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Engaging with ePortfolios: Teaching Social Work Competencies through a Program-wide Curriculum

Alice Schmidt Hanbidge

Renison University College, University of Waterloo, ashanbidge@uwaterloo.ca

Colleen McMillan

Renison University College, University of Waterloo, c7mcmillan@uwaterloo.ca

Kyle W. Scholz

University of Waterloo, kwscholz@uwaterloo.ca

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Engaging with ePortfolios: Teaching Social Work Competencies through a Program-wide Curriculum

Abstract

The potential of ePortfolios is derived from a learner's ability to synthesize learning experiences to better understand how seemingly disparate modalities are connected (Alvarez & Moxley, 2004; Chen, 2009). This is best accomplished through a program-wide implementation of ePortfolios, including providing time for self-directed learning opportunities to become accustomed to the self-reflective practice and online technology. Nonetheless, it remains challenging for program-wide ePortfolios to exist effectively due to the commitment and resources required (Posey, Plack, Synder, Dinneen, Feuer, & Wiss, 2015; Sidell, 2003). Our study examines one approach to alleviate logistical and pedagogical issues that emerge when considering program-wide implementations of an ePortfolio, namely, thorough integration of the ePortfolio within the program. We examine the efficacy of an ePortfolio assignment situated within the online Master of Social Work program at Renison University College that was informed by Bernstein's learning theory. As part of the program capstone, the ePortfolio is intended to be a synthesizing and culminating learning experience, wherein learners develop their professional self. It is a scholarly and creative collection of diverse artefacts accumulated through course work, a field practicum, and practical experiences.

We distill the features and processes that make this ePortfolio assignment unique. Core professional social work competencies are embedded within the ePortfolio and learners are expected to continually reflect on their learning experiences and explicitly connect them to the competencies. Such evidence of learning helps students demonstrate their competence to future employers, and allows for program evaluation to assess student proficiency. Learner-reported survey data collected through focus groups and reviewer surveys are analyzed using a thematic analysis on the effectiveness of the ePortfolio for future careers, as well as the ePortfolio's ability to encourage the intended outcome of synthesizing all aspects of the capstone experience. Multiple pedagogical benefits exist for incorporating an ePortfolio into a professional program.

Le potentiel des ePortfolios dérive de l'aptitude d'un apprenant à synthétiser ses expériences d'apprentissage afin de mieux comprendre comment des modalités qui semblent disparates sont connectées (Alvarez & Moxley, 2004; Chen, 2009). Le meilleur moyen d'y parvenir est de faire appel à la mise en oeuvre d'un ePortfolio à l'échelle des programmes, y compris le fait de consacrer du temps pour des occasions d'apprentissage auto-dirigées afin de s'habituer à la pratique d'auto-réflexion et à la technologie en ligne. Toutefois, l'existence efficace des ePortfolios à l'échelle des programmes reste difficile à cause des obligations et des ressources qui sont nécessaires (Posey, Plack, Synder, Dinneen, Feuer & Wiss, 2015; Sidell, 2003). Notre étude examine une approche qui permet de réduire les problèmes logistiques et pédagogiques qui surviennent lorsqu'on examine la mise en oeuvre des ePortfolios à l'échelle des programmes, plus précisément lors de l'intégration des ePortfolios au sein des programmes. Nous examinons l'efficacité d'un ePortfolio qui existe au sein du programme de maîtrise en travail social offert en ligne à l'Université Collège Renison, basé sur la théorie d'apprentissage de Bernstein. En tant qu'élément fondamental du programme, le ePortfolio est censé constituer une expérience d'apprentissage culminante de synthèse qui permet aux étudiants de développer leur moi professionnel. Il s'agit d'un recueil de travaux savants et créatifs divers accumulés par le biais du travail de cours, des stages effectués sur le terrain et des expériences pratiques.

Nous distillons les caractéristiques et les processus qui rendent unique cette tâche de préparation d'un ePortfolio. Les compétences professionnelles de base en travail social sont incorporées au sein du ePortfolio et les apprenants sont censés réfléchir continuellement à leurs expériences d'apprentissage et connecter

explicitement celles-ci à leurs compétences. Une telle preuve d'apprentissage aide les étudiants à démontrer leurs compétences à de futurs employeurs et fait en sorte que leur réussite peut être évaluée grâce à l'évaluation du programme. Les données recueillies par le biais d'un sondage auto-rapporté par les étudiants et par le biais de groupes de discussion, ainsi que les sondages effectués par des examinateurs, ont été examinés grâce à une analyse thématique traitant de l'efficacité du ePortfolio sur les carrières futures. L'aptitude du ePortfolio à encourager les résultats escomptés, c'est-à-dire à synthétiser tous les aspects de l'expérience fondamentale, a été examinée. Il existe de nombreux avantages pédagogiques pour incorporer un ePortfolio dans un programme professionnel.

Keywords

ePortfolio, social work education, critical reflection, competencies

Accreditation and competency development are central to the success of a program that strives to help learners grow and prepare for careers after their education. The Renison University College School of Social Work aims to ensure opportunities for this type of learning; the MSW program presents a unique learning context for its students, being a fully online program that upholds rigorous standards to ensure that all graduates are able to demonstrate how Social Work competencies are being addressed through their studies and practice. Social work competencies for the field were developed as student learning outcomes by Canadian Association for Social Work Education – l'Association canadienne pour la formation en travail social in the Commission on Accreditation Standards (CASWE-ACFTS, 2014). In this paper, we will provide further evidence of the efficacy of a program-wide ePortfolio by examining student feedback from a focus group and an online survey from ePortfolio assessors, as well as more detailed explanation for our rationale behind this project.

