

Undergraduate Research EFL Students' Experiences in Building ePortfolios

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Abstract

High-impact practices (HIPs) have been adopted by many universities around the world to enhance students learning. The aim of this qualitative study was to analyze how building ePortfolios may impact students learning experience via weekly reflections. A total of 45 senior undergraduate English as a foreign language (EFL) students from a public university in Saudi Arabia enrolled in graduation research projects shared reflections about their research experiences via the development of ePortfolios. Data analysis was carried out through deductive coding of the transcribed focus groups and weekly reflections. Findings suggest that the participants used their ePortfolios to improve their writing skills and increase their knowledge. Students were able to track their progress and felt more engaged in learning. They also showed appreciation to the feedback provided by their instructors on their reflections. However, the students shared some challenges they faced while developing their ePortfolios. Despite these challenges, there was a positive impact of ePortfolios on students' learning experiences. Implications and further directions for research are discussed.

Keywords: ePortfolios; English as a foreign language; high impact educational practices; learning experience; undergraduate research

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1. Introduction

The use of electronic portfolios (ePortfolios) is one of the high-impact practices (HIPs) in higher education (Watson et al., 2016). ePortfolios positively impact learning (Kuh, 2016; Mueller & Bair, 2018). As a relatively recent innovation, ePortfolios are currently employed by colleges and universities around the world (Kuh, 2017; Watty & McKay, 2016) to assess and document students learning. Collection of data from ePortfolios also aids with quality assurance and enhancement pursuits (Wong et al., 2017). ePortfolios lack a specific definition in the literature, probably because of their “surprising variety of uses”. Definitions seem to vary among academics depending on how ePortfolios are used and the educational setting in which they are used (Batson, 2010). Nonetheless, some have attempted to provide the needed clarity, such as Klenowski (2000) who described ePortfolios as “a digital collection of diverse evidence of an individual’s achievements over time involving selection, design, and reflection for a particular purpose and presentation to one or more audiences” (p. 236).

Characteristics of ePortfolios, when embedded in the curriculum, are that they are a repository of students’ work that will be subsequently evaluated. ePortfolios help students to be engaged in reflective practice (Andrade & Ziegner, 2021; Song, 2021; Weber & Myrick, 2018), receive timely feedback (Egan et al., 2018; Hager, 2013; Light et al., 2012), own their learning (Jenson & Treuer, 2014), and enhance personal growth (Buyarski, 2014). ePortfolios can be used as a tool to track students’ learning while they are involved in other HIPs, such as faculty-mentored undergraduate research and study abroad (Hubert et al., 2015). However, studies that examine the impact of ePortfolios on undergraduate research are lacking (Webber & Myrick, 2018), particularly in the second-language acquisition field and more precisely in the English as a foreign language (EFL) context.

This pilot study which was carried out at public university in Saudi Arabia aims to bridge the gap by examining how using ePortfolios promote students’ reflections and how these reflections, in turn, may affect their learning experience as they conduct their graduation research projects.

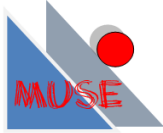
2. Literature review

2.1. Theoretical framework

The use of ePortfolios as a learning tool is grounded in constructivism. It is aligned with social and active learning (Thibodeaux et al., 2017). As an approach to learning, constructivism holds that “people actively construct or make their own knowledge and that reality is determined by the experiences of the learner” (Elliott et al., 2000, p. 256). Vygotsky (1978) asserted that community plays a key role in the process of "making meaning". In the same vein, Schrader (2015) argues that active engagement aids learners in shaping their thinking and offers ample learning opportunities. Based on the principles of constructivism, integrating ePortfolios in the learning environment provides students with opportunities for engagement (Pitts & Lehner-Quam, 2019). ePortfolios should be linked to reflective practices so that students can be engaged in deep learning, (Pitts & Lenher-Quam, 2019). Dewey (1938) asserts that “We do not learn from experiences; we learn from reflecting on our experiences” (p.78). Therefore, reflection becomes a valuable tool (Ramirez et al, 2015). Reflection and education go hand-in-hand in that reflection refers to “the process of turning experience into learning” (Boud, 2001, p. 10). Thus, engaging in reflective practice helps students to take ownership of their learning and become self-directed and lifelong learners (Wong et al, 2017). Engaging in the reflective process may result in increased self-awareness, efficacy, and better communication skills (Eynon & Gambino, 2017). As an HIP, ePortfolios are an effective means for boosting reflection (Landis et al., 2015). The potential role played by ePortfolios in enhancing students’ learning justifies the adoption of ePortfolios as a learning tool (Song, 2021).

