Distance learning – Learner Accountabilities and using E-Portfolio's

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ASU: Educational Technology 523: Distance Education Theory

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Introduction

Distance learning has been increasing year over year. It can be seen in the Changing Course survey

completed by the Babson Survey Research Group, documenting that a "far larger proportion of higher

education institutions have moved from offering only online courses to providing complete

online programs (62.4% in 2012 as compared to 34.5% in 2002)". (Allen & Seaman, 2013)

Given this increase, new learner accountabilities, responsibilities, and technological tools have been

introduced that can be elusive to new online learning students. Given the rise it's important for new

learners to fully understand what is needed to successfully learn at a distance and which tools will

advance them to the next level. These include, having the right equipment, responsibility for self-learning

and allotting "class" time. Beyond these it's equally important to document the work and progress

throughout learning using e-portfolios. So we'll discuss the factors that affect the distance learner and

how they can use e-portfolios to achieve success.

Factors That Affect the Distance Learner

As a distance-learning student, I am familiar with the issues that we face, the factors that can affect our

successes and our failures and what it takes to complete a course, successfully. Many discussions occur

about distance learning and how it affects the learner and a lot of times there is talk about the levels of

interactions within the course, the material itself, the teaching and even the design or media in which its presented. The truth is that much of the learner's success is based on things within the learner's control. The main elements that affect success are having the right equipment, taking a responsibility for their own learning, and making time for class. In some way, all of these elements have allowed me to be successful but they could have easily caused failure.

Equipment

One of the first steps to distance learning success is having the right equipment to work with in order to complete your courses successfully. The upside to equipment, in today's society, is that most everyone has access to some form of electronic communication and most courses can be accessed from even the smallest smart phones. Granted, it's not the most ideal way to write a paper, however, class participation, assignment reviews, viewing lesson video's can be done fairly easily on the go, for most people. It is almost essential to not only have a smart phone, but also a home computer, or a guaranteed access to a computer. Having a home computer with Microsoft Office or a comparable product, is almost a necessity for those with busy schedules; permitting late night cram sessions or squeezing in work when the kids are asleep. Without a home computer, you may have to consider your local library, school computer lab (if you live close to your online school and they offer the facilities), a work computer (which may require employer approval), or possibly friends and neighbors. The key to distance learning and equipment is to have plan A, B, and C to compensate for technological challenges. Unfortunately, even a brand new computer can experience challenges, which prevent a learner from being able to submit in a timely fashion. At Arizona State University (ASU), students are fortunate if they live in the area to have access to the University Technology Office, https://ucc.asu.edu/ (University Common Computing). This office provides many services for ASU students such as educational training sessions about current technology, technology support to get your computer fixed, and a wide variety of computer labs accessible throughout

the valley's ASU campuses. For those distance learners, which are not located within reach of their schools physical campuses, the local libraries or other colleges in the area may be able to help.

Responsibility

Once you escape any computer issues, the learner faces the biggest challenge of having to take responsibility for learning materials on their own. Though instructors are available for a consultation and create discussion areas for questions, most of the learning is self-learned. Debbie Morrison, an Independent Instructional Designer, reminds us of the various learning theories applicable to adult distance learners:

> *Adult learning theories – for instance Malcolm Knowles' Andragogy Theory or K.P. Cross' Adult Learning Theory, both suggest that the adult learner requires motivation, a drive to learn, life experience to apply to the learning situation and a sense of self-directedness. And, more recently the Connectivism Theory, similar to J. Bruner's Constructivist theory, is associated with networked learning and Massive Open Online Courses. This theory suggests that learners come to a course already motivated, seek to engage with the content, other learners and construct new knowledge. (Morrison, 2012, p. para 2)*

For distance learners that are young adults, one could assume a Connectivism Theory and would therefore construct the course accordingly. While schools need to create courses for those with life experience and those with only a motivation to learn, giving assignments that allow both to shine, in either case, learners must come with a desire and a readiness to learn. With that comes the leaner's responsibility to meet deadlines, follow assignment prompts and to participate, as indicated. There is a significant amount of reading typically involved in most courses, so it is imperative to manage time well, to get the materials

read, allowing time for questions. Another piece of this responsibility is to not just meet the minimum requirements, but to achieve, to assume that a future employer will one day see your work. Distance learners are not held any less accountable in the workforce for being able to display their successes in college to obtain a position. This means allowing time…

Time

That timing is a key element for any distance learner. Because there are rarely set class times, except perhaps hybrid courses, distance learners are tasked with strategically carving out time for class activities. Distance learners typically have families and/or are working full-time trying to complete an educational goal. If a distance learner is a full-time student fresh out of high school, the amount of time to study for each class can pose challenges for the learner, only accustom to a small amount of homework every day, switches to larger projects over smaller spans of time. These things will eat a distance learner's time and cause them trouble meeting their class's requirements, if not managed properly. Many schools offer resources that address the "finding time" issue. For instance, Arizona State University has many resources for learners with children.