ePortfolio Literature

Of the many affordances of ePortfolios discussed in the literature, their ability to help learners connect learning experiences in an effort to gain a better sense of what has been learnt over the course of an extended period of time has perhaps the greatest potential. Course-based ePortfolios can still be powerful learning activities, while program-based applications provide even greater possibilities for learners; instituting these large-scale assessment strategies, however, is challenging (see Beishuizen, Van Boxel, Banyard, Twiner, Vermeij, & Underwood, 2006; Housego & Parker, 2009). An overarching strategy must exist that ties the ePortfolio activity together in order to help those involved with the assessment of the ePortfolio understand what each learner has contributed, while also being understandable for the learners themselves, whose task will be to constantly add new material to the ePortfolio. Other considerations include whether or not there is a single ePortfolio that attempts to tie everything together across the program, or if specific courses within the program have separate ePortfolios which feed into the program-wide ePortfolio; Richards-Schuster and Galura (2017) explain that “as ePortfolios continue to emerge and proliferate, strategies are needed within classroom and co-curricular programs to help students navigate across multiple ePortfolios” (p. 43). Program-wide ePortfolio implementations, as well as discussions on the application of these program-wide implementations, tend to focus on one of two approaches to their analysis: pedagogical application or logistical implementation.

Pedagogical Application

From a pedagogical perspective, studies have professed some of the lessons learned by implementing program-wide ePortfolios. Richards-Schuster and Galura (2017) detail five strategies to help students who may need to navigate through multiple ePortfolios as part of a capstone course, intended to allow students to reflect on what was learnt, as well as “articulate their values and skills, build relationships with others graduating from the minor, and help position students for the post-graduation experience” (p. 44). The five strategies outlined include: (1) redeveloping the curriculum to meet the needs of the students, (2) including both curricular and co-curricular learning experiences, (3) acknowledging the necessity of providing clear ePortfolio instructions to students, (4) promoting the ePortfolio process as a digital tool to explore the developing professional identity of the student and (5) supporting community building and networking opportunities.

Hall, Byszewski, Sutherland, and Stodel (2012) shared their experiences developing a program-wide ePortfolio in the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Ottawa. As part of their implementation of the ePortfolio, the committee shared key strategies to ensure a successful integration such as “providing a clear and thorough introduction to the program; integrating it throughout the curriculum; making it student controlled; employing a simple, systematic evaluation procedure; and supporting faculty in their role in the program” (p. 745). Similar to the present study, their program-wide ePortfolio focused on the learners providing evidence of how they were able to achieve the competencies of the program. They nevertheless experienced challenges, such as faculty member buy-in, an initial lack of understanding about the utility of the ePortfolio, and general technical issues. Yet even with these challenges, Hall et al. (2012) spoke highly of the ePortfolio’s potential, arguing that it “supports student-centered learning [and] is responsive to the changing world and society’s expectations” (p. 749). Student-centered learning is embedded within the program-wide ePortfolio implementation and administration. Purposely, the ePortfolio itself can help learners identify the competencies they are developing.

Competency Approach

The acquisition and demonstration of competencies based on professional standards are particularly well-suited to human service professions, including education, nursing and social work (Hagenhauer & Volet, 2014). Competency statements have been developed to clearly describe what students should be able to do and professional programs have been designed around these (Kaprielian et al., 2013; Thompson, Harver, & Eure, 2009). Salm, Johner, and Luhanga (2016) assert that developing required competencies related to specific standards help to determine whether students had the technical and professional skills and were professionally competent for their chosen profession.

In social work education, recent developments for ePortfolio assignments as part of a course or as an entire course have emerged (Ajandi, Preston, & Clarke, 2014; Alvarez & Moxley, 2004; Coleman, Rogers, & King, 2002; Schatz, 2004; Sidell, 2003; Swigonski, Ward, Mama, Rodgers, & Belicose, 2006). While these ePortfolios integrate social work theory and practice and offer opportunities for self reflection, program-wide ePortfolios have not been documented in the literature, and there continues to be an ongoing debate and development on the ideal way to assess or evaluate student competencies (Smith, 2010). Wallar and Papadopoulos (2015) noted it was important to develop clear public health competency statements for programs in Canada, as they vary from professional programs in United States, Australia and Europe to ensure they align with workforce needs to program learning objectives.

Logistical Implementation

Logistical questions dominate discussion of program-wide ePortfolio implementation as well; questions, such as how many assessors to employ, and how to ensure that their assessment practices are aligned in order to ensure that learners are provided accurate and reasonable feedback, are crucial to consider. Receiving appropriate buy-in from all instructors expected to engage with ePortfolios can be challenging as well, which reinforces the necessity to ensure that a program-wide implementation of ePortfolios is well thought-out and meaningful.

Posey et al. (2015) developed a five-phase model designed to help an entire institution undergo the process of adapting an ePortfolio platform to suit the needs of all involved individuals.

The scale of this project was much larger than that which we are pursuing (institution-wide compared to a singular program), yet the steps that were advised by the researchers – conducting a needs analysis, selecting the ideal platform for a piloted version of the program, testing its usability, conducting the pilot study, and then evaluating the pilot through survey conducting of all involved parties – are all fundamental steps to ensuring successful program-wide implementation as well. Other studies focus more on the challenges associated with program-wide ePortfolio implementation; Wilhelm, Puckett, Beisser, Wishart, Merideth, and Sivakumaran (2006) detailed the process required to train faculty across three different universities in the United States, reflecting on the need to have continual training that is encouraged by strong leadership and communicated effectively to the faculty members involved so that they are in agreement on the common goals of the ePortfolio and can effectively contribute to their success. Lambert and Corrin (2007) shared their own experiences implementing ePortfolios at the University of Wollongong. Among the valuable lessons learned, they noted the necessity to have thorough and substantial orientation sessions for students to alleviate potential anxiety with using a new technology such as ePortfolios.