1.3. Previous research on ePortfolios for self-reflection

The increasing use of ePortfolios as a tool in promoting reflection has not only been the result of technological advancements (Payne et al., 2020) but has also been part of the shift of focus to a learner-centered rather than the instructor-centered approach (Wickersham & Chambers, 2006). Sufficient empirical evidence propelled the recognition of ePortfolios as “the eleventh high impact practice” (HIP) by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U, 2013; Kuh, 2017; Watson et al., 2016) because of the value they bring to the learning environment. The concept



of HIPs started to draw the attention of educators with the seminal work of Kuh (2008), who identified a number of HIPs believed to enhance deep learning and maximize student success. Kuh (2008) contended that HIPs help students to develop their critical thinking as well as new skills and knowledge. The implementation of HIPs, which involves active learning, also results in increased retention and graduation rates among college students (AAC&U, 2013). Subsequent work by Kahn and Scott (2013) identified ePortfolios as an additional HIP. When paired with the other HIPs, such as the project capstone and service learning, deeper and more effective learning occur.

In their attempt to summarize the uses of ePortfolios, Yang et al. (2016) referred to them as “a form of authentic assessment with formative functions that include showcasing and sharing artifacts” as well as self-reflection and other forms of engaged learning (p. 1276). ePortfolios offer instructors a way to evaluate students. Proof of students’ learning is no longer determined by grades only (Terheggen et al., 2000). Instructors can evaluate students’ artifacts and engagement to determine the extent of their learning using ePortfolios (McAllister, 2015; Wickersham & Chambers, 2006; Yang et al., 2015). They provide students with opportunities to showcase their achievements (Cambridge, 2010) and foster their career-development readiness (Barrett, 2007; Chen & Penny Light, 2010; Fallowfield et al., 2019; Hallam & Creagh, 2010; Penny Light et al., 2012). Further, ePortfolios are particularly important for institutions seeking professional accreditation because they provide transparent demonstrations of students’ learning. In fact, student artifacts can be used as evidence of academic achievement (AAC&U, 2013).

ePortfolios facilitate learning through self-reflection (Payne, et al., 2020). ePortfolios provide opportunities for students to respond to prompts that guide the learner through different stages of high-level thinking. Reflective prompts can facilitate learning about coursework, various experiences, and skills through reflection incorporated into the ePortfolios. The use of reflection encourages students to make sense of what they are learning (Franco Vázquez & Gillanders, 2014; Nicholl & Higgins, 2004) and transfer that knowledge to new contexts. ePortfolios help students identify and communicate what they know, reinforcing the higher-level critical thinking skills (Landis et al., 2015) that students should possess and improve professionalism (Nicholl & Higgins, 2004), a desirable attribute of graduates. In addition, engaging in reflection boosts students’ confidence and results in deep learning (Penny Light et al., 2012; Reynolds & Patton, 2014). Because of their value to integrative and lifelong learning, some scholars advocate adoption of ePortfolios

throughout higher education (Wong et al., 2017), and an increasing number of colleges and universities around the world are implementing ePortfolios (Watty & McKay, 2016).

Most studies about ePortfolios have been conducted at higher education institutions in the United States (e.g., Cleveland, 2018; Fallowfield et al., 2019; Payne et al., 2021; Thibodeaux et al., 2020). Evidence in the literature is replete with indications of positive outcomes from using ePortfolios as a reflection tool to promote deep learning. In a study involving pre-service teachers, Denton (2012) instructed participants to create ePortfolios and write entries related to their program, such as course content, assignments, and field experiences. Results suggest that the participants' writing entries fostered reflection leading to deeper learning. Similar results were reported by Cleveland (2018), who implemented ePortfolios in a counselor education program to help prepare graduates for the job market. Cleveland also reported fostering students' reflective writing. Participants demonstrated consistently higher reflection mean scores. The assessment was rubric focused and was based on faculty observations.

