

Increasing Student Engagement in the Classroom Through ePortfolios

A Review of the Literature

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Introduction

The way students learn has evolved and changed drastically within the last decade. In the aftermath of the Covid pandemic and the shutdown, the shift in teaching and learning pushed teachers to find new ways to engage their students in effective, deeper learning and self evaluation and reflection. As educators, we must drive innovation and always be on top of ways to make our students more successful in their learning and throughout their lives. Kids today are so in tune with current trends, technology and creating media. In examining how students engage with their learning in the elementary classroom, I noticed that there is a huge disconnect that wasn't as prevalent before. The educational system is not moving forward and making that shift as quickly as our students are demanding. The literature reviewed directly impacts my innovation plan by supporting the effectiveness of ePortfolios in the classroom, specifically in the elementary classroom. I chose literature to review that examined student choice, ownership and voice through authentic learning opportunities including ePortfolios and Project Based Learning activities. The literature also explores what motivates and sparks creativity in students and ways to design our teaching so that it positively impacts student achievement. I chose to review student engagement specifically because I work in a very low economic district on the southwest side of San Antonio. These students are already facing many challenges and obstacles keeping them from succeeding. I want to find ways to help them become successful in the primary, foundational time of their educational journey so that they don't fall even further behind as time goes on. This literature review will explore ways to increase student engagement within the elementary classroom through authentic learning opportunities such as ePortfolios.

Review of the Literature

Definition of ePortfolios

ePortfolios are digital portfolios created by students that engage students through choice, ownership and voice. These living documents can comprise of student work, goals and achievements, photos and projects, videos, essays and any other student created artifacts that show student learning. Teachers can utilize these ePortfolios for assessment of student understanding, growth made, and get an understanding of what previous skills they may have. It also gives students a voice and allows them to express themselves freely by giving them the independence to choose what they share on their ePortfolios and how. ePortfolios give students the tools they will need to use in the future such as collaboration, reflection and self regulation (Rhodes, 2011).

Utilizing ePortfolios in the Classroom

The use of ePortfolios has no real limitations or set guidelines, there are many ways for teachers to use them successfully. If integrated correctly in the classroom, should provide students with autonomy over what it looks like and what is shared. For elementary students, there are 3 main types of ePortfolios that can be utilized in the classroom: Presentation, Process, and a hybrid of both.

Presentation ePortfolios

Presentation ePortfolios are ePortfolios that are used in the same way an artist's portfolio would be utilized. These ePortfolios are a collection of a student's best work, or a culmination of learning that can be presented to parents displaying what has been learned. These ePortfolios may be used by a student as a reflection of their progress in their development of certain skills and can serve as a timeline of learning throughout a long period of time. These ePortfolios give

students the opportunity to choose their best work to be on display. This builds student confidence in themselves and gives them an incentive and goal to achieve that boosts engagement in their learning. As students develop and increase their knowledge, posts on these ePortfolios can reflect the degree of skill competency (Washington et al., 2019). Presentation ePortfolios, or “Showcase” ePortfolios are also the easiest to start out with at the beginning of the implementation process to allow students to understand the concept.

Process ePortfolios

The use of process ePortfolios can be combined with Project Based Learning opportunities for students. Process ePortfolios usually show “works in progress” with posts that update on the results of a project or assignment. These ePortfolios show the learning development of a student and provide excellent opportunities for reflection. It also promotes self regulation of a student’s own learning, building strategy skills to problem solve, and understanding real world situations (Tur et al., 2019). Through the use of Project Based Learning, students have the opportunity to build collaboration skills through working with others of varied levels, and for students that may be at a lower comprehension level, they may find greater success in their learning. Allowing students autonomy over the topics or tasks they want to choose, increases engagement in students, giving them the chance to work on subject matter that interests them. However, the balance of giving students control must be limited at the beginning of the project and slowly increase. Too much control over their projects at the start of the activity may decrease engagement and increase overall stress levels (Aubrey, 2021).

Presentation/Process Hybrid ePortfolios

These ePortfolios can follow a more structured/formal approach and can be used to display learning that is aligned with learning objectives and processes, or they can also include artifacts

that show a student's best performance. These ePortfolios can be a combination of several different learning opportunities that are presented through one site. These are also more prevalent in elementary classrooms.

Advantages of Using ePortfolios in the Elementary Classroom

There are several advantages to incorporating ePortfolios in the classrooms of young learners including the opportunity for reflection, self regulation and the ability to introduce the COVA Learning Approach into the way teachers approach teaching.

Reflection

Using ePortfolios helps to scaffold reflection, allows students to become accustomed to feedforward learning opportunities, and creates social learning connections not only student to teacher, but also student to student. Developing these skills will allow students to compare their prior knowledge and formulate solutions to problems. It also allows students to present what they have learned, evaluate their process and conclusion and either formulate another process to garner a different result or work to enhance their learning to achieve greater success. Reflection skills increase the engagement of students to discover themselves and take ownership of their learning to reach their goals. These reflective skills and feedforward practices must be taught and understood to be effective (Gavaldon, 2019).