> *This webpage is dedicated to the needs of students at Arizona State University who juggle parenting or elder care, study and work. It was designed to help you find the information you need in a simpler format. Bookmark the page and use it to help navigate the challenges of being a Student with Children here at ASU. (Students with Children, p. para p1)*
>
> *http://www.asu.edu/studentaffairs/reslife/family/students_with_children.htm*

This is just a subset of the ASU Family Resources, which covers a variety of topics such as Adult Learner Resources, Off-Campus Housing and other events for Off-Campus Students. By having resources like this, learners may be able to find childcare with subsidy assistance along with various other resources to help learner's manage time better. Of course, this will not solve all time management issues for learners; they should also consider discussing the return to school and distance learning with their family and friends to ensure complete support, including sacrificing quality family time for study time. This is a very important element that a learner has this support, as it typically does result in time away from the family and in some cases, work.

Personal Reflection for Distance Learning Accountabilities

As I mentioned earlier, all of these factors have lead me to success as a distance learner through my entire undergraduate collegiate career. As a full-time working student, I spent countless hours at work (after work) doing assignments and tests. In addition, I took advantage of the family resources offered by ASU for childcare and was able to have more time because I had childcare for my son. In addition, I have access to a computer at home and at work, along with my smart phone. Having accessible computers whether home or at work, allowed me addition flexibility in meeting class deadlines. With that said, no amount of preparation or planning prepares for illnesses of yourself and family. For this, the kindness and understanding of instructors was crucial. There is also no preparation for the class that has been laid out in a confusing fashion or with escalated deadlines. I have had courses where the material was challenging to decipher; the course did not flow through the Learning Management System properly. This is where my resilience to learn, to achieve A's and obtain my desired goal, override those circumstances. Achieving A's and submitting excellent work is part of the accountability process, I always envision an future employer asking to see examples of my work and that is one of the things that guide me to producing better pieces, despite the challenges discussed.

E-Portfolios for the Distance Learner

Also, in the effort to obtain my desired goals, I used e-portfolios. In the "old days", students would type or handwrite a paper to hand into the instructor for review and grading. Distance learning has affected that process by allowing online submissions of work either via a course management submission box or by e-mailing an electronic file created using Microsoft Office or Adobe products. Distance learning, while it provides a better interaction for paper submissions, has not done well at preparing distance learners after they graduate and begin seeking a new career or promotion. Distance learning students fight a myth that they have purchased their degree instead of earning it and therefore, they have to compile and retain their work. An e-portfolio is a great online tool to do so. E-portfolios have numerous benefits that could be explored on the cognitive and application sides. However, the two greatest benefits include a comprehensive, online collection of creations along side of reflections that describe the journey of the creations. Although portfolios have typically been associated to artists or models, actually every learner can benefit from using an e-portfolio.

> *E-portfolio is an electronic "collection of work developed across varied contexts over time. The portfolio can advance learning by providing students and/or faculty with a way to organize, archive and display pieces of work." (Regis University)*

E-Portfolio Features

To create an e-portfolio there are several technology options that are available to use. Whatever repository selected, the learner will organize and capture their works for review by peers, educators, and potential employers. The works should be models of works creating a showcase of effort. In some cases, that means including rough drafts and your steps along the journey, to show a culmination of efforts. Each of these artifacts should have some bit of reflection attached to elaborate on the road to the final destination.

The uploaded artifacts come from various sources, Word, PDF, Excel, PowerPoint, YouTube, and many more. Creatively, the learner creates headings, subheadings, and determines the flow or connectivity of the artifacts. In some cases, artifacts are used to identify specific core competencies of the chosen profession. No two portfolios will look the same, nor should they. They are designed as unique representations and as evidence of learning, achievement, and mastery.

On the following page there is an example page (Figure 1) from my personal web page, note the headings across the top and then the links toward the bottom. As you immerse yourself if your chosen field, the e-portfolio becomes your chance to make a mark on your industry with your own thoughts, contributions, linking to other knowledgeable spaces and to provide reflections of how you learned things along your journey.