A recent pilot study conducted by Webber and Myrick (2018) assessed the impact of using ePortfolios on student learning through reflective practice. Eleven undergraduates from diverse majors and different years of study (sophomore, junior, and senior) participated in a summer research program. The participants were instructed to reflect and write weekly about their research experiences by developing their ePortfolios. The researchers analyzed the transcripts from the focus groups and the interviewees' responses to questions pertaining to ePortfolios to identify themes. Results showed that ePortfolios enhanced the students' learning experiences because they communicated their engagement in their research projects. Students reported a considerable increase in their knowledge and acquired skills. They appreciated their ability to track their achievements, which was a source of motivation. The researchers emphasized the importance of giving students opportunities for self-reflection to guide their educational path. Promoting self-reflection through ePortfolios allows faculty and staff to analyze the learning outcomes and experiences of their students.

Other educational institutions around the world, especially in Europe and Asia, have started to adopt ePortfolios as reported in recent studies (Alexiou & Paraskeva, 2020; Ciesielkiewicz et al., 2019; González-Mujico, 2020; Poole et al., 2018). Wong et al. (2017) reported on a pilot study using

ePortfolios to engage students in reflective practice on their learning experiences at a public higher education institution in Hong Kong. The researchers found that ePortfolios were successfully implemented to improve the learning experience of participants who were engaged in research projects. Students had the opportunity to showcase their projects at the university library and at a conference to obtain feedback from their audiences. The researchers argued that, to use ePortfolios effectively, learners needed to understand their applicability and utility.

Implementing ePortfolios is not free of challenges. Building ePortfolios can be a daunting task for students who may not be proficient with the technical aspects of various platforms used in creating ePortfolios (Fallowfield et al., 2019). Students' main concerns were the time involved in developing the ePortfolios and their ability to create a website that is "aesthetically pleasing" (Weber & Myrick, 2018). Mapundu and Musara (2019) reported that students felt it took excessive time to build their ePortfolios. There were also privacy concerns, as observed by Cheng (2008). He found that more than 90% of the students who were interviewed indicated that they were reluctant to share their own work with their classmates. A number of higher achieving students argued that sharing their work with their peers might lead to plagiarism, while some of the low-achieving peers were reluctant to share their teachers' feedback and portfolio assessment results.

Another challenge is that improper ePortfolio implementation causes students to react negatively. In their study, Payne et al. (2021) reported that more than one-third of their students felt that building ePortfolios wasted their time, and less than half complained that developing ePortfolios did not establish any link between courses. Payne et al. (2021) argued that the results might be attributable to the failure of instructors to explain to students the benefits of using ePortfolios. For teachers, challenges include the need to spend additional time to learn how to effectively use an electronic system and dealing with student plagiarism (Cheng, 2008). Keeping track of students' reflections can be time-consuming (Ciesielkiewicz et al., 2019). Although a number of scholars examined the advantages of implementing ePortfolios, studies that explore the impact of implementation ePortfolios on students' learning experience while conducting undergraduate research are still lacking (Webber & Myrick, 2018). Furthermore, no single study on ePortfolios was carried out in the under researched context of the Arabian Gulf region.

3. Rationale

This study aims to contribute to the line of research on the impact of using ePortfolios on students' undergraduate research experience through reflective practice. Specifically, this qualitative study aims to examine how might the adoption and implementation of ePortfolios foster EFL students' reflection and impact their undergraduate research experience.