We suggest that ePortfolios can function as a pedagogical innovation and are an effective tool to evaluate the competencies students have developed for the reasons stated above, and we will closely examine our own unique context to explain the rationale behind adopting ePortfolios for the MSW program.

ePortfolio Design through Bernstein’s Pedagogical Model

In response to the identified challenges in the literature, faculty at Renison School of Social Work adopted Bernstein’s (2000) pedagogical model of knowledge integration when designing the MSW ePortfolio. The model emphasizes the merger of horizontal and vertical discourse.

Horizontal discourse is described as knowledge that is “local, segmented, context specific and dependent, for maximizing encounters with persons and habitat” (Bernstein, 2000, p. 157). Case studies or problem-based scenarios are examples of segmented learning where the student’s prior or lived experience informs their understanding and approach to the situation. In comparison, vertical discourse comprises “specialized symbolic structures of explicit knowledge” that is attained academically or through formal education (p. 160). Meta-theories such as critical, ecological or systems theory represent generalized propositions that hold true regardless of context, due to the high level of abstraction.

Bernstein (2009) asserts that when educators intentionally structure curriculum along such a matrix, meaning when vertical and horizontal discourses intersect, the outcome is knowledge that is deeper and therefore more sustainable over time because higher level theories are integrated with specific skill sets (See Figure 1 for a visual representation of Bernstein’s curriculum schema). This kind of synergistic conceptualization avoids what Maton (2013) refers to as “knowledge blindness”, meaning that theory is viewed as an object of study without being contextualized into political, cultural, social or moral codes and systems.

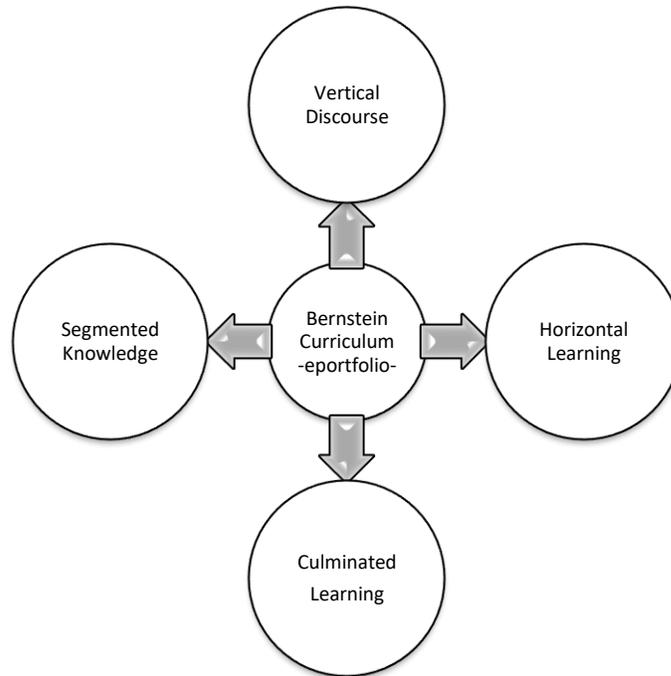


Figure 1. Bernstein's Curriculum Schema

The initial perusal of Bernstein's theory of knowledge development offered promise as to how knowledge could be conceived and operationalized within social work courses and then transferred to an online learning platform, including the form of assignments and that of the ePortfolio. Bernstein's theory had supported a resurgence of interest and discussion in the fields of psychology, sociology and linguistics on knowledge practices (Christie & Martin, 2007; Christie & Maton, 2011; Maton & Moore, 2010) but remained excluded by social work academics and programs. Challenged with the competing pressures of time, expectations of institutional productivity, limited faculty resources and increased student enrolment in online learning, the authors were guided by Bernstein's pedagogical model as a means to a theoretically robust and accessible online curriculum for social work in Canada. We found the intersection of vertical and horizontal knowledge transferred well to the ePortfolio as students could track how theories informed their practice during their field practicum and reciprocally, what they did in practicum allowed for the theories to become visible and hence, better understood and absorbed.

Furthermore, we ensured our capstone ePortfolio adhered to many of the strategies and best practices encouraged by other researchers (see Richards-Schuster & Galura, 2017). Some of these strategies included, offering students a live webinar, that was recorded for future viewing, to review instruction for completion of the ePortfolio; multiple opportunities for students to provide feedback to each other's postings for each competency and their final presentation; and developing an online repository (Renison Rspace Repository, 2016) for community networking and options for future social work students viewing. For this reason, we elected to not attempt to have multiple ePortfolios for each course or component of the program, but rather have a single, condensed space whereby students are guided and encouraged to specifically think about the relationship between what is being learnt in the MSW program and the core competencies students are intended to develop.

University College Case Example

The MSW program, located in southwestern Ontario, is a course-based curriculum that includes two mandatory, on campus, one-week block courses, four required core lecture/seminar courses (12 weeks each, delivered online), plus two elective courses (12 weeks each, delivered online) as well as one Capstone course. Canadian Association for Social Work Education (CASWE-ACFTS, 2014) accredited our program, offered through the School of Social Work. Students must complete a supervised 462-hour practicum or field experience, working a minimum of 2 days per week. The initial and final courses in the program are held on campus as one-week Summer Institute block courses.

The program's curriculum delivery model is primarily online, includes course emphasis on the social determinants of health, and recognizes the importance of culturally and spiritually sensitive social work health practice within a diverse society and the impact of discrimination, economic deprivation, and oppression on social work health practice with at-risk populations. CASWE has accredited Baccalaureate and Master level social work programs wherein nine competency standards support academic excellence for professional education and practice displayed in Table 1. Students work to address each competency throughout the program in their ePortfolio in their Capstone course.