Figure 1: A. Suzann Day's E-Portfolio Page (Day, 2013)
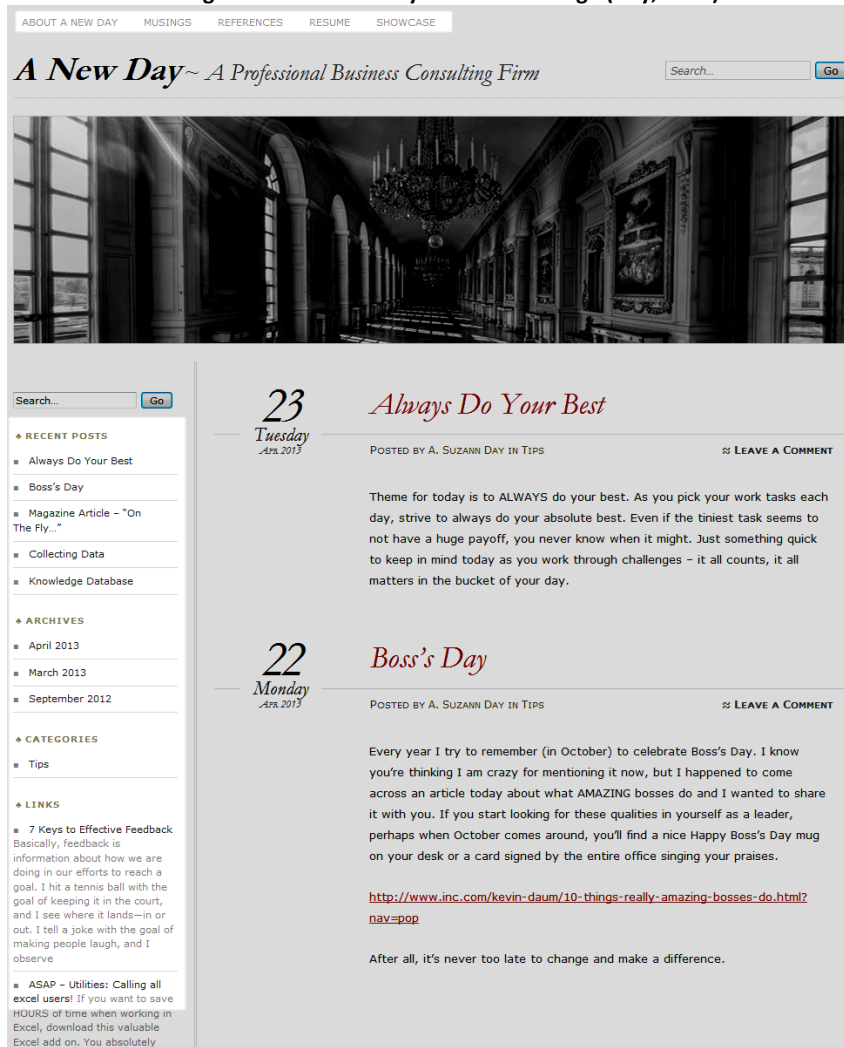
Technology Options

Some schools may have proprietary sites they request for students to use. However, most popular and well-known ways to create an e-portfolio would be with Word Press or Google Sites. While those are not the extent of options, as you could use Blogger, Wubbly, e-Portfolio.org, etc. The repository can be any web-based electronic site that allows the learner to collect artifacts and include reflective content. The technology is not so much with tool as with the resulting product

and the benefits from the process of developing the product. Discussing the two most popular sites, each site has its own unique features and distinct authoring advantages.

WordPress Benefits

WordPress "is an open source blog tool and publishing platform. It is the largest self-hosted blogging tool in the world." (Sela, 2009) WordPress is aesthetically pleasing to the eye with the variety of templates and customization features. WordPress allows immediate connections to social media, so in the event that the learner wants to expose their work for potential interest in the skills they offer; it is easy to do from WordPress. Word Press can be challenging to get started, as there are significantly more designing/content options. WordPress was created with full-blown website design in mind and therefore, may be a little more difficult for the novice user to navigate all of the options available.

Google Sites

"Google Sites is an online application for easy creation and sharing of webpage's. It allows you to gather information (such as videos, calendars, presentations, attachments, and text) in one place and share it for viewing or editing with others." (Sela, 2009) Google Sites tends to be more static with the framework and it can make it challenging to update, add content and/or navigational elements. Google Sites does not offer very many aesthetic customizations. It does offer different types of pages that you can use to customize your site such as filing cabinet, lists, or even just a normal web page. Google Sites definitely caters to the more novice users and works well for teams, collaborations, and small personal sites.