4. Method

4.1. Context of the study

This research was conducted at a public university in Saudi Arabia. The educational system in the kingdom is similar to the one in the United States. Students can earn a bachelor's degree when a student successfully completes a minimum of 120 semester units. Students typically graduate within four years. The university's strategic plan for 2020–2025 called for the implementation of HIPs following the recommendation of George Kuh and other scholars from the AAC&U who argued that HIPs, including undergraduate research and ePortfolios, promote deep learning and student success (AAC&U, 2013). ePortfolios have been proved to play a vital role in enhancing student engagement (Barrett, 2007). Some scholars argue that ePortfolios help develop real-world job skills such as digital competence and editing skills which are enhanced when students compile and manage content for ePortfolios. Other real-world job skills include reflection, communication, organization and visualization (Laurikainen & Kunnari, 2018). Hence the need for this pilot study to demonstrate how using ePortfolios may help provide evidence of student learning. This can be achieved by engaging students in reflecting on their learning experiences as they are conducting their graduation research projects using ePortfolios. The current study reports the implantation of the ePortfolios for the first time at Northern Border University and probably in the whole kingdom.

4.2. Participants

In this study, a total of 45 EFL university students were recruited (38 females, 7 males). The sample was selected from senior graduating English-major students who were enrolled in the graduation project in the Department of Languages and Translation at Northern Border University in Saudi Arabia. The sample comprised 38 females and 7 males aged between 22 and 24 ($M = 22.70$, $SD = .82$). This gender distribution was almost identical to the overall gender distribution of all students in the program, so it was determined that this sample was representative from the perspective of gender. The participants' GPAs ranged between 3.22 and 4.90 out of 5.0 ($M = 4.05$, $SD = .62$). All students are required to complete a capstone graduation project during their final semester as a graduation requirement. The Institutional Review Board at the Northern Border University approved this study. All participants provided signed informed consent. Because the educational system is gender segregated with females being educated at dedicated females' campuses, a female collaborator worked closely with the female participants in coordination with the rest of the research team. Two members of the research team worked with the male students. No differences in patterns of interaction were witnessed between male and female students. The research team created a WhatsApp group to communicate with the participants. Researchers sent regular reminders to students to submit their weekly entries and reflections. The WhatsApp group was the communication platform used by the students to post inquiries and to collaborate, especially regarding creating and posting their ePortfolios online. None of the participants had prior knowledge about ePortfolios and their use.

4.3. Procedures

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic the interaction between the research team and students was online. During the first week of classes, members of the research team introduced the project of ePortfolios and briefed the participants about its purpose and the requirements for a successful implementation of ePortfolios. One of the researchers provided students with a tutorial on how to build an individual ePortfolio and showed samples of complete ePortfolios. Then participants received guidelines regarding the weekly reflective journal entries. Students were reassured that their reflections will be kept confidential and that they will not be graded. However, participants were

encouraged to submit well-thought reflections. The emphasis was on content rather than on form. In other words, students were told that the instructors will not focus on grammatical issues but rather on coherence. Students' journal entries were posted online and were considered part of the ePortfolio. Most students had no previous experience with reflective learning.

4.4. ePortfolio structure

The researchers chose Google sites to host students' ePortfolios because it is easy to create an ePortfolio site. Student ePortfolios were made up of three web pages: About Me, Graduation Project, and ePortfolio Reflections. The About Me page included a brief autobiography of the students. Graduation Project served as a page where students posted different parts of their projects (title, introduction, research questions, literature review, method, discussion, conclusion, and references). In addition, the students' PowerPoint presentations were posted and were available for downloading/viewing. Finally, the "ePortfolio Reflections" page comprised students' individual weekly reflections based on prompts. Site viewers could browse the list of reflections and read each reflection by clicking on individual post titles. Students received training on how to develop their ePortfolios at the beginning of the semester.

4.5. Focus groups

Following Webber and Myrick (2018), the 45 ePortfolio students were sent an invitation to participate in focus group interviews. Students who decided to join the discussion joined the focus group meeting on Blackboard. A total of three focus group discussions were carried out by the researchers and one collaborator. An average number of 16 students participated in each focus group which lasted around 50 minutes. The focus group discussion questions were all in English. However, students were told that if they could not express a specific idea because they could not find the word in English they could say it in Arabic. Questions pertaining to students' experience in building their ePortfolios and how they benefited from using ePortfolios guided the discussion. Specifically, the researchers asked participants about the benefits they may have gained, their motivation and

engagement while building their ePortfolios, and any challenges they encountered. Sample focus group questions are included in the Appendix.

