

BY JOHN ITTELSON, PH.D.

Know Your ePortfolio

A new wave of ePortfolio interest has educators wondering: What can they do for my school? Experienced in all things ePortfolio, Dr. Ittelson enlightens us.

In the world of Flickr, Twitter, LinkedIn, wikis and blogs, establishing and maintaining your digital identity is daunting. Even more challenging is establishing and maintaining one's educational identity. Luckily, ePortfolio tools, systems and processing are helping individuals establish their formal identities.

The early days

Electronic portfolios, ePortfolios, are not a new phenomenon. But with technological advances and improved functionality, they are having positive impacts on education and have potential for use by a wider group.

Since the middle to late '90s, I have been an ardent follower and supporter of ePortfolio technology and pedagogy, attend-



ing and presenting at numerous conferences about ePortfolios across the country. I have also worked closely with educators on the adoption and implementation of ePortfolios inside the California State University system and within the relatively new K-20 California Education Technology Collaborative (K20CETC), comprised of California educators from K-12 and higher education. K20CETC's mission is to support highly effective, innovative, network-enabled teaching and learning opportunities.

In 2005, one of Educause's learning initiatives was ePortfolios. At that time, George Lorenzo, editor of Educational Pathways, and I published a series of reports about ePortfolios. We looked at and interviewed many of the early adopters of ePortfolio systems and wrote some basic perspectives about the various ePortfolio types, features and functions that were prevalent at that time. The conversations about ePortfolios were, and still are in

many respects, about how to collect student artifacts, provide a space for both student and teacher reflection, encourage sharing and learning, develop valid rubrics to discover what students are learning and possibly obtain some solid data that could help inform improvements at the individual, course, program and institutional levels.

Phase two of ePortfolios

Historically, the popularity of, and discussions about ePortfolios have always vacillated from warm to hot. Right now, they are blistering. While the majority of ePortfolio implementation has occurred in colleges of education, the change happening today places ePortfolios within a much wider swath of departments, units and institutional missions and goals.

This spring, two ePortfolio conferences sold out to record audiences — one hosted by LaGuardia Community College and another hosted by Eastern Connecticut State

The Grandmother of ePortfolios

Helen C. Barrett, the self-described "grandmother of ePortfolios," has always been a strong advocate of using common software and Web 2.0 tools — such as Microsoft Office, blogs, wikis and Web page editors — for building ePortfolios. In addition to finding Barrett's point of view on software and Web 2.0 tools, her Web site — www.electronicportfolios.org — is a great place for valuable information.



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University. Summer conferences on the topic are the ePortfolio Conference 2008 at St. Jerome's University in Waterloo, Canada. Also, at the Campus Technology 2008 conference there will be a session, The Next Generation ePortfolio – chaired by Trent Batson, with Helen Barrett, Eddie Maloney and myself as panelists.

It is also important to note that since 2003, the Inter/National Coalition for Electronic Portfolio Research has convened 40 cohorts of researchers and practitioners to study the impact of ePortfolios on student learning and educational outcomes. Each year, 10 institutions, selected through an application process, constitute a three-year cohort. Each campus or system works on an individual project that asks: "What learning is taking place as a function of ePortfolios and what evidence supports this conclusion?"

For instance, at George Mason University, educators examined the thinking processes of education graduate students as they created and reflected on building their ePortfolios. They found that while students initially had some technical difficulties and frustrations, they eventually moved to purposeful activities that showed evidence of using higher order critical-thinking skills.

The popularity of ePortfolios is not limited to North America. In Europe, for instance, there's the European Institute for E-Learning, a professional association whose activities and publications focus extensively on ePortfolios.

Additionally, the Joint Information Systems Committee, comprised of senior managers, academics and technology experts in the UK, supports a project called "eReturn" to develop a pilot, demonstrating the use of ePortfolios to support cross-institutional delivery of lifelong learning. The UK's Open University is the lead partner on eReturn.

ePortfolios for assessment, teaching and learning

The conversations about ePortfolios are embedded inside three broad camps: ePortfolios for assessment, accreditation and institutional reporting purposes; ePortfolios for teaching and learning; and ePortfolios for employment and career development. The terminology, features and functions that are growing around these camps can make things seem a bit more complex than what one might expect.

