

## Review: *ePortfolio as Curriculum: Models and Practices for Developing Students' ePortfolio Literacy* (Stylus, 2019)

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Since the start of ePortfolio use in higher education, research has come a long way to not only include testimonials and anecdotal reports about their importance and efficacy, but also to include research such as case studies and studies on the effect of ePortfolio for student attainment of learning outcomes. *ePortfolio as Curriculum: Models and Practices for Developing Students' ePortfolio Literacy*, edited by Kathleen Blake Yancey (2019), is a compilation of case studies that provide anecdotal and research evidence to support the use of ePortfolios as a curriculum. This publication showcases the advantages of implementing ePortfolio throughout students' higher education careers to encourage metacognitive thinking; reflection; and past, current, and future identity development. In addition to the research supporting ePortfolio as curriculum, the authors throughout this book provide several examples and concrete advice for those interested in developing their own ePortfolio program. This review discusses three major themes that the authors focus on: guiding the reflection process, determining the audience for the ePortfolio, and considerations for managing an ePortfolio program. Publisher: Stylus (Sterling, VA, 2019). ISBN: 9781620367605. \$29.95 (U.S.). 286 pages.

With *ePortfolio as Curriculum: Models and Practices for Developing Students' ePortfolio Literacy*, Kathleen Blake Yancey (2019) compiled a diverse set of first-hand research and experiences for using ePortfolios in higher education. The faculty, staff, and administrators who authored each chapter provide numerous examples of ePortfolio programs at various points in the ePortfolio process; some were just starting out, some were growing, and others were conducting research on their programs to continue to inform and improve their practices. The variety of experiences makes this publication a valuable resource for all, from experts in the ePortfolio world to novices just getting started.

Yancey introduced the topic by explaining that institutional use of ePortfolio falls on a continuum. In some cases, ePortfolios are used as a "wrapper," where the ePortfolio is solely a place to compile coursework and assignments to demonstrate learning. This is a helpful first step when engaging in the ePortfolio process because, in order to reflect on learning, it is necessary to first compile work to reflect upon. The downside of the "wrapper" model is that this process of creating an ePortfolio does not lead to any additional learning beyond what was learned during the creation of the original work sample.

On the other end of this continuum, *ePortfolio as Curriculum* focuses on engaging students in the process of making the ePortfolio with explicit instructions, questions, and prompts for reflection. As Rhodes (2019) stated in his foreword, this use of ePortfolio is a clear example of a meta high-impact practice due to the process of thinking through all of the learning from a specific course or an entire program of study, and purposefully making connections between the content and how learning has prepared students for the future. The concept of ePortfolio as curriculum not only draws from all learning that takes

place during higher education, including learning both inside and outside of the classroom, but provides students with a program that supports learning during the process of creating the ePortfolio.

The case studies selected for inclusion in *ePortfolio as Curriculum* provided valuable information for implementing ePortfolio as a curriculum, with specific steps faculty can follow to successfully engage in this process. This review discusses three themes. First, encouraging reflection is touted as essential within each case study, with many chapters including descriptions and resources for others to encourage reflection as students were creating their ePortfolios. A second theme is the focus on audience, including determining the intended audience, identifying the unintended audience, and clarifying how to develop an ePortfolio that meets student goals for communicating with the audience. And third, there are several examples of logistical advice, such as structuring your course to include ePortfolio development and how to get an ePortfolio program started at your institution. These key themes provide valuable advice to readers so they can understand and draw from the successes and challenges of the authors of this book.

### Guiding the Reflection Process

The importance of reflection during ePortfolio construction was evident throughout the publication, as many of the case studies include examples of how to guide reflection through questions, prompts, interviews, and peer and self-reviews. Burns and Thompson (2019) provided the prompts that they gave to students throughout the ePortfolio construction process, which were intended to make the reflection process meaningful rather than tedious and difficult. They used

three deceptively simple questions to guide the process: “1. What are you doing (or being asked to do)? 2. What results do you expect? 3. How can you improve it?” (p. 38). The authors pointed to additional literature that has shown how the use of pointed, guiding questions allows the ePortfolio process to be a self-regulated learning process (e.g., Yang, Ngai, & Hung, 2015). To demonstrate the effectiveness of their ePortfolio curriculum, Burns and Thompson (2019) reported that the students they worked with had used their ePortfolios during job interviews and other professional development opportunities.