Table 1
CASWE Competencies

CASWE-ACFTS Competency Standards
Identify as a professional social worker and adopt a value perspective of the social work profession
Adhere to social work values and ethics in professional practice
Promote human rights and social justice
Support and enhance diversity by addressing structural sources of inequity
Employ critical thinking in professional practice
Engage in research
Participate in policy analysis and development
Engage in organizational and societal systems' change through professional practice
Engage with individuals, families, groups, and communities through professional practice

The capstone experience is a student-directed demonstration of beginning master's level practitioner competence, a chronicle of career development and reflection and a glimpse into their professional future learning through a plan for continued growth. The main purpose of completing an ePortfolio within the capstone project is to develop essential critical thinking, problem-solving, oral communication, public speaking, research, planning, and goal-setting skills and preparation for professional social work practice. In the ePortfolio developed during the MSW program, an *organic living bibliography* is created that represents a variety of references or artifacts that document student's learning journey. A bibliography grows each day and, to be meaningful, requires ongoing examination and reflection.

The MSW Capstone ePortfolio provides learners with both a product and process outcome. As a product, students are asked to provide concrete evidence of how they are meeting each core

competency. We also asked students to build towards completing a capstone project, synthesizing what was learnt and creating new knowledge by creating a unique product that addresses their areas of interest and what topics most resonated with them, as well as displaying their final capstone project directly within the ePortfolio space. From a process perspective, scaffolding is provided for the student by providing guiding prompts to stimulate their thinking about the competencies (see Figure 3), and learners are asked to detail their final capstone project through three separate project check-ins which are coordinated entirely through and within the ePortfolio. This process was intended to help students maintain interest and engagement with the ePortfolio, while also directly benefitting the MSW program itself by having documented achievement of competencies that can be utilized for program review purposes. Examples of how the ePortfolio looks in its default stage (before being customized by each individual learner), as well as how core competencies are being addressed, can be seen in Figures 2 and 3.

MSW Capstone Information	
MSW Capstone Information	The portfolio experience is intended to be both a developing and a culminating experience; the focus is on the social worker you are becoming (Phillips & Carr, 2009). The portfolio experience is a student-directed demonstration of: masters level practitioner competence over the student's career, a chronicle of career development and reflection about that development, and a glimpse into the student's professional future learning through a plan for continued growth. It is a creative and scholarly organized collection of artifacts accumulated through classes and daily experience that demonstrates your abilities to articulate your model of practice and sense of the integration of the domains of professional social work. The portfolio experience will culminate in sharing and demonstration to each other, faculty, and local practitioners about your learnings as an MSW student.
About Me	
Capstone Progress - Update 1	This type of capstone experience represents a philosophical shift that is centered on you taking an action research approach to your learning and provides a model/process for you to take more responsibility for your learning in graduate school and in your professional career. Using an action research model becomes a systematic and flexible way for students to regularly monitor, examine, and document their learning in their own ways.
Capstone Progress - Update 2	
Capstone Progress - Update 3	Students take the lead in presenting demonstrations and illustrations of the integrations they are making and taking into the work world. In your portfolio you are creating an "organic bibliography" that represents a variety of "references" that documents your learning journey. It is a bibliography that grows each day and, to be meaningful, requires ongoing examination and reflection. It is a bibliography that will be influenced by being in our classes and which will hopefully influence our classes. Additionally, our intention is to help students become researching practitioners who learn about credibly providing, analyzing and presenting evidence about the social workers students are becoming.
Final Capstone Project	
Competency 1:	Please note: There are instructions available and helpful tutorial videos located in your MSW Capstone Course on I FARN. Start there before jumping into your eportfolio!

Figure 2. MSW Capstone ePortfolio description.

Core Competency 1

<p>MSW Capstone Information</p> <p>About Me</p> <p>Capstone Progress - Update 1</p> <p>Capstone Progress - Update 2</p> <p>Capstone Progress - Update 3</p> <p>Final Capstone Project</p> <p>Competency 1: Identify as a professional social work and adopt a value perspective of the social work profession</p>	<p>Identify as a professional social worker and adopt a value perspective of the social work profession</p> <p><i>Question prompt: Identify a recent experience in which you began to feel like a social worker as opposed to a student studying social work. Thinking about the foundation level values and practice behaviors, provide an example(s) of ways in which you are developing your professional social worker identity within the context of your social location.</i></p> <p>Comments</p> <p><i>Last modified on Aug 3, 2016 3:48 PM</i></p> <p>Review Item</p> <p><input type="button" value="Add Comment"/></p>
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Figure 3. MSW capstone ePortfolio core competencies.

Figure 4 demonstrates how the MSW Capstone experience is designed within the learning management system (LMS) and the actual MSW Capstone ePortfolio, which is part of the MSW Capstone Project course. A key distinction between these two entities is the shared nature of each: the course is shared only internally amongst students enrolled in the program and the instructors. Students have the opportunity to review and provide commentary for fellow learner's ePortfolios and final capstone presentation which contributes to the student's social learning opportunities within the capstone experience.

The course is assessed by the instructor based on the completion of all competencies however, instructors did not evaluate the final capstone presentation. The ePortfolio is intended to be shared externally, and indeed is done so at the end of the program when external reviewers are invited to see a student's ePortfolio and provide feedback, evaluation and a pass or fail grade on what the student has accomplished.