4.6. Students' weekly reflections

In their ePortfolios, students reflected on their learning as they were engaged in their research project. In these reflections, student teams were asked to reflect on what worked and what did not work in their projects, what they needed to do differently to address the challenges they faced, how they had responded to feedback, and so forth. The reflections were designed to aid students to examine and improve their work. Students were encouraged to be frank and honest so that their reflective journals to capture both positive and negative lived experiences. The reflections were written entirely in English.

4.7. Research design

The focus groups were audio recorded and transcribed. Transcripts from the focus groups were analyzed for common themes derived from students' responses to questions related to ePortfolios using open coding as laid out in the grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Then additional content analysis was carried out to ensure that the common themes were consistent with the content generated from the students' reflections about ePortfolios. The researchers used triangulation to ensure an accurate interpretation of the collected data (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019).

5. Results and discussion

Five dominant themes emerged from the analysis of the participants' reflections and the focus groups: Improved skills and gained knowledge, Tracked progress, Increased Engagement, Valuable feedback, and Challenges. Table 1 reports the number and percentages of coded responses per theme.

Table 1. Number and percentages of coded responses per theme.

Themes	Number of coded responses	Percentage of coded responses
Improved skills and gained knowledge	120	28.92%
Tracked progress	81	19.52%
Increased engagement	92	22.17%
Valuable feedback	73	17.59%
Challenges	49	11.81%

5.1. Improved skills and gained knowledge

This recurring theme emerged with the biggest number of coded responses. Students reflected on how building ePortfolios helped them not only to acquire a new set of skills regarding creating and posting materials online, but also to enhance their communication and writing skills. Writing reflections as part of an ePortfolio proved to be a useful tool to improve students' writing skills. The quality the ePortfolios provides evidence of students' acquisition of digital skills. In addition, the content of reflections demonstrates students' steady improvement of their writing skills. In fact, instructors noticed that reflections were well-thought and written in better English. One of the students stated: "This is probably the biggest number of writing task that I have done since my first year. I think that the quality of my writing improved a lot. In addition, I started more attention to details since I did a lot of editing.

The same opinion was shared by a number of students during the focus group discussions. One student observed: "Writing reflections was an opportunity to practice writing in English. Even though my instructor mentioned that journal entries should be well thought, I made a lot of efforts to submit reflections that are mistake free. I had to write multiple drafts and treated each reflection as a final exam. Writing is very difficult for me because I make a lot of spelling and grammatical mistakes". (Student #7, Focus Group 1). Another student shared the same sentiment: "I have to confess that I did not like the idea of writing a weekly reflection. I always struggled with writing. It is my weakest skill. I was scared of getting a bad grade because of the quality of my writing. However, I noticed an improvement in my writing skills. I gained more confidence in my ability to express my ideas in writing. I learned from my instructor's corrections. I appreciate the fact that my

instructor took the time to highlight the areas that needed improvement. I even felt that my speaking skills have improved as a result of learning new words. This is the best preparation for the job market as I'm graduating in a few weeks and I need to be fluent in English in order to get a job". (Student #18, Focus Group 3).

Other students stressed how the knowledge gained while working on their ePortfolios bolstered their confidence: "I'm not a good student even though I try to work hard. I'm always afraid of making mistakes and of my classmates laughing at me. As I worked on my ePortfolio and compared it with the ePortfolios of other students I felt that I could be a good student too. My instructor once told me that my reflections were getting better and that my project was good". (Student #22, Focus Group 3).

5.2. Tracked progress

The participants valued the opportunity to keep track of the progress they made and the amount of knowledge they acquired through weekly reflections. The ePortfolios helped students regulate their own time and focus on the tasks they need to complete. One student said: "I feel that I'm more organized. Because I know that I have to write about the progress that I made each week then I had to accomplish at least one task to show that I'm a hard worker" (Student #7, Focus Group 1).