James, Scida, and Firdiyewek (2019) also described the importance of teaching students how to reflect productively. Their case study examined students in language learning programs (i.e., beginning and intermediate French and Spanish). Language learning courses provide students a unique opportunity to reflect not only on language skills obtained but also on cultural competence. James et al. (2019) required both a pre-reflection and post-reflection, after which students would evaluate together in order to reflect on the entire ePortfolio creation process. This multi-stage process goes a step further than other processes by requiring students to reflect on their reflection, which encourages the development of metacognitive thinking skills we all strive for our students to gain. Their chapter appendix (Appendix 3A) generously provides the specific prompts and questions they used for the initial, intermediate, and final reflections. In addition to the ample information about the processes they engaged in, the authors administered online surveys and conducted focus groups with instructors and students and analyzed students’ ePortfolios. Overall, they found their process for creating ePortfolios enhanced students’ meaning making of the class content as well as developed metacognitive skills for students to better understand how their learning grew. James et al. (2019) also reported that students found the reflection helpful for assessing points of improvement and areas of weakness within the ePortfolio.

As a final example, though as mentioned the importance of reflection was ubiquitous throughout the publication, Matthews-DeNatale (2019) used curriculum theory to examine students’ experiences during an online Master of Education program. As part of this program, students were required to keep an ePortfolio in which they saved coursework from all courses, ideally signature work, accompanied with a reflection component. Matthews-DeNatale (2019) pointed to Pinar and Grumet’s (1976) narrative approach when discussing curriculum theory, specifically, their encouragement to use curriculum not just as a noun, as it is typically used, but as a verb, something that is acted on (i.e., through reflection). After interviewing alumni from the program,

Matthews-DeNatale (2019) reported that students appreciated courses that encouraged them to maintain their ePortfolio during their program by compiling content (e.g., reflections, syllabi) rather than having to scramble to compile documents at the end of the program. Specifically related to reflection, students reported it was difficult to make connections to prior learning by the time they got to their capstone course when they created the final ePortfolio product. Reflection throughout allowed students to better understand not only what they learned but also how what they learned applied to their future. These student testimonials show the importance of reflection when creating ePortfolios and provide evidence that, unless we require students to be mindful about reflecting, reflection may not happen.

Upon graduating from a college or university, many students are unable to describe what they learned in college, an issue not only for the institution but also for students applying for jobs. Unless they can describe what they learned and cite examples, future employers cannot be certain they have the skills necessary for a position. The process of mindfully reflecting when selecting work requires students to describe why the work they choose is important as well as the skills and knowledge they learned when they created the work sample. Scaffolding this process with prompts and questions for reflection makes the lessons learned during the college and university experience explicit to students so they can communicate the skills they learned and back up their assertions with evidence to future audiences of their ePortfolio.

### **Determining the Audience of the ePortfolio**

In addition to illustrating the steps for guiding reflection processes, the case studies in *ePortfolio as Curriculum* emphasize the importance of teaching students to consider who the audience for their ePortfolio will be. Audience consideration is described as a factor often forgotten during the ePortfolio development process. Including this practice enhances the effectiveness of the ePortfolio product and brings attention to the fact that many of these ePortfolios will be posted to a public website. The use of a public platform adds several considerations that must be attended to for safety and copyright compliance, as well as for effectively crafting a product and narrative for the intended and, potentially, unintended audiences. Many students begin this process unsure of what the outcome will be and how it will be used by others. They need help making the connections between artifacts and their goals for the ePortfolio, as well as their ultimate professional goals (Cordie, Sailors, Barlow, & Kush, 2019). Many of the case studies in this publication model this explicit assistance to students.

