ePortfolios through the Looking Glass: Projecting our Learning into the Future

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Abstract

This opinion paper was birthed in the reflective conversations between two higher education academics whose combined knowledge and experience spans ten years of Australian ePortfolio research and practice. A number of questions fed those conversations reflecting on the past, present and future for ePortfolio use in Australia. In offering this paper we hope to stimulate a wider collective reflection and conversation about current ePortfolio practice and how we might envisage the future.

The *NMC Horizon Report Higher Education Report 2016* predicts an increase in blended learning, bring-your-own device (BYOD) and a shift towards deeper learning that will link learner autonomy, graduate attributes and real-world experiences to help students transition to the workplace. The report also sees a significant challenge in students connecting formal and informal learning experiences. The challenge for ePortfolio advocates is demonstrating how to respond effectively to these trends.

The AeP project, commissioned by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) in 2007 found a strong interest in ePortfolio use for student reflection and evidencing of skills across Australian universities. The later AeP.2 project sought to develop an ePortfolio community of practice, which over time evolved into the Australian ePortfolio Forum (Hallam et al. 2008, 2009).

Since that time ePortfolio implementation has gained traction in institutional, faculty, program/course or course/unit implementations across universities. There is still strong interest in ePortfolio use for professional accreditation and career enhancement, and the development of reflective practice and other pedagogical outcomes. Implementation, however, is not an easy process (Slade et al. in press) but we can project our learnings and experiences into thinking about the future of ePortfolios.

Students are the key ePortfolio users in higher education, but there are other important stakeholders, such as staff, institutions and early adopter industry groups, to consider. In particular, we need to understand the systemic barriers and advocate change with industry and accrediting bodies to facilitate improved ePortfolio uptake.

We know there are still other areas of ePortfolio practice that could be enhanced, such as ePortfolios in student placements, employability and integration with co-curricular activities or newer areas like learning analytics. This raises a number of questions which we can discuss together. Maybe we need another audit to measure progress, a think tank involving collaboration of stakeholder groups for strategic planning or an idea from left-field. Whatever the case, we are eager to hear the opinions of the ePortfolio collective….so let the conversation begin!

Introduction

This paper was birthed in the reflective conversations between two higher education academics whose combined knowledge and experience spans ten years of ePortfolio research and practice in Australia. A number of questions fed those conversations reflecting on the past, present and future for ePortfolio use in higher education. Then, unbeknownst to us, a complementary conversation ensued at the *CRA/AAEEBL International Seminar* in July 2016; a synergy which indicates it is a good time for the Australian ePortfolio community to take stock. Therefore, in offering this brief commentary, based on our experiences and a scan of recent ePortfolio literature, we hope to stimulate a wider collective reflection and conversation about current ePortfolio practice and how we might envisage the future.

Nearly ten years ago the seminal AeP ePortfolio project, commissioned by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) found strong interest in ePortfolio use for student reflection and evidencing of skills across Australian universities. Implementation was generally at the program or course level with strong involvement from passionate early adopter champions. The later AeP.2 project sought to develop an ePortfolio community of practice, which over time evolved into the Australian ePortfolio Forum we enjoy today (Hallam et al. 2008, 2009).

Since then ePortfolio implementation in Australia gained traction across institutional, faculty, programs or courses levels in a number of universities, particular with the sector drivers towards employability. There is increasing interest in ePortfolio use for professional accreditation and career enhancement, and the development of reflective practice and other pedagogical outcomes for student learning. Implementation, however, is not an easy process (Slade et al. in press). Eynon et al. (2014) suggest that 'the ePortfolio movement is at a crossroads' as budgetary constraints, accountability and rapid change impact higher education (p. 95). Effective implementation in this context requires a strategic approach to enable positive responses to change; the ability to manage all stakeholders effectively; and the provision of ongoing opportunities for ePortfolio change agents to engage in critical reflective and evaluative processes (Slade et al. in press). But still this may not be enough…

Current Uses

Students are the key ePortfolio users in higher education, but there are other important stakeholders such as staff, institutions and early adopter industry groups, to consider as well when projecting our learning into the future. Students, guided by educators, use ePortfolios as an organisational tool to collect and store evidence of their competency, to reflect on and showcase both formal and informal learning over time using a range of multimodal formats (Joyes et al. 2010; Rhodes 2010). This validation of a student's work is a major purpose of ePortfolio use because it is meaningful to a chosen audience, such as a potential employer. Educators hope that student outcomes from these processes will include the development of an integrated academic, personal and professional identity, and improved self-regulation and self-efficacy (Shroff et al. 2013; Boulton 2014; Kahn 2014). In exploring the transition of teacher education graduates to the workplace, who used ePortfolios in their studies, Boulton (2014) found they have a strong sense of ownership and professional empowerment. Student collaborative activities such as inter-professional education (IPE) (see Karsten et al. 2015)

and mentoring (see Groißböck 2012) are newer areas of ePortfolio exploration as is badging (Kehoe & Goudzwaard 2015).

The use of ePortfolios by staff is sometimes overshadowed. Educators working with their students also develop new digital skills to varying levels. It is hoped that they will also embrace using an ePortfolio system for their own professional development but this may not be the case. Yet there are other staff members, both academic and professional, that eagerly adopt the use of an ePortfolio, for its intrinsic value for career enhancement and evidencing continuing professional development.

