A Review of *ePortfolio Performance Support Systems: Constructing, Presenting, and Assessing Portfolios* (WAC Clearinghouse, Parlor Press, 2013)

Elizabeth Davis
University of Georgia

This article provides a review of *ePortfolio Performance Support Systems: Constructing, Presenting, and Assessing Portfolios*, edited by Katherine V. Wills and Rich Rice (2013). Focused primarily on ePortfolios as a method for writing-related student learning and assessment, this collection addresses a range of concerns about support and sustainability of ePortfolios in academia, the workplace, and community. The collection is grounded in Kathleen Blake Yancey's (2004) *College Composition and Communication* essay, "Postmodernism, Palimpsest, and Portfolios" (reprinted as Chapter 1), and the rest of the chapters provide a diverse range of viewpoints, experiences, and methods that engage in various ways with that article. Wills and Rice have succeeded in gathering together a group of authors whose collective expertise makes this book an important addition to the literature on ePortfolio. Publishers: The WAC Clearinghouse (Fort Collins, CO) and Parlor Press (Anderson, SC, 2013). ISBN 978-1-60235-442-5 cloth; ISBN 978-1-60235-441-8 (paper); ISBN 978-1-60235-443-2 (adobe ebook); ISBN 978-1-60235-444-9 (epub). $60.00 cloth; $30.00 paper.

If there is one thing that my experience as an ePortfolio practitioner and researcher has taught me, it is that the process of portfolio learning and assessment requires an astounding amount of support at all levels of the practice. From students who need the right kind of pedagogical scaffolding to build folio thinking, to instructors who want to understand how to construct that scaffolding effectively, to administrators who may have to be educated about what ePortfolios offer and how to parse the kind of reflective learning that portfolios provide as evidence for assessment purpose — all of the stakeholders in ePortfolio practice need carefully constructed, accessible, and sustainable infrastructures of all kinds in order to build, support, and maintain a folio-based approach to teaching and learning. For those of us in the ePortfolio community, the benefits of portfolio learning and assessment are generally clear: ePortfolios, when integrated thoughtfully into the curriculum, offer the kind of rich, nuanced picture of student learning that other measures, like testing, do not. Yet we also know that portfolios—and ePortfolios, in particular—pose complex challenges, even to their most ardent supporters and advocates.

In my own work as the director of a writing program that requires a capstone ePortfolio representing nineteen hours of undergraduate coursework, I have experienced such challenges first-hand. My students need to have the tools to "collect, select, and reflect" and ultimately assemble and present their portfolios. I need access to resources and research on best practices that will help me help my students through the demanding process of reviewing and making sense of many semesters' worth of work. My institution needs evidence of student learning, and employers and graduate schools want to see what students who earn a certificate in writing can actually do as writers. Luckily, I have a number of support systems in place, from technological tools to research and administrative support, that enable me to successfully engage in the practice of ePortfolio pedagogy and assessment. My students and I exist in an ecosystem in which ePortfolio was integrated holistically into the First-Year Composition Program through a considered approach that recognized the value of and need for support structures built into the system from the ground up, and we have benefitted from that strong infrastructure. Without such a foundation, an ePortfolio initiative can crumble when the technology does not afford what we need, or the pedagogy does not fit with the tool, or the outcomes are not demonstrated effectively by the output, or ongoing accretion and presentation are not feasible. As researchers and practitioners call for ePortfolio to spread beyond the classroom, the program, and the institution as a tool and method for lifelong learning (e.g., Cambridge, 2010; Heinrich, Bhattacharya, & Rayudu, 2007; Lorenzo & Ittelson, 2005; Porto & Walti, 2010, 2013), the need for support systems is heightened and highlighted.

By titling their collection, *ePortfolio Performance Support Systems,* Wills and Rice (2013) foreground the idea that performance is tied inextricably to the infrastructures (e.g., technological, pedagogical, and systemic) that support and enable learning. Focused primarily on ePortfolios as a method for writing-related student learning and assessment, this collection addresses a range of concerns about support and sustainability as ePortfolios become more widely adopted and integrated into the landscape of higher education and the workplace. The collection itself traverses a broad landscape, covering such ground as "assessment and accountability, learning and knowledge transfer, principles related to universal design for learning, just-in-time support, interaction design, and usability testing" (Wills & Rice, 2013, p. 3). The editors have divided the collection into four sections,

each consisting of three essays, in an effort to organize this wide-ranging material into intellectually cohesive groupings. The first section's chapters deal in various ways with systematic thinking with regard to ePortfolios; the second's consider how ePortfolio can construct bridges from academia to the workplace; the third's consider support for the kind of interactive and usable design that is vital to ePortfolio; and the final section's essays take on the subject of transition and transfer between methods, between courses, and between learning and the measurement of that learning. This organization allows readers to negotiate the material presented in the collection based on their specific concerns, while also getting a sense of the range of support issues that ePortfolio practitioners might encounter.

