From Personal to Social and Back Again: A Review of Darren Cambridge's *Eportfolios for Lifelong Learning and Assessment* (Jossey-Bass, 2010)

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This article contains a review of Darren Cambridge's *Eportfolios for Lifelong Learning and Assessment.* This book sees a major potential in ePortfolios for articulating a distinctive and integrated identity for their authors while simultaneously involving those authors in the conversations that characterize institutions and social networks. Cambridge reviews the philosophical as well as the technological questions that ePortfolios raise, grounding the analysis within the needs of assessment and student learning. Publisher: Jossey-Bass (San Francisco, 2010). ISBN-10: 0470503769. List price: $38.00. 288 pages.

ePortfolio initiatives in higher education frequently run up against formidable barriers: too few of our instructors see a place or function for ePortfolios in their courses, or too many of our students need too much class time to master the technology. Exactly the right tool hasn't been developed yet, or else it would cost our institution – or our students – too much money. Maybe it works well for some of our academic programs but not others. The simpler ePortfolio systems restrict the expressiveness and individuality of our more technologically creative students, and with the technology changing so rapidly, the system that we adopt this year might be overtaken by a superior system in another year or two. The commercial system that we like would require us to house the data outside our institution, vulnerable to the backup plans of that company and impossible to integrate with our in-house database. We don't have the resources to build our own ePortfolio, let alone maintain it once it's in place. Training our assessment teams and then assessing the ePortfolios would take up more of our time than we can give. Even if we could conduct such assessment, we end up with data that isn't comparable across institutions. And all the while, external demands for accountability keep shouldering us away from the touchy-feely, reflection stuff and over towards standardized tests and "academic rigor."

What wonder, then, that many initiatives opt for partial solutions, a pilot in an Honors program here or an implementation strategy built upon one-time grant money there. At a more theoretical and conceptual level, commentators such as Helen Barrett have simplified the landscape by suggesting different ePortfolios for different purposes. On the one hand, we should develop personalized ePortfolios – "portfolio as story" – and on the separate, other hand, to address assessment needs, we should develop standardized ePortfolios – "portfolio as test" (Barrett & Carney, 2005; Barrett & Wilkerson, 2004). In his 2010 study *Eportfolios for Lifelong Learning and Assessment*, Darren Cambridge considers such attempts to simplify ePortfolios and rejects them – pretty convincingly – as partial solutions that would ultimately leave ePortfolios on the vague and uncertain margins of higher education. While Cambridge agrees that the personalized and the standardized models are "in tension," he argues for the importance of combining and synthesizing both within a single ePortfolio, one that would resolve this tension through "the cultural ideal of authenticity" (pp. 18-20).

This tension and dichotomy provide Cambridge with a useful structuring device for much of his analysis. In the personalized portfolio, he suggests, the author establishes ownership of her work and her learning; the process of reflection creates a self-authorship crucial to the authenticity reflected in the portfolio. Cambridge goes on to argue, however, that keeping the more rules-based standardized portfolio separate from the personalized "distorts both" (p. 36) by disrupting the valuable dialogue that can help to inform institutional and curricular development through attention to personalized learning.

A focus on the personalized portfolio tends to find value in the author's sense of audience: the author can share the portfolio with others of a similar set of values and interests, almost like a social network. Cambridge also emphasizes audience, although more with an eye to the professional network and the ePortfolio's ability to demonstrate its author's professional competence and integrity across a variety of public roles, some of them personal and others more career oriented. He sums up: "Authors craft their eportfolios in such a way that they accommodate varied kinds of evidence that meet the needs of different readers and capture diverse experiences" (p. 143).

Cambridge sees a major potential in ePortfolios to guide learners in making choices – and making sense of their learning – over the course of a lifelong development that might bridge many different institutions, jobs, or even career paths. In describing the support that ePortfolios might provide to lifelong learning, he summarizes this process as "articulating a distinctive,

integrated identity grounded in evidence of learning and performance and using that self-representation to participate in institutions and social networks" (p. 223). Relying on the philosophical work of commentators such as Charles Taylor, Cambridge argues that the cultural ideals of authenticity and integrity can be combined in portfolios in ways that enrich both the culture and the individual. Even the word "eportfolio" for Cambridge lacks the common hyphenated break of e-portfolio or the mid-word, upper-case bump of ePortfolio.