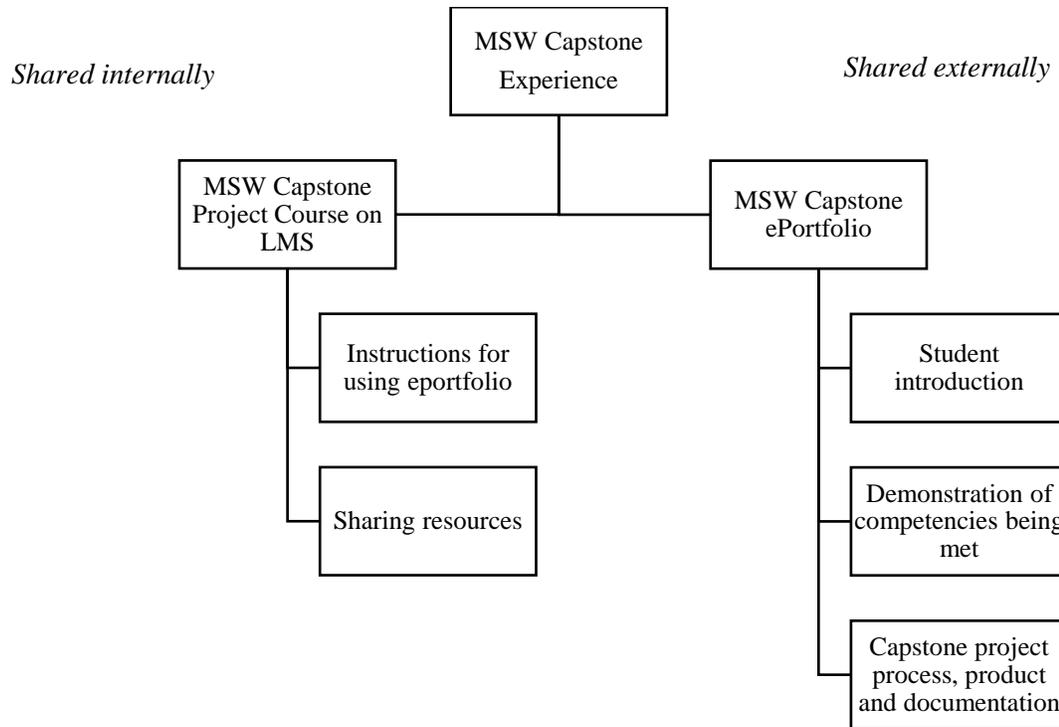


Figure 4. Design of the capstone experience.

While capstone projects can take on a wide range of different formats, in our social work program, they are framed as longer-term formative ePortfolio projects. The ePortfolio experience culminates in the delivery of a final virtual presentation that demonstrates what the student has learned over the course of the graduate program. Each presentation is reviewed with feedback given from a member of the School of Social Work faculty and a social worker practitioner in the community. The ePortfolio is graded as credit/non-credit.

Method

Two groups of participants were recruited to gather a deeper understanding of the benefits and limitations of the ePortfolio and capstone. We conducted a focus group of MSW graduating students combined with an online survey of social worker reviewers to gain multiple perspectives and to triangulate the data (Creswell, 1998) on the benefits and limitations of the ePortfolio. Focus groups are a useful way to engage learner's participation in the process of eliciting in-depth feedback about local experiences with an ePortfolio. While collecting feedback is important, interviewers need to be aware of the possibility that some speakers may dominate or individuals may be reluctant to share some data during the discussion. Understanding the limitations of using a focus group for data collection was partially addressed through an experienced and trained facilitator who was mindful of soliciting feedback from all present. Additionally, while an interview script was available the facilitator followed up on interesting leads that were felt to be important in the moment, thus collecting a wide range of feedback. The 2016 MSW student cohort who completed their ePortfolio in their Capstone course were invited to participate in a focus group through an email invitation sent through their University of Waterloo email address in the learning management system, the course management system. Semi-structured interview questions were posed to the group for discussion purposes (see Appendix A). With consent, the focus group

meeting was audio-recorded, transcribed and coded by the same author to ensure consistency and staying close to the data (Glasser, 2005). In addition to the focus group, capstone community social worker reviewers nation-wide were contacted through email and invited to participate in an online survey as to their perspective regarding the benefits and limitations of the capstone and ePortfolio (see survey questions in Appendix B). Ten survey respondents shared their assessment of the experience from a reviewer's perspective through ten online questions.

A thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was employed to analyze the data gathered from both the focus groups and community reviewer surveys. We understand and value ePortfolios as a complex educational technology, and as a result, we wanted to ensure that all feedback received by students and reviewers was taken into consideration. For purposes of continuity, the same author coding the responses using the same method of analysis, which will be described more fully under Findings. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the University Research Ethics Review Committee.

The focus group was facilitated in order to determine if our perceptions of the utility of the program-wide MSW ePortfolio aligned with what the students themselves experienced. Eleven MSW students participated at the end of their year-long program, after having used the ePortfolio for the entirety of their program. The focus group questions (see Appendix A) targeted a variety of themes of interest, such as general impressions of the ePortfolio, technology, feedback, connecting theory to practice, and reflection possibilities. We did not explicitly ask the participants about the ePortfolio from a program-wide perspective, as we wanted their experiences to be as users of the ePortfolio and not attached to our own agenda of determining the utility of ePortfolios within a more encompassing framework. The participants nonetheless discussed themes and issues that were a product of having spent so much time immersed in the ePortfolio, many of which were a direct result of being fully integrated in an ePortfolio experience that accompanied them throughout their program. As a result, the emergent themes described in the subsequent section are a direct result of responses gathered from both students and reviewers which address aspects of an ePortfolio experience that is comprehensive and a crucial component of a program, especially one housed within the online environment.

Results

Six themes emerged from the data collected from the focus group and the online survey (see Table 2). We define the themes as they apply to our context, and highlight primarily those comments that reflect the program-wide nature of the ePortfolio:

Table 2
Focus Group and Survey Themes.