The first section, "Systematic Performance Support Systems," opens with an essay that will likely be familiar to ePortfolio scholars and practitioners in the writing studies community, Yancey's (2004) *College Composition and Communication* article, "Postmodernism, Palimpsest, and Portfolios," which, as Wills and Rice (2013) explain in the introduction, is "foundational to the ePortfolio conversations of this collection" (p. 4). Certainly, it is foundational for any discussion of digital portfolios, as Yancey (2004) in this essay established some key concepts that have come to be axiomatic in thinking about digital portfolios: that they are fundamentally different than print portfolios; that they are inherently reflective in nature; and that they are, in and of themselves, unified compositions that draw on the linking enabled by digital media to become "palimpsest and palimtext both" (p. 27) through the layering and mapping (and re-mapping) of multiple representations and contexts inherent in teaching and learning that is created by means of this capability.

What is missing from the collection, perhaps, is a more thorough discussion of those key concepts as a framework for reading the rest of the collection. The introduction spends more time detailing the backgrounds of the contributors than it does creating a theoretical framework through which to think about the ideas of performance support systems, taken both as a singular concept and as individual concepts. In truth, each of those terms could use some unpacking in relation to ePortfolios. Take the term performance, for example. As Yancey's (2004) essay concluded, ePortfolios, in allowing for re-arrangement, "permit different inventions, invite different representations" (p. 31). Hence, an ePortfolio is itself a performance, one that changes according to who is reading and the purpose and context for that reading. The performance consists of multiple layers of representation and context, so what are the multiple ways we might understand the concept of performance and its implications for ePortfolio practice? Is an ePortfolio a performance of identity—professional and/or personal? of skills and/or competencies? of measurable outcomes that might be used to evaluate

whole programs and institutions? A more explicit foregrounding of these kinds of questions might be useful as a way to set up what follows Yancey's (2204) opening provocation.

The subsequent chapters do cover all these questions about performance (as well as numerous ways of understanding the terms support and systems), certainly, but it would have been instructive if the introduction had put them into a cohesive dialogue with each other as terms and with Yancey's (2004) "seminal article" (Wills & Rice, 2013, p. 4) in order to draw out some of the problematic and productive ways we might think about these terms (individually and collectively) and to construct a clearer conceptual understanding of the collection's title. Only three of the other essays in the collection *ePortfolio Performance Support Systems* engage explicitly with Yancey's (2004) piece (i.e., through citation), so there is an unmet opportunity here to create a stronger through line for the collection, and an introduction (or perhaps an afterword) that puts some of the essays into a stronger theoretical context is something I found myself wishing for.

Despite this (or perhaps because of it), I did find myself actively trying to make connections between the chapters, and that process was, appropriately, much like the process of reading ePortfolios. While reflective elements generally create the cohesion that binds a strong ePortfolio into a coherent whole, the links between the exhibits in an ePortfolio create, as Yancey (2004) pointed out, a "gallery-like" (p. 26) experience in which both repetition and difference are embedded. The links and paths laid out by the portfolio's composer may not be followed by the viewer, or may suggest unintended narratives and connections. The ePortolio itself may display signs of re-thinking, revision, and reiteration. Interestingly, many of the chapters here deal explicitly with those three "R"s in their focus on the authors' processes of researching and implementing ePortfolio practices and programs. So, while all quite different, each of the essays demonstrates the concern with performance support systems in its emphasis on such issues as planning, piloting, researching, and theorizing—on forming the foundational structures, in other words, that will allow for sustainable practice. This thematic unity provides readers the opportunity to read the text and find the narratives and links that are relevant for their own ePortfolio practice.

Whether theorizing how to re-think the teaching philosophy statement through ePortfolio, as in Rice's essay, "The Hypermediated Teaching Philosophy ePortfolio Performance Support System," or how to conceptualize a communal ePortfolio that will effectively and thoughtfully detail the experiences of a community in its efforts to improve and develop literacies by analogy with a controversial museum, the subject of Darren Cambridge's excellent, thought-provoking chapter, "From

Metaphor to Analogy: How the National Museum of the American Indian Can Inform the Augusta Community Portfolio," many of the chapters ask that we re-think the ways we present a particular picture (of ourselves, our learning, our communities) to an audience. The social aspect of ePortfolio—the interactivity between author and audience—is at the forefront in this collection and, though those audiences may differ (e.g., potential employers, instructors and others involved in academic assessment, the public, learners themselves), the authors all provide examples and experience of ePortfolio as "performance" and how any kind of performance must be scaffolded with pedagogy, research, technology, and theory.