In particular, we need to understand the systemic barriers and advocate change within industry and accrediting bodies to facilitate improve ePortfolio uptake. The current limitations of ePortfolio acceptance within this group inhibits the closing of the employability loop for users. Students (and staff) can become despondent when their digital presentations are not accepted or disregarded. Although there are obvious benefits in recording and reflecting on all learnings this situation is a significant barrier to promoting the value of ePortfolios to students in academic studies and continued graduate ePortfolio use in professional practice.

Some institutions also emphasise eportfolio outcomes for performance assessment with a view to whole-of-institution quality assurance and standardised reporting. Eynon et al (2014) suggests that this practice only aligns with assessment of learning but could be included in assessment for learning through the inclusion of reflective learning outcomes for individual users as well.

ePortfolio use within and across stakeholder groups is heterogeneous and somewhat ad hoc. Many uses need further exploration and consolidation to reach maturity, and support by empirical studies to demonstrate impact. If we claim employability as a major ePortfolio driver we need to increase our advocacy work with industry to accept digital portfolios for accreditation and job applications.

Pedagogical and Research Considerations

There is growing scholarly articulation of ePortfolio-associated pedagogies, driven by what Batson (2016) calls a 'flipped epistemology' in which initial teacher-centred phases transform to a more desirable learning-centred phase through ePortfolio-enabled contextualised or authentic learning situations. Using learner-centred pedagogy focuses on individual learning experiences that encourage independent yet collaborative and reflective, lifelong learners who have the capacity to apply existing knowledge to new contexts and can adapt to new environments (Emes & Cleveland-Innes 2003; McLean & Gibbs 2010). The concept of integrative learning, discussed by Huber and Hutchings (2005) fits neatly with the objectives of ePortfolio use, by overcoming the fragmentation of institutional academic study through learning opportunities that make connections across contexts and experiences. The strength of ePortfolios is 'its capacity to serve as a connector' (Eynon et al. 2014, p. 96). Linking ePortfolios[1] with other high impact practices, such as WIL, overseas exchange or capstone courses further enhances integrative learning (Kahn 2014; Rhodes 2010).

While conceptual agreement may be easy to give in this situation, ePortfolio implementation can meet with resistance because it is not just about introducing a new technology but requires a massive cultural shift from teacher-centred to learner-centred approaches that should not be underestimated (Kahn 2014). Shane Sutherland from PebblePad reminds us that 'authentic

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[1] In late July 2016 George Kuh added ePortfolios to the 2008 Association of American Colleges and Universities' list of high-impact practices (HIPs) for student learning. This is the first time another HIP has been added. For more information see: http://www.centerforengagedlearning.org/eportfolio-as-high-impact-practice/

stories of learning' result from 'good learning design' so just adding ePortfolios does not fix poor pedagogy (Personal communication, July 2016). In reality, when introducing ePortfolios or other technologies educators are required to adapt their pedagogies at the same time (Slade & Readman 2013) which can be a steep learning curve for some.

Conceptual and practice-based ePortfolio research grew in the last few years but as the areas of use broaden and mature so must the research undertakings (Jimoyiannis 2012). There is a particular need for empirical research and evidence of impact of learning (Kahn 2014) to strengthen the sector's contribution to scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL). The Becta Report in 2007 recommended future research work in developing longitudinal research (3-5 years) studies, the identification of potential audiences and their readiness to accept ePortfolios as common practice and exploration of the potential of data mining from ePortfolio use. There were some discussions at the Australian ePortfolio Forum in 2015 of the need to collaborate in inter-institutional research to advance the maturity of evidence around ePortfolio pedagogy and collect empirical evidence of practice. Perhaps we can have that conversation again this year?

ePortfolio Futures

Higher education will continue to digitalise learning. The *NMC Horizon Report Higher Education Report 2016,* for example, predicts an increase in blended learning, bring-your-own device (BYOD) and a shift towards deeper learning that will link learner autonomy, graduate attributes and real-world experiences to help students transition to the workplace (Johnson et al. 2016). The report also sees a significant challenge in students connecting formal and informal learning experiences. There is an increasing need for graduates to fill hybrid jobs that merge digital capabilities with high-level analytical skills (General Assembly & Burning Glass Technologies 2015). The *Committee for Economic Development of Australia (CEDA) Report 2015* emphasises the importance of graduates needing high levels of social intelligence, creativity, mobility and dexterity. Yet a survey of 1,484 students and graduates and 331 recruitment agencies by Internships.com and General Assembly in 2014 found that only 44 per cent of students felt they were well equipped with digital and technical skills for professional work (internships.com 2016). Another complication is that only 18 per cent of employers felt graduates were prepared (internships.com 2016). Students expect their university study to be customer-driven with flexible service delivery in order to be competitive in the job marketplace (den Hollander 2015). Although the majority of students are digitally literate in terms of using different technologies the challenge now for educators is to help them learn how to create or adapt technology to solve problems in readiness for professional practice (Ventimiglia & Pullman 2016).

The challenge for ePortfolio advocates is demonstrating ways in which ePortfolios can respond effectively to these trends. We know there are still areas of ePortfolio practice that could be enhanced, such as student placements and career development. Or perhaps there is room for the development of newer areas such as learning analytics, peer-review and collaboration. It raises a number of questions… Do we need some calibration in our approach or updating of our language around the value of using ePortfolios? How can we synchronise our ePortfolio message with the wider changes or needs of our institutions and their partners? Is the message too narrow? Are there other uses for ePortfolios? User buy-in – are we realistic about that? These are all questions we can discuss together. Maybe we need another audit to measure progress, a think tank involving collaboration of stakeholder groups for strategic planning or an idea from left-field. Whatever the case, we are eager to hear the opinions of the ePortfolio collective….so let the conversation begin!

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