Theme	Definition	Student Responses	Reviewer Responses
Social learning	The ePortfolio's ability to connect learners and inspire interest in what one another is working on throughout the program	Enjoyed seeing each other's progress; observe how one another met the numerous competencies; look to each other for guidance when having difficulties; helpful to comment on one another's work	The online Capstone makes this evaluative piece more accessible to practitioners in the community who best understand the competencies needed to be effective social workers
Program content & reflection	The extent to which the ePortfolio helps students learn the material being taught throughout the program, and opportunities to reflect on that content	Helpful to work through competencies in a transparent manner; connect how they are being developed through work/placements; ePortfolio would be very useful when registering to be a social worker	Gives students the opportunity to provide examples from their placement and coursework that apply to social work competencies; the capstone allows the student to include other aspects of their learning that are personal, experiential and integrative; the presentation can summarize learning in a holistic way
Flexibility	The ePortfolio functioning as a tool to allow reflection when beneficial to the learner	Appreciated being able to leave the ePortfolio and come back to it; the capstone felt more relaxed due to it being perceived as less formal; would gravitate more towards the ePortfolio than a traditional paper	Allows for creativity and integration; I enjoyed the online format; easy to use and to view at my convenience

Theme	Definition	Student Responses	Reviewer Responses
Feedback	The role of feedback (from both instructor and fellow students) to guide learner throughout the program	Feedback was reassuring; when requested from the instructor was helpful; more feedback from all instructors would be helpful	It might be helpful to hear from other, more experienced capstone reviewers to find out how they make decisions on their evaluations
Technology	How the technology facilitates or inhibits learning	Virtual repository/reflection space was helpful; other courses use more user-friendly technology; the ePortfolio looks archaic – wouldn't want to show to employers even though it is perceived as beneficial to do so; different modality to share experiences was helpful; good to be forced to use technology like this in an online program	Valued viewing the digital presentation at a convenient time suited to availability; no other major technical issues experienced by reviewers
Support	The extent to which support was available to guide learners through this process	Clearer guidelines would have been helpful; provided instructions to use ePortfolio not helpful for those without technical experience	Guidance on the purpose of the online system; a tutorial programme alongside to support the capstone process

Students were asked if they used ePortfolios in other programs or for their own enjoyment. None of the 11 students had previous experience within an academic setting. This was not surprising, as ePortfolio adoption at our university has been relatively low, primarily due to perceived limitations of the technology and the complexity of the tool itself. Students were then asked to identify the advantages to working with ePortfolios. A range of benefits were indicated, including:

- the ability to see progress of other student's work (Social learning),
- the flexibility it afforded to work at one's pace (Flexibility),
- the capacity to use as a reflection tool, the degree of ownership it allowed (Program content & reflection),
- the use of creativity to personalize (Technology),
- the preference to use a non-traditional form of learning, and lastly (Technology),
- the utility of being virtual allows for connection between other students (Technology, Social learning).

As can be observed, many themes emerged during this initial exploration, and these themes were reinforced as focus group participants expanded upon the other questions asked. When asked about the type of feedback they received over the course of the program from other students and the instructor who viewed their ePortfolio, students offered a range of responses. The emergent theme of Feedback became a contentious issue—while some students felt the feedback received was sufficient, others felt that additional feedback from their instructors or other faculty members would have been helpful. The existence of some technical issues was mentioned as a challenge to knowing when feedback was received.

In response to how the ePortfolio supported the transfer of concepts or theories to practice-based scenarios, the majority expressed positive feedback in how the ePortfolio supported working through competencies as they related to situations experienced in practicum. An extension of this question asked how the student connected ideas, experiences and knowledge from other courses to the ePortfolio. The majority identified this as a challenge, citing difficulties around lack of clarity of instructions, lack of instructor preparation and learning too many other platforms in other courses which felt overwhelming at times. To this end, Technology and Support themes became a recurring issue throughout the focus group as participants expressed challenge with the ePortfolio tool due to feeling relatively unprepared. Although mechanisms were designed as part of the ePortfolio implementation strategy to provide support (as discussed previously), these were evidently insufficient for the majority of learners. Students were explicitly asked if they felt they had adequate technical support from the institution, and the response was unanimous that technical challenges were frequent and diverse. Increased clarity was felt to be needed regarding ePortfolio instructions, navigation of the site and level of terminology used, the latter especially noted by students who had lower comfort levels with technology despite being an online program. Suggestions for improvement included online tutorials and the piloting of the ePortfolio by students prior to being offered.

When asked how students planned to use their ePortfolio and in what avenues, responses were mixed. While some felt that the site was too cumbersome to show potential employers, others felt they would use their Capstone ePortfolio during a job interview. This speaks to the theme of Program content & reflection, where learners attempted to discern how they would be able to apply the knowledge gathered in the ePortfolio to broader contexts. Others felt that the attainment of the MSW degree was sufficient on its own without the additional feature of the ePortfolio. The question was extended by asking if students would recommend using the ePortfolio to others, and if so, what advice would they give? The majority agreed that the ability to interact, learn and connect with others regarding course content was invaluable. The fact that the Renison University College MSW program is national was also seen as an asset in this regard. The theme of *Social learning* remained the most prominently positive aspect of the ePortfolio experience, perceiving its social relevance throughout multiple facets, connecting learners and instructors, and potentially reaching family or employers as well.

Lastly, we asked the students what else did they felt was important for the researchers to know about their experience. Several areas were identified as being important. The need for earlier and increased communication regarding the Capstone final presentation was identified as a key item. The timeframe of ten minutes was felt to be inadequate to record their capstone final presentation given the amount of information gained during the ten-month program. It was also expressed that many enjoyed the introduction of new technology and that this provided a space to learn a new skill set as graduating social workers entering the job market. Again, themes of Support and Technology emerged and were reinforced as learners expressed the challenges that were

associated with a program-wide ePortfolio without adequate support, yet the potential of learning a new technology that could be applicable to their own field of practice counterbalanced some of these issues.

Social work community reviewers indicated several positive aspects in the digital format of the capstone presentations. Themes emerged from the data and reinforced those elicited from the focus group data. Reviewers valued viewing the digital presentation at a convenient time suited to their availability (Technology). As most were community-based practitioners, feedback indicated they felt they were the most appropriate person(s) to review the competency focused assignment (Feedback, Social learning). The majority of reviewers (over 50%) indicated they spent between 20-40 minutes assessing each student's capstone ePortfolio and the technology supported these efforts. Reviewers didn't experience technical or accessibility challenges with the assessment form. Portfolios focusing on developing student's professional competencies garnered comments from reviewers, such as "The capstone allows the student to include other aspects of their learning that are personal, experiential and integrative. The presentation can summarize their learning in a holistic way" (Program content & reflection).