For example, some of the vendors of ePortfolios have changed their business models, adding new products and services

Lorenzo's Web site

For information about ePortfolios and assessment management systems, see George Lorenzo's latest Web site — www.edpath.com/ep.htm. Lorenzo,

who has been writing about ePortfolios since 2002, has put together an excellent online resource with an extensive number of links to institutional samples of ePortfolios, vendors, articles, papers and organizations. He has also been writing in-depth case studies about the major players in this field and publishing them inside his online newsletter, Educational Pathways. Check out Lorenzo's site for announcements about upcoming ePortfolio events. In the works are online events that will feature how ePortfolios are being implemented on campuses for the purpose of creating a successful culture of performance-based assessment.



and calling themselves providers of assessment management systems or accreditation management systems. That seems to be where the market is at this time. This trend started in 2000 when the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) established that teacher education units must have an assessment system that collects and analyzes data on the applicant's qualifications, candidate and graduate performance and unit operations to evaluate and improve the unit and its programs. ePortfolio technology and pedagogy were the natural fit to help meet this NCATE standard, and by 2003 the ePortfolio business experienced significant gains.

The general message today is that these companies have enhanced and further developed their systems, primarily through pilot programs with institutions across the country, to make institutional reporting and accreditation easier.

Along with this growth, additional terms and notions have become more prevalent within the ePortfolio lexicon and its capabilities, including learning outcomes assessment and management, performance-based measures and risk retention, among others. And of course, let's not forget about rubrics. One of the drivers behind the success of an ePortfolio-based assessment system is contingent upon building strong rubrics and getting faculty and students to understand and use them effectively.

On the teaching and learning side, ePortfolio software is touted as being easy for students and faculty to use for a variety of interesting engagements, most recently for the facilitation of Web 2.0-oriented, community-building formal and personal learning environments. The idea is that students and faculty can enhance and modernize learning from more active online interactions, sharing and reflecting through Web 2.0 applications and tools, such as blogs and wikis, all residing within ePortfo-

lios. This is the basis of the next generation of ePortfolios, where the latest in digital technologies work interactively with these applications, helping to advance knowledge and individual creativity in interesting and engaging ways.

The decision-making process

In short, when considering the implications of ePortfolios from the two primary sides – assessment and learning – the technology directors and academic decision-makers are faced with more options than they may realize. So, what do they really need to know before buying into anything?

First, an overarching question that is growing louder is: How can you find a middle ground between assessment for

course, program and institutional improvement and the practice of effective, creative teaching and learning environments? Also, when considering the implications of Web 2.0, it could be concluded that buying into one ePortfolio application is not enough. Students today use Flickr for sharing photos, Facebook and MySpace for social net-

as for assessing learning outcomes and gathering data for analysis and reporting, for career-oriented repositories or for communicating, sharing and reflecting within a teaching and learning environment;

- coming up with clear steps and recording mechanisms for ultimately getting an across-campus adoption rate;

ePortfolio technology focuses on what students know from the time they start their education up until they receive diplomas.

working, YouTube for watching and sharing videos, wikis and blogs for publishing what's on their minds – and the list goes on. So far, there is not one ePortfolio system that provides all these things, along with assessment and accreditation management features and functions.

Perhaps the most important rule when considering ePortfolio and assessment system adoption is: Don't buy until you have really done a thorough analysis of what you need. Some institutions, have been forced to step back from their initial investments in ePortfolio software. Why? They were not adequately informed about what they really wanted and needed, nor did they realize how much time and effort it realistically takes to implement an ePortfolio and assessment system.

Putting it to work

Any ePortfolio and assessment system implementation process requires a good deal of planning and organizational management. The discussions have an opportunity to be meaningful and exciting since ePortfolio technology focuses on what students know from the time they start their education up until they receive diplomas.

Some implementation challenges, which mostly are not about the technology, include:

- how to train faculty and students to use ePortfolio software;
- how you want to utilize the ePortfolio, such

- developing authentic and valid assessments;
- developing effective rubrics;
- establishing clear and consistent terminology and rating systems for assessments and rubrics;
- figuring out what kind of data-gathering mechanisms will inform teaching and learning as well as meet accreditation standards and institutional reporting requests;
- keeping faculty on board for the long term; and
- maintaining an overall systematic approach for the utilization of ePortfolio and assessment tools.