Another student noted: "there is a self-imposed stress that pushes me to work on my project and update my ePortfolio. I hate to see myself lagging behind while my peers are making progress. Without completing any task I can't submit a decent reflection, which will result in losing points". (Student #3, Focus Group 2).

These comments document the role played by ePortfolios in promoting self-regulated learning because students were able to monitor their own knowledge, acquired skills, and overall progress (Andrade & Ziegner, 2021) throughout the semester. In this regard, Parker et al. (2012) argued that ePortfolios help students monitor their work more efficiently than supervised learning. ePortfolios promote student-centered learning where learners can track their own progress and contribute to lifelong learning (Mason et al, 2004; Meyer et al., 2010; Yusuf & Tuisawau, 2011).

5.3. Increased Engagement

The use of ePortfolios increased students' engagement and boosted their self-regulated learning. Previous studies (e.g., Rogers & Swan, 2004) have documented that self-regulated learners are active participants in the learning process and are mostly like to achieve academic success. One student wrote in her reflective journal entry: "I spent a lot of time checking my ePortfolio and making sure that it is good enough for an A. It became a habit to log in daily and polish my work even though I still have time."

Another student argued that "Building an ePortfolio to display my work was a cool idea. I always wanted to have my own web space that includes the "fruits of my school work". I had to spend long hours learning how to present the different parts of my graduation project in a nice way. I had to seek the help of my classmates but I managed to complete all the requirements. Because I knew that my instructor and peers will be checking my ePortfolio I had to make sure it was perfect". (Student #10, Focus Group 1)

This proves that ePortfolios aided students in evaluating their success and deciding on ways to improve their work. Another student emphasized her learning curve: "I have to admit that I'm not a very techy person. Being able to build an ePortfolio from scratch and most importantly posting my graduation project in a neat way is a huge achievement. I feel that this interesting experience helped me gain more knowledge than during my CALL course. I gained confidence in my ability to build an ePortfolio because of the amount of time I dedicated for improving my project and finish the assigned tasks as scheduled so that I could get an A. I had a slow start because I was overwhelmed by the number of tasks but I was able to set specific goals that I needed to achieve. I was not sure I could do that at the beginning of the semester". (Student #11, Focus Group 3)

Similar experiences were reported by Mapundu and Musara (2019), who found that students regarded ePortfolios to be fun and interesting, and therefore they were engaged in learning. Student engagement through the implementation of ePortfolios can help overcome academic shortcomings (Meyer et al., 2010).

5.4. Valuable feedback

The participants enthusiastically appreciated the feedback they received from their instructors because it helped them to consolidate their learning and increase their confidence with knowledge and skills. They thought constant feedback made them feel that they had the support they needed in the process. Formative feedback encouraged reflection and revision of the students' work. This view is shared by many students. For example, one student asserted in her reflective journal entry: "I appreciate the feedback from my teacher. Her comments were precise and very clear. They guided me towards correcting my mistakes".

Another participant mentioned that "the constant appropriate and relevant feedback that I received from my instructor made me feel that I'm not alone in this journey. Knowing that my instructor will read and react to my reflection which includes my need for help (Student #2, Focus Group 1). The same opinion was echoed by another student who indicated that "the comments offered by my instructor regarding my work helped identify the areas that require improvements" (Student #4, Focus Group 1). Another comment that further highlights the importance of feedback provided by instructors was the following: "At first I felt that building an ePortfolio and sharing weekly reflections are additional unnecessary tasks that were time-consuming. Then I realized that without the constant feedback I received from my instructor I would not be able to finish my project on time". (Student #3, Focus Group 2)

The value of feedback corroborates the findings of previous studies (e.g., Mapundu & Musara, 2019; McDermott & Gallagher, 2011; O'Keeffe & Donnelly, 2013; Webber & Myrick, 2018).

5.5. Challenges

Students reported experiencing a number of challenges through their reflection journal entries and during focus group discussions. This outcome was not surprising given the fact that students had no prior experience in building ePortfolios. Furthermore, implementation of new tools does not go smoothly.