Reviewers also revealed several suggestions to enhance the assessment process. While reviewers found the assessment tool to be relatively easy to use, some survey participants indicated they would have preferred a guided tutorial system alongside the assessment tools (Support). A couple of survey participants indicated they would prefer to have online technology support present and available to address their inquiries (Support). A suggestion was made that it may be helpful to hear from other, more experienced capstone reviewers to find out how they make decisions on their evaluations (Social learning). Generally, reviewers enjoyed viewing the digital capstone presentations and valued the opportunity to be part of student's educational journey.

Discussion and Recommendations

The most beneficial aspect identified by the participants was the social connection the ePortfolio afforded in an online program where students do not have structured opportunities to interact with one another. Yet, due to the nature of the discipline and the myriad approaches to practice in this field, learning from one another, observing how their varied experiences help them meet the competencies as outlined in the program, all serve to better prepare students for success in their careers. Furthermore, the compilation of acquired competencies and the associated evidence as to how these competencies were developed was perceived to be beneficial for registering with their provincial professional association of Social Workers as a means of demonstrating precisely how they are meeting these competencies. While meeting these competencies is certainly of utmost importance, the act of doing so is often hidden, yet the Capstone ePortfolio emphasizes all competencies.

It is clear that there were challenges faced by participants when completing their ePortfolios. Some of these—namely those dealing with technology—are understandable yet largely out of our control due to our University having an institutionally-supported ePortfolio platform that is underdeveloped. Yet we also perceive a need to find better ways to manage technological hurdles, something which can be further developed for future iterations (as Hall et al., 2012 explain as well). Feedback was another contentious issue, with some participants wanting more and varied feedback from other instructors who were part of the MSW program, and whereas others were content with feedback being primarily received from fellow students. This speaks to another challenge expressed in other studies, which is attaining buy-in from other faculty members

when integrating program-wide ePortfolio initiatives (see Hall et al., 2012; Richards-Schuster & Galura, 2017).

Drawing from the themes which emerged from the thematic analysis, as well as our own experiences structuring and scaffolding the learning process through the capstone ePortfolio, we would encourage other programs looking to adopt ePortfolios, especially those in a largely online context. We offer the following six lessons, related to the themes outlined above, for others to consider when designing an evaluative assessment tool:

Social learning. Emphasize the social aspect of the ePortfolio. The ePortfolio may be structured to focus on competency development or other items that demonstrate a learner's knowledge, skills, and values in the program, but the benefits of the social space should not be forgotten, particularly in terms of how students can learn from one another's own experiences. Furthermore, allowing external partners to view and access the ePortfolio and become a part of the community further establishes the relevance of the ePortfolio as a learning tool and promotes social learning.

Program content & reflection. A dual focus on product and process is beneficial, providing both necessary scaffolding to keep learners on track, while also giving them final end product that is useful to share with employers. The transparency with which program-specific outcomes are associated with practical learning experiences can help learners become more invested in the ePortfolio. Reflection, a key element of many ePortfolios, allows learners to make sense of the content of the program and create connections between other experiences and their community reviewers.

Flexibility. Structuring the ePortfolio with multiple entry points into reflection (competency development, tracking capstone progress, reading feedback) helps provide flexibility which resonates with learners who are already focused on other coursework and their professional lives. Providing varied opportunities to interact with the ePortfolio allows learners to choose when to work on it, without feeling like they need to be constantly engaged with it. Giving community reviewers an extended period of time to review the digital recording enhanced the product assessment aspect of the ePortfolio experience.

Feedback. Although the act of reflection is crucial to learning when using ePortfolios, learners are also keen to receive as much feedback as possible. Feedback from peers is sought out and welcome, but feedback from instructors is evidently preferred. Faculty within the program must therefore be trained to use ePortfolios so that they can be involved in the feedback process. Due to program-wide ePortfolios drawing upon multiple sources of inspiration and knowledge from a wealth of varied courses, instructors who have been directly involved in those learning experiences should be able to provide feedback that supports the meaning-making that occurs in the ePortfolio. External reviewers valued the opportunity to view an integrated demonstration of student's learnings.

Technology. ePortfolio technology is complex, regardless of the ePortfolio tool that is being employed. For this reason, ensure proper technological support and training is in place during all aspects of the program, but particularly at the very beginning of the program where students are eager to explore the ePortfolio, but before they become confused and unwilling to learn new strategies to use it properly. Technical guidance and support for product review and assessment is preferred by community reviewers.

Support. In order to mediate the technological barriers of the ePortfolio, provide sufficient examples of other ePortfolios and guidelines so that learners are aware what is meant by reflection and how to write quality reflections. Furthermore, other means by which to offer support (such as webinars) are seen as incredibly valuable by both students and reviewers, and regardless of how clear the process to create an ePortfolio may appear, inevitably there will be confusion, and support will be required.

Outside of the items addressed by the thematic analysis, we would suggest two additional items of caution when considering program-wide ePortfolio implementation. Firstly, a program-wide discussion should be held concerning the privacy of the ePortfolio. ePortfolios function well as a form of social pedagogy, whereby learners can benefit from observing the evidence of learning from, and feedback provided to, other learners, and use this as a means by which to reflect on their own learning and development. To do so implies that the reflection being engaged in is shared, but especially in a field like Social Work, there may be tension between the benefits of sharing one's thoughts and experiences and the privacy of each learner's educational journey. ePortfolios strongly support learner ownership of one's own work, so should the intention be to share this work amongst others, alternatives should be made available to learners who want their privacy respected yet can still equally complete the assignment.

