



ASSESSMENT

PAPER-BASED AND E-PORTFOLIOS: THE CHANGING LANDSCAPE OF ASSESSMENT IN NEW ZEALAND

Both paper-based and electronic portfolios are important in early childhood settings, writes WENDY LEE.

I support the use of both e-portfolios and paper-based portfolios in ECE assessment. One of the reasons for this is that I have, for some time, been a passionate advocate for 'learning stories' which are records of what a teacher (or parent) has seen a child (or group of children) doing in an early childhood programme.

These learning stories form most of the content of the portfolios in New Zealand early childhood settings and I have talked with teachers in many other countries about the value of them as a valuable mode of formative assessment.

I believe *both* e-portfolios and paper-based portfolios are essential in ECE, but for different reasons. Whereas paper-based portfolios are critical for young children, e-portfolios are useful primarily for adults (i.e. parents and whānau) and fostering adult participation in the learning of young children.

Documenting children's learning lives through paper-based portfolios has the power to support and construct learner identity. Children and adults can discuss the learning using the 'learning book' as a prompt and this enables a collaborative conversation about progress and what might come next.

The learning journey is apparent and is materialised in text and photos. Even very young children can 'read' the photographs of their learning activities and written stories will be read by the child (and his or her family) for many years to come.

Some of these learning stories will even be read to their children when they are parents. All this indicates that we should develop processes that hold the test of time and paper-based portfolios do this.

But it doesn't have to be a matter of one or the other. Although e-portfolios also have a distinct place in assessment and learning, their use is mainly for parents and whānau and not the child. This is because of the way in which digital technology may impact on learning.

In order to consider documenting a child's learning effectively with an e-portfolio we must first ask ourselves some vital questions: 'Is the digital screen the only access for the child to stories about their learning?'; 'Is there a digital divide amongst the families in this community?'; 'Who is the portfolio for?'; and 'What is the primary reason for the child having a portfolio?'

In this article I will discuss the first two questions, and include teachers' voices to answer the last two.

IS THE DIGITAL SCREEN THE ONLY ACCESS CHILDREN HAVE TO STORIES ABOUT THEIR LEARNING?

This question is really about screen use. The issue of screen use for very young children has become highly controversial in recent times and more and more research is now questioning open access to electronic screens for children.

Increasing concerns about screen viewing should make us wary and precautionary about young children's access to screens.

The importance of the paper-based portfolio for the child reinforces this concern, but this stance should also recognise that there may be appropriate uses of e-based technology for infants and toddlers in some contexts.

For example, viewing digital photos, participating in Skype interactions with loved ones, co-viewing e-books, and engaging with some interactive apps are important and useful, so long as screen time is limited.

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Sue Fahey and her child

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It is interesting to note that there are no guidelines for screen exposure in New Zealand. Even now, given that we are becoming increasingly aware that many of our very young children are having very high exposure to screens, our children's viewing times significantly exceeds the recommendations of other countries.

WHO IS THE PORTFOLIO FOR?

Ideally, paper-based portfolios benefit children directly and provide a durable and easily accessible record of learning.

E-portfolios are of more benefit to parents and whānau because they connect directly and give such immediate access to the child's learning.

E-portfolios are designed to share a child's learning with parents and wider family.

John Hattie's book *Visible Learning* finds that the most important family variable is parents' aspirations for their children (Hattie 2009 p.70). Such hopes and aspirations are grown by a good portfolio of learning stories, both as an e-portfolio and a paper-portfolio.

It is not enough to photograph an event and then describe it. If we are to have an impact on engaging families in parents' aspirations for their children we need to thoughtfully connect the learning episode to the individual child and his or her learning and progress.

This is what a good paper-based portfolio does, while the e-portfolio helps parents and whānau reinforce and grow this.

Recent developments in e-portfolios that encourage teachers to tick learning 'tags' have the potential to undermine the thoughtful professional role of the teacher and analyst of the learning. This is the most important part of the assessment, where a teacher thoughtfully connects the learning to the child's learning experience and makes this visible to the child and the parent.

As Karen Fowler, a teacher at Greerton Early Childhood Centre in Tauranga, reflects, "How do you explore wonder, joy, humour and compassion when you tick a box? It is the human element of the story in which the magic truly lies."

