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The Whys and Why Nots of
ePortfolios

Shelley Kinash, Kayleen Wood and Matthew McLean

In a teaching environment where there is always a new tool proclaimed as a necessary part of the educator's repertoire because it promises to enhance student learning, ePortfolios are a relatively recent entrant. What is an ePortfolio? As the name suggests, it is a portfolio that is by and large electronic. The term portfolio is common vernacular in the context of visual art, as students applying to an institute will prepare a folder of their best works to demonstrate their talents and mediums.

In education, a portfolio extends across subjects. It is a collection of in-progress or completed student assignments, exams, publications, projects and certificates that frequently represent process and accomplishments from an entire level of schooling (such as secondary school) or degree. Portfolios may be applied to formative or summative tasks. For example, because they are not bound by the structures of single subjects, the portfolio might be used as an assessment tool across themes or units. They might also be used to assemble and orchestrate capstone culminations from an entire program of study. The portfolio might also include transcripts, a resumé and letters of reference. Students often include reflective comments, annotations or interpretive notes. Within the portfolio, there are folders or some other type of organisational structure. If students are using portfolios as evidence of achieved competencies or experiential equivalence, they will map their performance against admission, certification or accreditation standards. Portfolios are usually non-linear and include multi-media elements. Portfolios can be creative and often reveal the personality of the author. Portfolios are frequently used in application for jobs, promotions, school and university admissions, and for grants, awards and scholarships.

There are numerous benefits of electronic as compared to print-based portfolios. The online portfolio can be situated in a network of prospective employers. Readers can like, link, endorse or testify elements or entire portfolios. Others can contribute, add, mark-up, comment or co-author. The collection is securely stored and can be cloud-based so that it is available anywhere and anytime. Online content is amenable to multimedia, so that creators can embed video, images and animations. Online content is easier to alter, change and extend than printed collections. The ePortfolio need not be linear, meaning that authors can link and embed various elements.

Rather than just accept that this new resource will aid in your teaching and deliver elevated results, we must ask, 'Where's the teaching and learning?' Without this foundation, today's new tool quickly ends up on the scrap-heap with yesterday's discarded fads. Education research to date has concentrated on ePortfolios as an assessment tool used by educators and school/university officials who are attempting to solve mobility, multi-disciplinary, transparency and accountability issues. There has been minimal research regarding the student perspective on portfolios. To establish where and how the teaching and learning occurs in ePortfolios, we should look to the small body of emerging literature addressing ownership and sharing through and with ePortfolios.

Studies have identified ePortfolios as an important learning and assessment tool because they encourage students to create individualised understandings, rather than demonstrate knowledge through teacher-defined exams, essay, and research projects. A few studies have further identified that students enjoyed creating the portfolios and were encouraged to think about what they had learned, as well as the professional knowledge, skills, and abilities they acquired. Evaluation of rubrics for portfolio assessment showed that students scored either on-target or acceptable on all assessed criteria.

As with any new technology, ePortfolios have their critics. Given the significance of each student's education, it is wise to approach new educational technology with a healthy degree of scepticism. There are inherent challenges to incorporating ePortfolios in an education context. The primary barrier is common in diffusion of innovation. Until there is large-scale uptake, students, educators and employers are unwilling to take the risk of this non-traditional approach, and until enough people take this risk, this threshold roll-out will not occur. Students are not going to carry-out the extra work of creating a portfolio until there are teachers and employers calling for them. Likewise, teachers and employers are not going to reconceptualise and restructure assessments and job applications until there are sufficient portfolio exemplars and evidence that they are worth the effort. There are also questions about whose responsibility it is to create rubrics and map standards, certifications and attributes. There are worries about privacy, freedom of information, copyright and intellectual property.

These wider and more general barriers to the introduction of ePortfolios are married with local and domestic challenges as well. Commitment to ePortfolios is blocked by a stalemate between the interests of employers and education, and structure and suspicions regarding the motivation for ePortfolio collection and dissemination. Are ePortfolios primarily created, controlled and distributed by and for the students/graduates or their schools and universities? When teachers and professors want to work together in order for their students to create multi-disciplinary projects, traditional constraints of semesters, courses and grade allocation come into play. Investment in the software that makes ePortfolios a reality is restrained by a lack of unequivocal evidence that these platforms provide value for money, a lack of student-demand for the initiative and a financial model that permeates schools and higher education rarely supportive of full service beyond graduation.

At Bond University, we carried out a needs assessment and inquiry into how both students and lecturers are using and perceiving ePortfolios. We looked at students' voiced concerns and needs for learning and their description

of ePortfolio experience. Our focus was on what the students were doing and then how the lecturers were interacting with them, via ePortfolio. Our goal was to recommend a site license and supports for a single ePortfolio system. We expected one system to stand-out because there would be examples of student use of ePortfolios where they asserted their own intellectual property, and used the ePortfolios for collaborative purposes. We hypothesised that learning would emerge as a theme in the discourse of participating students.

To best assess the feasibility of the ePortfolio platform as a learning tool, three volunteer educator/student groups representative of diverse departments and faculties across campus participated. We observed process, considered learning artefacts and discussed perceptions. Their implementation of ePortfolios ranged from not doing much at all and feeling overwhelmed, through muddling with some sort of peer and lecturer feedback for iterative formative assessment items, to creating ongoing portfolios in which to accumulate a body of work and give personality and philosophy to the learning experience. The groups were surveyed at the start of the semester and again at the end, to allow us a window into their thinking, feeling, use and engagement.

One lecturer has developed a plan for her students to accumulate three exemplary items of their work over the year, for feedback, comment, and then inclusion in their portfolios of learning for future professional use. Current conversations with other participating lecturers are revealing other instances where renewed focus on assessment for learning and interactive process has occurred. Creativity and critical thinking has happened, not just as a graduate attribute for students, but in continuing professional development for the teachers.

What we found was diversity of implementation, purpose and system. At this point in our research journey, have we backed ourselves into a corner

and do we find ourselves unable to make a recommendation of a definitive ePortfolio platform? The answer is no. Open conversations with the lecturers to determine their dynamic goals for their students and how they think these can be best achieved will reveal how ePortfolios need to be woven into our existing systems. Our inquiry revealed that purchasing a single off-the-shelf solution will not meet the diverse needs of our disciplines, students, academics, accrediting bodies and employers.

From the micro of our pilot program to the macro of our literature review, we can take-away a number of lessons:

• When deciding whether to use an ePortfolio in your teaching, start by assessing student needs and concerns. This needs assessment will help you to identify the variance between the existing situation and the desired learning environment. Then decide how, or if, an ePortfolio will fulfil that need.

• An ePortfolio is most often used by schools and universities as a means of student assessment. In order to satisfy this role, the ePortfolio must be: authentic, creative and enable multimedia, across subject platforms, context-specific, professional and polished, accessible for peer-review, and a tool for formative assessment.

• There are numerous ePortfolio choices available in the market place. As an educator, you are looking for a platform as a means to enhance student learning and engagement. This is coupled with the capacity for timely and iterative feedback on assessment and collaborative group work with internal and external partners and educators, templates for reflective practice, and ongoing access for alumni. A further overarching 'selling point' may be the ability to launch seamlessly from your learning management system.

In summary, the decision to use ePortfolios pivots on their capacity to enhance learning, their relating operation as perceptual and formative tools, and the stakeholders' engagement in the organic process. In asking, where's the teaching and learning?, we have

no doubt that pedagogy can be found in and through ePortfolios, yet as many things in life, we learn just as much on the journey as we do when we reach our destination.

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