COVA Learning Approach

The COVA Learning Approach is a learner-centered approach that gives students choice, ownership and voice through authentic learning experiences. Allowing students these learning principles pushes the engagement level and results in beneficial outcomes (Parker et al., 2017). Choice is a low intensity option for teachers that requires little preparation and easy to incorporate into everyday learning (Common et al., 2015). It gives students the opportunity to

connect their learning to their interests and motivates them to put forth more effort into tasks that may challenge them. ePortfolios offer teachers the chance to allow students to choose their what they are passionate about, what they may want to share on their ePortfolio and allows them to have a voice in their learning journey. Choice and a voice in their learning go hand in hand with ownership of their learning. By giving them choice, they take ownership of their learning, are more focused and gain a deeper understanding of the topic. Although COVA is student-centered, it is important to remember that it is still a guided discovery led by the teacher (Cummings et al., 2017).

Barriers to Implementing ePortfolios in the Elementary Classroom

Although the benefits of incorporating engaging ePortfolios outweigh the challenges, there are a few that may still stand in the way of a successful implementation. However, like all new endeavors, there must be bumps along the way to success that serve as learning experiences. One of the main barriers to the implementation of ePortfolios is technology and its reliance on WiFi. Systems go down often and there are size limitations to many free sites that teachers use to host their students' ePortfolios. Google Sites has been proven as a reliable platform to host student ePortfolios and allows for collaboration across its many tools and applications. Another challenge in the ePortfolio implementation is time. With teachers tasked to account for the learning of their students minute by minute, there is often little time available to introduce and apply ePortfolios in the classroom. Teachers must have significant knowledge and experience with ePortfolio creation in order to implement it into everyday classroom learning without significant time lost on learning how to navigate them (Poole, 2018). Students must have ample time to learn the process of creation so that they are able to independently contribute to them.

Although these barriers seem insurmountable, they are small in comparison to the increase in overall student engagement in learning.

Student Engagement and Student Burnout

After effects of the Pandemic show student engagement at an all time low. Student burnout is due oftentimes to anxiety, boredom, emotional issues, and stamina and endurance level. Students feeling burned out can lead to depression and withdrawal (Yang et al., 2023). In an effort to steer students clear from burnout, teachers are introducing new methods to get them excited about learning and engaged. ePortfolios provides many avenues for students to feel supported, gain confidence, and be engaged in their learning topics that interest them. Students that are engaged are motivated to use critical thinking skills, be creative and innovative in their application of learning, and more adept at trying new things (Umar & Ko, 2022).

Summary

With the need for change in the educational system from teacher-centered instruction to student-centered learning, an ePortfolio can be a meaningful tool for teachers to assess what students have learned, where they are at in their learning path, and what knowledge and skills they still may need to access (Wickersham-Fish, 2006). The ePortfolios also allows for the integration of a student's academic and personal achievements and their personality, providing teachers with background knowledge essential for understanding the needs of their students (Theodosiadou et al., 2015). These types of artifacts provide even more data for teachers to use to determine how to motivate their students in their self regulated learning and using their interests and current skills to drive lesson planning and development. What better way to enhance the learning experience for students, as well as allow them to see the value and

importance of what and how they are learning, than to guide them in developing their own ePortfolio. Creating a digital, “living document” that students can actively reflect on and share, would help in preparing them with lifelong learning skills and engage them in their learning for a successful future.

This Review and the Field of Education

This literature review creates a better understanding for teachers of the benefits to incorporating ePortfolios into their classrooms. Specifically, many elementary school teachers don't know that ePortfolios can be utilized in their classrooms. The review brings together several validating points to the effectiveness of ePortfolios in regards to students achievement and engagement in their learning. Engagement being a key problem in schools today, this review, I hope, can inspire educators to discover how ePortfolios can benefit their students, how it is easier to implement than you think, and that it is a gift of skills you are giving your students that will benefit their future.

Strengths and Weaknesses of this Body of Literature

There is a plethora of information and literature involving ePortfolios and their use in education and careers. Studies have shown successful implementation and what it does for student engagement and participation. The literature provided thorough content surrounding possible challenges and outcomes, along with integration of Project Based Learning opportunities and how they affect student engagement. Overall, there was a significant amount of research available to choose from.

Although there was a lot of literature available for the implementation of ePortfolios, they were almost always centered around high education. There was very little information focused on elementary or even middle school students. The lack of articles on this subject was very

disappointing to me, being an elementary teacher of 19 years. I don't understand the displacement of importance in the primary level of education. These years are the foundation for a student's learning path and more focus should be placed on studying this group. I also found very little information of the after effects of the Pandemic on student engagement, In a time when engagement is at the lowest it's ever been and this problem being at the forefront of school issues, I feel like there needs to be more research done.

Focus of the Current Study

The information gathered from the literature review will be incorporated into my action research study on the importance of the COVA framework on student engagement. ePortfolios are just one of many ways that can positively impact student engagement and my findings have led me to wanting to gather more data on elementary aged students. Student engagement is a hot topic across the educational board, and educators are scrambling to find solutions to adjusting to a new way of teaching. Introducing the COVA learning approach to teachers and having them internalize the framework and its easy implementation in their everyday classroom routines will ensure a positive upturn in their students' engagement levels and increase academic achievement. One area I hadn't even considered was student burnout. Student burnout is one of the leading causes of the decline in student engagement. I want to examine this issue further and find ways to curb the problem.

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