Table 1: WordPress vs. Google Sites [(Sela, 2009)]

Use	WordPress	Google sites
Extended functionality with plugins/gadgets or coding	Limitless	poor
Users can share files	X	V
Messages and lists	X	V
Ease of use	V	V
Single-click page creation	V	V
No Coding required	V	V
Free	V	V
non-blog content management	V	V
Users can be invited to collaborate	V	V
themes	V	V (few)
Users can comment	V	V (with permission)
Beautiful design	V	X
Blogging abilities	V	X
Users can register	V	X

E-Portfolio Benefits to Application

Again, the technology component is a small part to the overall benefit of the e-portfolio. Karen Barnstable does a great job of outlining all the various benefits, 41 initially defined, of an e-portfolio on her Word Press blog site (Barnstable, 2010). She labels several categories of benefits:

Students	Product	Process
Educators		
Employers		
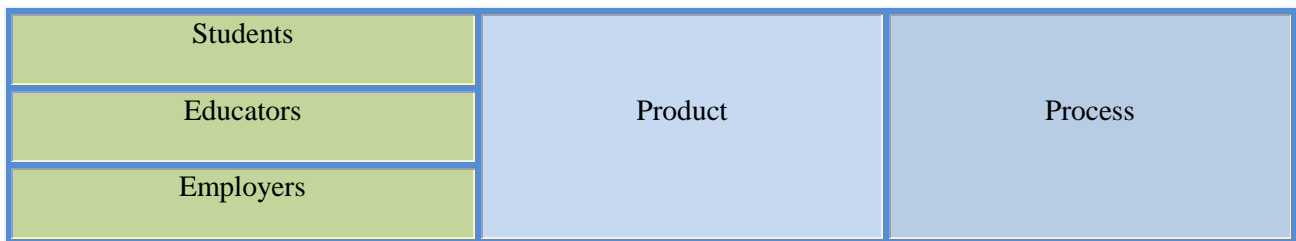
The table above shows that both the product of the e-portfolio and the process of creating it yield benefits for students (learners), educators, and employers. Focusing solely on benefits for the distance learner, we find that this collection of works and reflective journey is a proven way to show employers and educators that the learner achieved the desired skills and concepts. In reflecting this way, it eases the transition when there is a desire to change careers, enhance them, or create them because it allows a future employer to see how you applied your education in ways that could benefit them, despite an experience gap.

Distance learners often find themselves fighting a battle that they just did not work as hard as a brick and mortar student, the e-portfolio allows the student to show naysayers a different side to that argument. Beyond just the future opportunities it cultivates, during the process, the distance learner is able to evaluate the standard of the learner's work to the standard of their intended industry. The reflections of their process working through various objectives, outcomes, habits, or tasks are ultimately, what allows them to shine to educators and employers. In either case, you can see growth, success, and mastery. Concepts are further solidified by compiling lesson information and learning's into artifacts, whether it is an essay, presentation with voice over, video, or web page. The process challenges distance learners above mundane test questions where multiple choice and true false have a statistical ability to guess correctly, rather than actually demonstrating learning (Burton, 1999). Furthermore, with the absence of proctoring for most distance learning students there is no evidence of closed book/notes/friends taking of the test. Whereas when the learner is challenged to redesign or re-present the information, defend a position on the information or elaborate on the information, it requires critical thought and can completely ensure that not just a memorization happened but that a concept or idea was accepted into that person's cognitive thinking. Not to mention that the longer something takes to work on - the more ingrained it becomes. This is why e-portfolios can be so magical. Students formulate and reflect on their work, post it strategically and that process only allows further acceptance of the information.

Personal Reflection for E-portfolio's

More and more employers are looking online to get a better idea of the candidate they are looking to hire. I provide on my resume a link to my WordPress page which is a blog based site that encompasses my resume, significant works related to my degree and chosen field, along with frequently updated postings. These posts are professional reflections of industry specific topics. It allows potential employers to see a part of me that might otherwise not shine during the interview. As a side note, I significantly trimmed out the content on my social networking sites so that my personal life is not on display for potential

employers. For those entering multiple fields, I would recommend creating different pages within your e-portfolio showcasing your different talents or interests. For me, the e-portfolio is an extension of my learner responsibility; to do what's asked to the degree that I am proud to share that with future employers as an example of my work experience.

Conclusion

In summary, distance learners often start class with a number of factors ready to disable their efforts, including functional computers, threats to being a responsible learner, along with the tough fact that there are only 24 hours in a day. Many schools do offer resources to help these distance learners to be successful. The one thing that is the most challenging is a learner's responsibility. While educators can do some things to structure a course to encourage responsibility, ultimately this falls to the learner to be responsible for learning and understanding the materials, no matter how the course is designed. If a student does not have resilience to achieve then distance learning can get the better of a student. To further solidify their careers and online academic achievements, distance learners should utilize E-portfolios. They can become a signature component for distance learners to example their work for their instructors and future employers. It's a showcase beyond those hand written papers, one with style, finesse, and longevity. Though it is not mandated by all schools as of yet, the distance learner owes it to themselves to keep their work compiled, accessible and visible to the people that matter.

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