Secondly, this reinforces our next item of caution, which is to be aware of the contextual factors associated with the program that ePortfolios are being embedded into. Although we perceive the benefit of having the core competencies being addressed within the ePortfolio in order to support both student learning, as well as program development, the contents within the accompanying reflections may at times be personal and not appropriate to share more broadly. Thought should be given as to the utility of the ePortfolio, and perhaps a "Showcase ePortfolio", one which is created afterwards and intended for broad, departmental-use, could be designed, so that the student's original ePortfolio is still intended for his or her own utility.

Despite these two cautionary suggestions, we still perceive the social aspect of the ePortfolio, as evidenced by the learners and the reviewers themselves, as one of the most positive features of the ePortfolio experience; additional thought needs to be provided in order to determine how best to maintain a strong social presence and create a culture of social pedagogy within the ePortfolio, particularly with online programs such as this, while simultaneously acknowledging the personal nature of an ePortfolio in a discipline such as this.

Adhering to these recommendations will help ensure that learners feel supported throughout the program, while providing them with a community of their fellow learners to work with and learn from. As this was the inaugural program offering of the ePortfolio, future program offerings will provide valuable comparison data. Given that our program has smaller class sizes and therefore, a restricted number of participants in this study, the generalizability of our findings is limited. The findings in this study are particularly relevant to online social work programs.

Conclusions

Our paper examined one novel ePortfolio approach and extracted unique features, characteristics and processes of the implementation of a program-wide ePortfolio assignment within a social work educational setting. Our research extends this exciting but little understood and developed area by contributing in three meaningful ways: (a) the insertion of competencies is program-wide, ensuring that learning and professional development is continuous and supported by regular instructor evaluation; (b) both the professional competencies and ePortfolio are fully online; and (c) the assessment of professional competencies in an online program are novel in the social work profession, reflecting a degree of innovation not found elsewhere. These unique pedagogical features elevate the offering of social work education to a level that acknowledges the changing nature of the profession while embracing the influence of technology in education. Expectations placed upon social workers are increasing as is the complexity of practice situations encountered upon graduation; ensuring our graduates are competent and highly skilled and ethical practitioners is not just pedagogically good practice, it is a necessity.

We learned about the importance of continuing to refine and document our teaching practices to foster high impact educational practices. In future research, we hope to explore how we can clearly cultivate ePortfolio experiences with lifelong reflection. It would be useful to examine how program-wide ePortfolios can comprehensively measure student development over time. Future research directions reflect the previously mentioned contradictory concepts of individual student privacy and collective social learning within the ePortfolio. Exploration on how to navigate this seemingly contradictory space within an academic course will deepen understanding and potentially guide future development of ePortfolios, not just for Social Work but other professions that place a high value on experiential learning. Additional research may also attempt to determine how program-wide ePortfolios may be utilized after the completion of the program, either as a reflective pedagogy that learners continue to build upon as they learn, or as a career-minded tool that allows learners to demonstrate, with evidence, what they have learned in their studies. With as much potential as ePortfolios evidently contain in higher education, we remain hopeful about the future for integrating technology with teaching to further enhance student learning.

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Appendix A

Focus Group Questions for MSW Students

Directions: The purpose of this focus group is to learn more about your experiences with using ePortfolios in this course. Please answer each question as best you can. Thank you! Let's begin our questions and discussion;

1. What was the best part of working with ePortfolios?
2. Have you used ePortfolios in other programs, classes or for your own enjoyment? Please describe.
3. What type of feedback did you receive about your ePortfolio entries during the MSW program? Did your classmates and instructor look at your ePortfolio and provide feedback to you? How was the feedback useful to you?
4. How has your work in the ePortfolio emphasized applying theories or concepts to practical problems or in new situations?
5. How have you been able to connect ideas, experiences and knowledge from other courses and/or your practicum to your ePortfolio?
6. Was there technical assistance available to you during the program through the instructor, through LEARN, or your peers? Please explain.
7. What was most challenging about using ePortfolios?
8. How did your ePortfolio support your growth and learning?
9. How would you use your ePortfolio to show what you've learned and what you can do for others, such as potential employers or classmates?
10. Would you recommend using an ePortfolio to others? If so, what advice would you give?
11. Is there anything else you would like to add today that we haven't talked about?

Appendix B

Online Survey Questions for Social Worker Reviewers

1. What do you see as the main purpose of the online capstone system? (Please check all that apply)
 - a. to support formal learning/learning to learn
 - b. to support overall development (including personal and career areas, and experience/learning from less formal contexts)
 - c. to support formative assessment
 - d. to provide an assessment management tool, for formal summative assessment
 - e. to create a presentational portfolio/showcasing for progression
 - f. to support transition between different learning environments (into and from the institution)
 - g. Other purposes? (Please state)
2. Did you experience any technical issues navigating the online form and instructions for use?
 - a. NO
 - b. YES. Please explain by giving an example
3. Did you experience any accessibility challenges with the capstone tool?
 - a. NO
 - b. YES. Please explain by giving an example
4. How much time do you estimate that you spent on assessing one capstone presentation?
 - a. RATING SCALE 10 - 20 minutes; 20 -40 minutes; 40 – 60 minutes; 1 hour+
5. Value of marking rubric tool. Was the tool helpful for you?
 - 1 - Poor
 - 2 - Below average
 - 3 - Average
 - 4 - Above average
 - 5 - Excellent
 - a. Any changes recommended. (please explain)

6. What type of guidance and support would you prefer to assess the capstone? (Please check all that apply)
 - a. Guidance on the purpose(s) of the online system
 - b. Guidance on how to use the online system
 - c. A tutorial programme alongside to support the capstone process
 - d. On-line tutor/mentor support for feedback
 - e. Any other human resources, such as tutor support, IT support for learner and system, IT developer support for further development.
 - f. Additional electronic assessment tools
 - g. Any other form of guidance/support?

7. How does an online capstone support competency-based social work education?

8. What aspect of assessing student`s capstone via the online tool worked best for you?_____

9. Any additional comment(s) about your experience with the Renison capstone course or this survey that you would like to share with us. _____