

ACADEMIC ■ IMPRESSIONS

Next Generation ePortfolio

“The only interesting software is going to be software that is connected to the web.”

~ Ray Ozzie, MS chief software architect.

(New York Times, Business section, February 10, 2008)

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Summary

Portfolios as a pedagogy, assessment approach, and practice pre-dates digital technology. Today, technological instantiations of portfolios are often exemplified by monolithic platforms tied to course management and student information systems. What used to be a quick and light classroom strategy appears to have become essentially volume management and tracking and in many cases an institutional platform trying to do too many things.

Although modifications and adjustments to these technology platforms will undoubtedly continue, we propose focusing our attention on learning and the reasons why portfolios are chosen in the first place. By first clearly articulating the desired learning goals, we can then decide what array of tools – existing platforms and Web 2.0 technologies - can be selected to support the evolution of a new distributed eportfolio path that will also require corresponding changes and innovations in portfolio practice, culture, and environment.

The evolution of the next generation eportfolio emphasizes a return to basics, reclaiming the portfolio approach as a teaching and learning philosophy while building new eportfolio field experiences in Web 2.0. The added value of the facilitates these efforts by expanding the range of features and potential benefits to include, for example, support for self assessment, alternative means of self-representation, and a personal space for lifelong and lifewide learning.

Background

The word portfolio came into English from Italian in the early eighteenth century. The original was portafoglio, something in which one carried sheets of paper. And this was its first meaning in English: a receptacle or case in which to carry loose papers, prints, drawings and the like, a meaning it still has. Much later it was applied to the set of one's investments, no doubt seen as a collection of bits of valuable paper (Quinion 1998).

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The value of a learning portfolio as a rich body of work documenting student achievement and progress has long been recognized in numerous fields including art, architecture, writing, and composition. It has also garnered interest from professionals in nursing and teacher education as well as elementary and secondary educators as a more authentic and externally valid approach to assessment, especially in comparison to other methods such as standardized exams.

Increasingly, the value of the process of creating the portfolio for enhancing student reflection, metacognition, and the construction of knowledge is being recognized (Cambridge, 2001; Belanoff and Dixon, 1991). From the creation of the collection of artifacts that might contribute to an eportfolio to the selection of artifacts for presentation to specific audiences, advances in information technology have expanded the possibilities of eportfolios as a strategy for teaching and learning in higher education (Cambridge, 2001a). The steps below offer an example of how an eportfolio process might work:

1. Students collect their papers in one place during a course
2. Having the papers in one place makes them reviewable
3. Over time, reviewing leads to new thoughts ABOUT the papers
4. With enough time/distance from the papers, students get more engaged in revising them
5. With guidance from their instructors, students construct a collection of work that reflects their growth
6. A portfolio that has been redesigned over time may be shareable with peers, instructors, and others such as prospective employers
7. This portfolio then can be carried from course to course and used to show ongoing development
8. Portfolio-based evidence of individual progress can be abstracted to inform a program assessment portfolio (a separate portfolio designed for a different purpose)

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It is important to note that the physical manifestation of the portfolio - formerly paper-based and now electronic – is only a thing. What learners, teachers, and assessors do with that thing contributes the value. If the container for the content (whether it's a three ring binder or a CD-ROM), becomes too complicated or too heavy, the value of the portfolio practice is compromised.

Growing out of this seemingly simple practice of collecting works over a course

of study, a philosophy of teaching has emerged. A simple tool like a portfolio, following certain practices, has helped both teachers and students to grasp the following:

- With portfolios, students have the opportunity to build their own collection of course content and to represent their personal experience of their education
- They own this collection because they design, update, and maintain it
- Looking through the collection, they can see their own progress over time
- They can reflect and annotate their own work where the feedback and the comments themselves become derivative work

From these realizations from the simple portfolio (made possible by the advent of word-processed printouts) subsequent impacts can emerge (Hamp-Lyons and Condon, 1998; Cambridge, 2001):

- Students often become more engaged in the portfolio of work collected over time than they were in the individual work – the constructivist impulse is fostered
- The context in which the portfolio was created, such as the course syllabus or assignment, can be captured and made visible
- In addition to sharing multiple examples of work, the portfolio can include comments from teachers and peers that also become part of the portfolio collection
- The portfolio facilitates conversations between instructor and student as well as among peers
- Students arrive in later courses with evidence of their previous work – they bring content to their courses just as teachers do

Academic Impressions

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Late in the last century, the portfolio philosophy of student-centered open education approaches to learning underwent a profound change. The simple collection of student work on a website met the database. The features of a portfolio database not only facilitate the capture of portfolio content but also the management of metadata in the form of demographic information about who creates the portfolio as well as those who might wish to view and comment on these artifacts. At the same time, the ability to search, organize, set access privileges, synthesize, analyze, and publish have produced new and sometimes unanticipated outcomes for how portfolios are used in various disciplines and contexts.

