern region of the Victorian Building Bridges program. He is married and has a beautiful 8 yr old daughter. His other passions include video editing, bike riding, travelling, holidaying at Dromana, watching and playing cricket and supporting the StKilda Football Club.

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