Many of the chapters provide insight into some of the well-known ePortfolio initiatives. It is instructive and edifying to learn from Karen Ramsay Johnson and Susan Kahn about the trial and error process of developing an effective scaffolding for reflection that will help English majors articulate the value of their major to themselves and others in their English Capstone ePortfolios at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis. It is exciting to hear from Carl Whithaus that he and his colleagues at University of California, Davis were replicating and extending prior research on how ePortfolios affect revision in student writing and transfer of writing skills across the curriculum. It is heartening to see the attention being paid to accessible design and interfaces for visually impaired ePortfolio users by Sushil K. Oswal at the University of Washington Tacoma and how that raises important questions about the benefits and drawbacks of ePortfolio for disabled students and instructors. It is reassuring to discover, as Mark Zaldivar, Teggin Summers, and C. Edward Watson report, that the long, complicated process of dialogue between multiple stakeholders can result in assessment data that is useful and authentic.

Each of the chapters presents an important piece of the larger ePortfolio puzzle while exposing the missing pieces, the un[der]explored questions that will help us continue to shape useful support systems that allow for the kind(s) of performance(s) that we want to achieve with and through ePortfolios. I find myself thinking of this collection as an ePortfolio itself. Though the organization and presentation of the chapters suggests a certain narrative in its organization and each section prefaced with an epigraph and illustration that serves to evoke a particular way of thinking about the topic of that section, there are other narratives that emerge from taking the chapters on their own and in different order. Such a reading process is particularly engendered if a reader chooses to access the text through the WAC Clearinghouse website, where .PDF files of each chapter are freely available (though this method eliminates those epigraphs/illustrations, which I find somewhat regrettable). Also like an ePortfolio, this collection could benefit from a reiteration that

addresses the numerous and frustrating editing problems a reader encounters throughout the text. Still, *ePortfolio Performance Support Systems* is a welcome and valuable addition to the literature on ePortfolio. The multiplicity of viewpoints, experiences, and methods recounted in these chapters is vital and will provide ePortfolio practitioners from all quarters with something useful to take away for consideration, implementation, or clarification. Wills and Rice have succeeded in gathering together a group of authors whose collective expertise makes this book a must-read for the ePortfolio community.

References

Cambridge, D. (2010). *E-portfolios for lifelong learning and assessment*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Heinrich, E., Bhattacharya, M., & Rayudu, R. (2007). Preparation for lifelong learning using ePortfolios. *European Journal of Engineering Education*, *32*(6), 653-663. doi:10.1080/03043790701520602

Lorenzo, G., & Ittelson, J. (2005). *An overview of e-portfolios*. Retrieved from https://net.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/eli3001.pdf

Porto, S., & Walti, C. (2010). Lifelong learning links in the ePortfolio. In J. Liebowitz & M. S. Frank (Eds.), *Knowledge management and e-learning* (pp. 219-252). Boca Raton, FL: Taylor & Francis.

Porto, S., & Walti, C. (2013, September 12). ePortfolios: The revival of a powerful tool for lifelong learning. *The Evolllution*. Retrieved from http://www.evolllution.com/distance_online_learning/eportfolios-revival-powerful-tool-lifelong-learning/

Wills, K. V., & Rice, R. (Eds.). (2013). *ePortfolio performance support systems: Constructing, presenting, and assessing Portfolios*. Fort Collins, CO: WAC Clearinghouse. Retrieved from http://wac.colostate.edu/books/eportfolios/

Yancey, K. B. (2004). Postmodernism, palimpsest, and portfolios. *College Composition and Communication, 55*(4), 738-761.

_____

ELIZABETH DAVIS is the Coordinator of the Writing Certificate Program (WCP) at the University of Georgia. She teaches undergraduate courses in writing and rhetoric and the capstone ePortfolio Workshop for the WCP. With her colleagues in the First-year Composition program at Georgia, she has conducted research on ePortfolios as members of Cohort VI of the Inter/National Coalition for Electronic Portfolio Research. She is the co-author, with Nedra Reynolds, of the third editions of *Portfolio Keeping* and *Portfolio Teaching* (Bedford/St. Martin's 2014). Her research and teaching primarily focuses on the influence and effects of technology and media on writing.