The kind of integrated portfolio model explored in this book rests upon some of Cambridge's earlier work with the concepts of the "symphonic" and the "networked" selves (2008). It's not all seamless for Cambridge, then, as in his clarifying distinction suggested by these separate concepts. In the case of a symphonic ePortfolio, the author will need to invest considerable time in the project via extended reflection (or "deliberation") in order to realize the developmental insights and benefits. A networked ePortfolio, by comparison, is more immediate and might be exemplified by a blog rather than a layered and carefully planned ePortfolio. Cambridge argues that the ideal ePortfolio blends both of these approaches, gaining immediacy and energy from day-to-day experience but also gathering together a set of materials that can later be refashioned into the more coherent – "symphonic" – narrative that might have more enduring value to the individual, well beyond the walls and experiences of academe. The "lifelong" in his title really does mean "for your whole life."

Cambridge has a broad range of experience as a foundation for this book, such as his involvement in the eFolio Minnesota project, which provided ePortfolio capability to all residents in Minnesota; his stay at New Century College at George Mason University; or his work with EPAC, Sakai, and the IMS Global Learning Consortium. He benefits, as well, from a rich array of projects fostered and collected over several years now within the Inter/National Coalition for Electronic Portfolio Research (I/NCEPR), and I should mention a disclaimer here: as part of the University of Cincinnati team, I participated in Cohort V of the I/NCEPR initiative, where I grappled particularly with the issues of assessment that ePortfolios raise for higher education.

Cambridge's book helps a great deal with such frustrations, as when he points the way towards the kinds of assessment strategies that institutions would ideally implement in order to benefit most from the learning exhibited in student portfolios. While it is easy to highlight the limitations of standardized tests, Cambridge also tackles the more complex problems raised when an institution might build an assessment strategy around portfolios, pointing to such developments as the AAC&U's Valid Assessment of

Learning in Undergraduate Education (VALUE) project.

I wish that Cambridge had given time to some of the related pedagogy initiatives that have taken shape over the past dozen years, such as the Visible Knowledge Project that Randy Bass has helped to develop towards making the results of teaching and learning more public (Hatch, 2004). More significant: John Zubizarreta's valuable concept of the "learning portfolio," first articulated in a 2004 study, doesn't get mentioned here. The fact that Zubizarreta then reissued this book in a second edition in 2009 underscores the valuable and far-reaching role it has played in those pedagogy discussions with faculty for whom "e" anything means "one more damned thing." Although for Zubizarreta, the learning portfolio doesn't require the format of an ePortfolio, Cambridge does make a strong case for the importance of the "e" within the whole process. Pointing to lessons learned from the eFolio Minnesota experience, he notes that the software provides not just a flexible structure but also the ability readily to share one's ePortfolio with others and get the kind of feedback necessary for a dialogic process.

Cambridge's book also represents a sharp contrast to another work appearing just a few months earlier in the same year, the AAC&U publication *Electronic Portfolios and Student Success* by Helen L. Chen and Tracy Penny Light (2010). While the Jossey-Bass format will appeal to the traditionalists in all of us, the AAC&U publication offers much greater focus and efficiency, more elegantly styled for the twenty-first century, more a handbook to take into the pedagogy workshop and the committee meeting than a scholarly treatise to review in the library.

Amidst such considerations of terminology and visual appeal, however, Cambridge's study delivers its greatest value at the level of the conceptual and the philosophical rather than the technical, not so much a "how to" as a "why to." The "Questions for Practice" sections with which he ends each chapter seek not so much to address the kinds of down-in-the-trenches problems with which I began this review as to guide readers towards their own more holistic approach to ePortfolios and the desired role for ePortfolios within the comprehensive structures shaping higher education.

Within his own focus, moreover, Cambridge ultimately lays out an agenda that is strikingly visionary and forward-looking, with his concluding chapter pressing for several key changes that he sees as necessary if higher education is to support lifelong learning beyond the lip-service phrases within institutional mission statements. In his terms, we might envision this as a dialogue between an institution and its students about teaching and learning, via multiple, distributed, and integrated technologies, and with the larger goal of "cultivating learning throughout the

society" (p. 224). Cambridge sees many hopeful signs of such developments becoming increasingly more substantial within higher education, as with the growing importance of the scholarship of teaching and learning, the open-source impetus to make course materials freely available online, or the increased attention to engaged research and teaching. In his view, higher education needs to do even more in these directions to help individuals in the wider society to articulate their identities in more meaningful ways. For Cambridge, ePortfolios can play a key role in helping that articulation to happen. In reading his book, you gain the hopeful vision that such integrating and unifying changes might indeed just be possible.

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