The early adopters of ePortfolio and assessment systems who overcame such challenges and successfully brought about positive change to students, courses, programs or across institutions did not achieve results overnight or in six months. In fact, it typically takes two to three years – at minimum – to fully implement a successful ePortfolio and assessment system in a college.

A Californian strategy

Many of these success stories can be found in California. The statewide CalStateTEACH – a teacher preparation program through the California State University system – has successfully implemented an ePortfolio system, dating back to early 2000, as part of its teacher credentialing process, using

In order to **create an ePortfolio**, users need to collect content, choose software and design and publish the completed product.



Students' ePortfolios demonstrate academic classes, internships and projects completed.



TaskStream's Learning Achievement and Accountability Manager System tools.

At San Francisco State University (SFSU), project managers Ruth Cox and Kevin Kelly have built a program geared toward improving ePortfolio development processes by building campus-wide knowledge of ePortfolio use within SFSU and its broader CSU community through research, collaboration, experimentation and sharing.

In recognition of their work on ePortfolios and assessment, SFSU and the College of San Mateo are identified as leadership campuses in the Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education project with the American Association of Colleges and Universities.

Also, one of the earliest developers of ePortfolios, California Lutheran University, has successfully been using a homegrown, Web-based ePortfolio and assessment system, called Webfolio, since 2003 inside its School of Education.

At K20CETC we are working on a promising ePortfolio pilot that we hope will lead to a larger statewide plan. As part of the pilot phase, K20CETC is partnering with eFolio Minnesota to build and deploy eFolio California.

The eFolio Minnesota effort is a multimedia ePortfolio system that is available for free to all Minnesota students and residents. eFolio Minnesota is a product of the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities system and a visible commitment to support lifelong learning throughout the state.

The effort currently boasts more than 80,000 users who typically utilize the service to build an online showcase of their education, career and personal achievements. A joint effort between MnSCU and the CSU system – the largest public higher education system in the U.S. – could easily result in a statewide adoption rate that could exceed Minnesota's 80,000 users and could generate interesting data, given California's diversity.

In addition to this statewide initiative, K20CETC plans to work with the Epsilen Environment, a social-networking oriented ePortfolio system that came out



ePortfolio Resources

Educause Learning Initiative Resources, **"White Papers: E-Portfolio Series."**
<http://www.educause.edu/ELIResources/10220>

K-20 California Education Technology Collaborative
<http://www.k20cetc.org>

"ePortfolio Conference 2008,"
St. Jerome University in the University of Waterloo,
<http://www.sju.ca/eportfolio.html>

The International Coalition for Electronic Portfolio Research,
<http://ncepr.org/index.html>

To see abstracts, reports and presentations from the cohorts, visit
<http://ncepr.org/members.html>

The European Institute for E-Learning,
<http://www.eife-l.org>

San Francisco State University,
"ePortfolio: Academic Technology SF State,"
<http://eportfolio.sfsu.edu/index.php>

eFolio Minnesota,
<http://www.efoliominnesota.com/>

Epsilen Environment,
www.epsilen.com

The New York Times Knowledge Network,
<http://www.nytimes.whsites.net/knowledgenetwork/index.html>

MERLOT ePortfolio Portal,
<http://eportfolio.merlot.org/>

of the Purdue School of Engineering and Technology at Indiana University-Purdue University, Indianapolis. The New York Times recently became an equity and strategic partner in Epsilen, launching the *New York Times* Knowledge Network. We are planning to work with Epsilen for California institutions that might want to choose that resource.

We will also look at how to leverage the work of those companies that have successfully implemented ePortfolio and assessment systems at a wide variety of institutions within the state. Those companies include Chalk & Wire, Digication, LiveText, TaskStream and course management system providers who have built-in ePortfolio systems, such as Angel Learning, Blackboard, eCollege and Desire2Learn. Essentially, we are looking at whatever trends can be considered the next phase of ePortfolio development.

Fulfilling a purpose

Overall, we see ePortfolios as fulfilling a greater need for individuals to be able to document and share their professional accomplishments in ways that are richer than an educational transcript.

The potential is great. An ePortfolio and assessment system applied across large segments of institutions, such as the CSU system or the California Community College system, can positively affect the lives of students, teachers and future employers.

I look forward to the day where an individual's ePortfolio becomes the credit bureau for his or her academic and professional achievements. The current trends bode well for making this a reality. ●

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