Many of us no longer know what an eportfolio refers to – is it a technology, an assessment approach, a pedagogical practice, or more recently, an accreditation management system?

Management of data has become the watchword of the time and in the creative burst from 2003 on, many of us no longer know what an eportfolio refers to – is it a technology, an assessment approach, a pedagogical practice, or more recently, an accreditation management system? The drive for accountability has transformed the portfolio idea from an easy and effective teaching/learning philosophy into an online bureaucracy (Batson, 2007). Although current educators might think of a portfolio as a vast database, this may be understood by researchers and accreditation offices but by few others.

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Using an eportfolio for accountability and re-accreditation is not transformative in itself. In fact, it could have a retrogressive effect by re-authenticating the status quo and freezing it in place, making curricular changes more difficult. The ratio of short term effort to long term benefits may be disappointing although implementing assessment management using portfolios may possess its own value as a curriculum-audit and reform process. In some cases, campuses that stayed with the 1990s idea of using web pages as personal portfolios for students have achieved more impact than campuses that have implemented an extensive portfolio-based assessment management system.

However, countering the push toward monolithic enterprise-wide platforms and inflexible and impersonal interfaces, the affordances of Web 2.0 tools such as wikis, blogs, and social networking environments are creating new pathways for how next generation eportfolios can be designed, accessed, shared, and presented (Waters, 2007). The potential benefits of these simple and flexible open tools and applications to support portfolio work is most evident in the fostering of folio thinking, a pedagogical approach that uses portfolios as an instructional method to enhance self awareness and deepen learning (Chen and Mazow, 2002; Chen, in press).

What Does this Mean for Educational Institutions?

There is a growing recognition and understanding among educational institutions that a single eportfolio platform will not meet and address all of their needs. In the early 2000s, the idea of a uniform platform seemed the holy grail of the eportfolio movement. In the last couple of years, as monolithic systems have faltered due to a splintering of the technology market, institutions must now rethink their goals to consider the array of tools that can be used to accomplish portfolio practices for multiple purposes. Institutions must first begin with what they want to do and then decide what kinds of technology, digital or not, make sense for their particular situation, circumstances, and constraints.

From traditional to Web 2.0 learning technologies used by students of varying ages and backgrounds in an increasingly global learning landscape, the changes that are currently underway in US higher education suggest we are in the midst of a revolution.

From an individual classroom to institution-wide reaccreditation, eportfolio planning and strategy must take into account the multiple uses and stakeholders involved in a portfolio implementation. This approach can be disruptive because of the primacy placed on student work and the whole range of learning experiences from curricular to co-curricular to non-curricular in both formal and informal environments. Yet nationally and internationally, eportfolio technology, pedagogy, and practice represent the philosophy of the age as a more flexible and authentic means for fostering distributed, digital, and integrative learning.

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Practical Considerations and Future Directions

From traditional to Web 2.0 learning technologies used by students of varying ages and backgrounds in an increasingly global learning landscape, the changes that are currently underway in US higher education suggest we are in the midst of a revolution. How can the value of higher education be preserved and sustained during this all-encompassing transition?

The very concept of portfolio began with the idea that work can and should be portable, learner-centered, and shareable. Advances in technology have extended and expanded this idea to include multiple kinds of learning experiences in multiple forms, and accessibility anytime, anywhere. ePortfolio technology is inextricably tied to a learning purpose and well-grounded in a learning-research community that preceded the technology revolution. The eportfolio approach is uniquely suited to this digital age as a locus of learning and a viable way to frame and leverage this open revolution in higher education.

Of the various practical considerations of implementing eportfolios, beginning with the institution's strategic planning document and clear articulation of the portfolio philosophy is necessary in order to keep discussions focused on learning outcomes

and not the technology and how to manage it. Administratively, eportfolio activities on a campus should be coordinated by offices that place equal emphasis on accreditation/assessment and on teaching/learning. Other stakeholders such as academic advising, student affairs, and those organizations on campus not typically thought of as eportfolio territory, such as the alumni association, may also need to be included in campus eportfolio conversations.

Unlike most technologies where we can say, “it’s just a tool,” the next generation eportfolio is embedded in a community and a culture of folio thinking practices.

With the forking of eportfolio capabilities in higher education, eportfolio support also must multiply and adapt. Vendor promises to do it all can no longer be perceived as the safe path. This has implications at the grass roots level, since faculty, instructors, and student support services will need a place to go or a group to check with about how to use something other than the large eportfolio platform that may be available on campus. Partnerships with academic technology departments, teaching and learning centers, and information technology groups should be established early on in the implementation process.

Unlike most technologies where we can say, “it’s just a tool,” the next generation eportfolio is embedded in a community and a culture of folio thinking practices. Unlike a course management system, it does not just manage whatever is already occurring, but guides learners toward a range of tools, applications, and environments which lead to the kind of learning most appropriate to the dynamics of this century.

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