This is the place that the teacher builds strong connections with the family and whānau engaging in purposeful ways with the parents' aspirations for their child.

WHAT IS THE PRIMARY REASON FOR THE CHILD HAVING A PORTFOLIO? WHAT ASPECTS OF E-PORTFOLIOS WORK BEST?

Julie Killick, Chelsea Kindergarten, Auckland

At Chelsea Kindergarten we use both an online platform and a hard-copy paper portfolio to share our learning stories with the children and their families.

I love the online platform for its ability to connect with parents and whānau, and globally, and I think it's led to greater family engagement in their child's learning. However, it is still absolutely vital to maintain a paper portfolio so that the children can access their books and sit around and share them with each other. Children can be regularly seen sprawled out across the carpet looking at their own and each other's books, sharing stories and looking at photos.

I think it's really important that we remember that the portfolios primarily belong to the children and they must have easy access to them. Being able to revisit their stories significantly informs their future learning and lines of inquiry. Being able to enjoy the online platform is a fabulous addition to the child's learning journey and partnership with parents and whānau. I think we absolutely need both.

Sue Fahey, Auckland Point Kindergarten-Matangi Awhio, Nelson

We believe maintaining a 'hard copy' portfolio book alongside the e-portfolio platform, is essential. These books are very important to tamariki, who proudly have a sense of ownership of them, and are keen to engage with them.

Tamariki pore over their stories and photos, reading them on their own or together with peers and/or kaiako. With profile books readily accessible, tamariki are able to exercise a choice to revisit and reflect on their learning and experiences, including their ihi, wehi and mana moments.

Profile books provide tangible evidence to tamariki (and to whoever they are shared with) of learning and growth. They are a taonga that can be easily carried through kindergarten, and travel between home and kindergarten (or to other important places) tucked under an arm or into a bag.

Tamariki use them to connect their worlds, home, other important places, kindergarten and school. Virtually universally, whānau tell us they love the e-portfolios.

"How do you explore wonder, joy, humour and compassion when you tick a box? It is the human element of the story in which the magic truly lies."

Whānau engagement with documented learning conversations has increased. Sometimes we get feedback to learning stories posted within minutes of a story being uploaded.

Whānau tell us they find it easy to document and record learning that is happening at home to share with, and influence what is happening at kindergarten. Extended whānau from around the country and around the world let us know how much they enjoy the immediacy of the e-portfolios, and feel that they are more involved with what is happening for their special child, even from afar.

We believe that e-portfolios on their own are unlikely to create fabulous relationships with whānau, but can enhance the relationships and dialogue that kaiako prioritise and intentionally develop with whānau face to face.

Teachers from Greerton Early Childhood Centre in Tauranga

We have loved the feedback that happens through the e-portfolio site as almost instantly we have comments from families. We share many videos too and this offers families great insight into their child's learning. As an additional tool the portfolios are wonderful.

– Lorraine Sands.

Learning tags seem like a pointless task, more like taking a baseline approach and not exploring further into the context of the learning for each child. It's checking boxes, rather than any analysis of the learning you think is connected to this child you are assessing and to the intricacies of the holistic nature of *Te Whāriki*. Who would this be for? For the children? For the families who we hold most dear? – Karen Fowler.

I watch children every day engaged in sharing their portfolios. The resulting conversations are rich in connection, in discussion about their learning and in making plans to stretch this further. I can't imagine children being so deeply engaged if these stories were a series of templated virtual copies. Where would be the emotional engagement in that? I have seen portfolios like this at other settings and they are bland, unimaginative and uninviting. – Lorraine Sands.

THINKING ABOUT SCREENS FOR VERY YOUNG CHILDREN

In summary, paper-based portfolios are the foundation for effective assessment of young children in early childhood settings and e-portfolios have greatly enhanced family and whānau engagement in their children's learning.

Both are useful, even necessary, but their use needs to be carefully constructed to keep the child's learning in the foreground.

So, with this in mind, we can support the use of e-portfolios in early childhood education, but with the strong caveat that their attractiveness, popularity and ease of use don't detract from children's learning. ★ Wendy Lee is an educational consultant with Educational Leadership Project (Ltd).