

ePortfolios

From puppies to old crocodiles.

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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

At Avans University of Applied Science digital portfolios have been used as a tool to support the individual learning process of students for a number of years. In 2006 however Avans University revised their educational view on learning and teaching, which resulted in an even more important role for digital portfolios. It also leads to new questions, such as: would this revision also have an impact on faculty members? And if so what kind of changes would we have to make to support this? Are digital portfolios really useful as HRM-tools for staff members? In order to answer those questions, we started the following two projects:

- * using digital portfolios during the workplace assignments of our students
- * using of digital portfolios by faculty members as a basis for their professional development

1.1. Background

Avans started using digital portfolios some years ago on a small scale and primarily as a tool to enhance and assess student learning on campus. In the last couple of years the use of portfolios has expanded not only in size but also to new areas. In 2006 we started the first project focused on using digital portfolios as a tool for off campus coaching of students during their workplace assignments. The use of digital portfolios enabled our students to present themselves as (future) employees of a company or institution, and gave their teachers and (company) coaches a better insight in their learning process during this time and to their development as a future professional.

The successful start of this first project soon triggered a second project in which digital portfolios are used by faculty members as a basis for their own professional development. Building and exchanging portfolios give them more insight in available fields of expertise and actively support collaboration.

1.2. Alternatives

Both projects are triggered by and in concordance with the revised educational view on learning and teaching of Avans University. Students are even more encouraged to take responsibility for their own learning process whereas staff members adopt new roles. They are not only experts in their field of expertise but are also assessors, developers, coaches and sometimes even learners.

1.3. Conclusions

At the moment both projects are well under way and the faculties taking part in the project on using digital portfolios for staff members are quite positive. Already a number of other academies are lining up to take part as the first results are very encouraging. However enough questions remain. Surprisingly it might be that the similarities between students and staff members are outweighing their differences.

2. The Avans University

Avans University of Applied Science is based in the South of the Netherlands and has 18 faculties in three locations: Breda, Tilburg and 's Hertogenbosch. We offer 20.000 students and 2000 staff-members an effective and inspiring rich learning- and teaching environment, based on a social constructivist view.

Avans University aims to become a leading educational institution that produces excellent professionals, who in turn will continue to further develop themselves and their profession. For selected businesses and organisations we are their partner for knowledge development and knowledge sharing.

2.1 Our view on Learning and Teaching

In 2006 Avans revised her view on Learning and Teaching. In her revised view on Learning and Teaching, Avans opt for people (students, lecturers and professionals) who connect, cooperate and collaborate in acquiring knowledge and become competent. Keywords in this are: Recognition of diversity, connecting knowledge, acquiring knowledge, competences ambition and a passion for learning and teaching. Those keywords apply not only to students, but to lecturers and professionals as well. It therefore had also an impact on both the scope and the use of digital portfolios, the way they are used and finally lead to a new target group: those of professionals. Portfolios became even more important as a tool to enhance and assess student learning (on and off campus), to encourage reflection and the professional development of our staff members.

2.2 The projects

As a result of our changing view on learning and teaching we at Avans University started a project on *the use of digital portfolios by students during their workplace assignments*. During this time students spend a period of up to 20 weeks working in a company or an institution on a special assignment to prove that they are able to apply all knowledge, skills and competences learned at school.

At earlier times they encountered problems in the form of:

- Students having only a limited time and limited meetings with their supervising lecturers
- Students missing out on opportunities to keep in touch with fellow students to communicate collaborate and share knowledge
- Teachers missing out on means to keep up to date with the student's progress
- Teachers having little means to communicate with the company mentor.

The use of portfolios for workplace assignments resulted therefore in a shift from on campus coaching and assessing towards expanding the use of digital portfolios as a tool for off campus coaching of students as well. Students were offered new opportunities to better present themselves as (future) employees of a company or institution and to prove that they are competent as a professional. It also gave their teachers and (company) coaches a better insight in their learning process during this time and their development as a future professional. Last but not least students use their digital portfolios as a tool for self-reflection.

A second project focused on *the use of digital portfolios by faculty members as a basis for their professional development*. The revised view on Learning and Teaching had implications for our staff members as well as our students. Staff members got new and better defined roles. Apart from lecturers, they became assessors, developers, coaches and sometimes even learners. By starting our second project on using digital portfolios for faculty, they used it as an instrument to show their professional skills, the projects they are working on, collaborate with in and out of Avans University and share knowledge with their

colleagues. It also gave Avans University a better insight in available and missing competencies, so it soon became a valuable instrument during the yearly staff review process. Ultimately it gave staff members control over their own professional development.

2.3 Requirements

Both projects may look very similar but they do require different things in order to be successful. Using digital portfolios off campus does require facilities and procedures to share the results and to be able to communicate with company coaches, who may not have automatic access to the electronic learning system, which is used to build digital portfolios. Students also have to be aware of the extra value of keeping their portfolios up to date. They need to feel in control and deserve to be taken seriously.

In the case of using digital portfolios for staff members it takes a clear view on the goals of the organization and the role that digital portfolios play as part of a yearly staff review process. Organizations or managers may not go for the shift in thinking it really needs and may not be prepared to really change current protocols or may not be willing to take digital portfolios really seriously. Last but not least the ICT skills of staff members may be very different from those of students, which can really lead it to be an almost insurmountable barrier.

3. Results so far

The revised view on Learning and Teaching has had a major impact on students and staff members alike. At the moment both projects on the use of digital portfolios are well under way. We find that they are an essential tool to support Lifelong Learning for staff and students alike. It really increases mobility and employability. Surprisingly it might be that the similarities between students and staff members outweigh their differences, although the implementation process, facilities and conditions for success differ enormously. Even though the first results are very positive and new academies are lining up to join the projects we do not have all the answers we're looking for. It's still a challenge, but.... we like it!