A number of students complained about the amount of time needed to build the ePortfolio. In one reflection piece, a student suggested reducing the number of reflections: “I think I’m running out of ideas. I shared everything about my experience. I think that five reflections should be enough”. The same sentiment was shared by another student: “Having to write a weekly reflection is a huge burden. I think that writing a biweekly reflection would have been more reasonable. Understand the benefits of reflection but I have other assignments from other courses.” (Student #17, Focus Group 1)

Another student indicated that developing an ePortfolio was time consuming and that caused her a lot of stress: “During my mid-term exams I had no time to write a reflection note because I’m a slow writer who needs a lot of time to write an acceptable journal entry. I wish that our reflections were not worth points.” (Student #11, Focus Group 2).

Other students thought that having to update their ePortfolio each week was too demanding because it involved logging to Google Sites and make the necessary changes. One student pointed out: “Having an ePortfolio is cool but sometimes I don’t feel like I don’t have enough new content to post on the site. When I’m busy with other courses I tend to delay my work on the graduation project. I need to take care of other courses”. (Student #23, Focus Group 1)

The same concerns with regard to time consumption were voiced by students in other contexts, as reported by Mapundu and Musara (2019) who found that students in South Africa complained about the excessive amount of time needed to build ePortfolios. Similar views were expressed by some American students who were not willing to put the time and effort into developing an ePortfolio (Webber & Myrick, 2018).

Instructors were prompt in helping their students overcome their challenges. Some students needed more time. Other students needed encouragement and confidence in their abilities to complete the assigned task. One student stated in a reflective journal entry that her teacher was very accommodating: “I appreciate the fact that I got more time to finish up my tasks since I was busy with mid-term exams. I did not think it was smart to spend a lot of time writing a journal entry and lose focus on what matters most. I know that writing such journal entries help me practice my writing more but I need to maintain my high GPA”.

Another recognition to the support provided by the teachers comes from a male student who reflected in his journal entry on the role played by his teacher in helping him overcome some of the challenges he faced: “Without the help and support from Dr. B. I would not be able to finish the weekly tasks. He understands my fear and anxiety. I’m someone who panics fast and hate deadlines. Dr. B was very lenient and always believed in me and my classmates. His comments on the class WhatsApp group were very encouraging. I felt bad that I complained a lot”.

6. Implications

The findings from this study suggest that the implementation of ePortfolios can help students to acquire knowledge and a set of skills that result in enhancing their learning experience. Therefore, the decision of Northern Border University to adopt the implementation of ePortfolios along with other HIPs can boost the academic performance of students and equip them with the necessary skills that prepare them for the job market.

7. Conclusion and potential future research

This study provided evidence that building ePortfolios experience provided students with opportunities to review their work in progress, make improvements, and recognize their achievements. In addition, the implementation of ePortfolios increased students’ engagement and honed their writing skills. The act of reflecting aided them to see what they had accomplished and what areas they needed to address for improvement. Students’ overall positive responses during focus group discussions and their weekly reflections suggest the fact that ePortfolios may enhance students’ learning experience. Despite the positive outcomes, the current study has a number of limitations. The sample included only English major students from one single institution. A future study might explore two cohorts—one group majoring in English and another majoring in a scientific field such as computer science. In addition, the study involved participants who worked on individual projects. Setting up group projects could have given the researchers the opportunity to measure collaboration and peer interaction, which are important elements that enhance students’ learning experience.

Students in group projects may experience a sense of community when they interact with each other through a forum or group discussions (Bowman et al., 2016; Hadley, 2007). Such a setup could have added depth to the study analysis. An additional limitation was that the study occurred at a single newly established university. It would be interesting to learn whether the researchers would obtain similar results if the participants were students from a top-tier university where motivation to conduct research might be higher.

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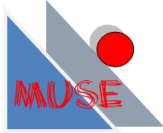
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Appendix

Sample Focus Group Questions

1. How would you describe your experience in building your ePortfolio?
2. What have you learned from using your ePortfolio?
3. What are the benefits/advantages of building an ePortfolio?
4. What are the challenges of building an ePortfolio?
5. Was there anything you gained from uploading your project to the website that you would not have learned otherwise?
6. Were the reflective journal entries valuable?