The first chapter, titled “ePortfolio as Curriculum: Revisualizing the Composition Process” (Cicchino, Efstathion, & Giarrusso, 2019) discusses the decision-making processes students are continuously engaged in when selecting work for their ePortfolios, while also keeping the audience of the ePortfolio in mind throughout these processes. The authors provided various activities that can be enacted to accomplish these goals. The first activity has students view other ePortfolios and asks them to consider questions about themselves as viewers, such as why they preferred certain ePortfolios. The activity also asks students what they want viewers of their ePortfolios to think of them and what texts and work they should include to accomplish that. These thoughtful discussions allow students to preemptively consider factors that might otherwise be considered later as extraneous variables. However, we know that details like design consistency and navigation around the ePortfolio are essential to be able to access all features of the ePortfolio.

Cicchino et al. (2019) included audience accessibility as a responsibility of the student by considering artifact descriptions and placement. Audience consideration is accomplished through multiple checkpoints during the ePortfolio creation with questions that require students to reflect on how their artifacts are presented, if they should continue this design, and what needs to be changed. Student testimonials show the thoughtfulness students put into their products with the audience in mind. The reflection questions devised by Cicchino et al. (2019) model a successful method for requiring students to explicitly state who may view their ePortfolios during the construction process, rather than considering the audience after the ePortfolio has been completed.

As another example of considering future ePortfolio viewers, Stonaker, Cohn, Carpenter, and Chen (2019) emphasized audience awareness as one of three priorities in their ePortfolio-focused courses to ensure students are constantly thinking about the final ePortfolio product. The goal is to create a curriculum that promotes metacognitive thinking by requiring students to consider the user experience with their ePortfolio. Cohn et al. (2019) accomplished this by offering several opportunities for students to receive feedback from various stakeholders including their peers, relevant faculty, and other advisers selected by students. Discussing their ePortfolios with these different audiences allowed for more critical reflection about how their work was received. Before they incorporated these opportunities for audience previews, Stonaker et al. (2019) found that student reflections were limited and simple as they only would include short observations about the ePortfolio content. Discussing their ePortfolios with these different audiences allowed for more critical reflection of their

work. The authors gave the examples of a writing studies professor prompting students to think about how much text is on a slide, while a discipline-specific adviser could give advice about potential data visualizations. In addition to encouraging positive revisions to an ePortfolio, these opportunities for deeper reflection and metacognitive awareness made students better able to establish a story for their ePortfolio as well as their own identity for the present and future.

These are two exemplar case studies of many in this volume that require the consideration of the audience as an essential step in ePortfolio creation. This focus allows students to develop deeper reflections about their work beyond their own opinions and thoughts. It also considers additional, essential stakeholders (e.g., future employers) who may potentially view their ePortfolios, which allowed them to preemptively market their work to their goals for their future.

### **Considerations for Managing an ePortfolio Program**

Finally, an important area to consider when implementing an ePortfolio curriculum in your course, program, or school is the logistics that come with this endeavor. As with any new program, there will be challenges to overcome such as budgets, onboarding, and staff bandwidth. Each chapter provides advice, reflections, and lessons learned by faculty on their own journey to creating an ePortfolio curriculum.

As one helpful example, Denning (2019) provided practical advice for getting an ePortfolio program off the ground and running. The program began with a faculty-initiated, grant-funded pilot program. Even with Denning securing a grant, administrative support was limited (i.e., just the author), so Denning was cautious about not advertising the program widely. Despite this lack of advertisement, the program grew every year due to students promoting the value of ePortfolios to one another. Students appreciated the thoughtful processes of this ePortfolio program including prompts to engage in thoughtful brainstorming for the ePortfolio, guidance on selecting artifacts, and finally building the ePortfolio using WordPress. The interest in the program required thoughtful planning to mitigate the limited capacity. First, even though there was high student interest to participate, Denning kept the enrollment to 10. If the enrollment was higher, the author understood they could not provide the same, hands-on support that makes the program successful. Denning also reserved seats for freshman and limited how many seniors could enroll in the course in order to use the ePortfolio to focus on future coursework at the institution. Finally, Denning’s use of technology enhanced the ability to continue the program with a single-person team. Students used text analysis tools to create a tagging

system with WordPress, which enhanced the navigability for those viewing the ePortfolio.

In another case study, “The Invited ePortfolio Curriculum,” Katherine Bridgman showcased an example of a fairly new university (established 2009), also a designated Hispanic-serving institution (HSI), implementing a four-course ePortfolio curriculum. Physically, the university is located in an area without many institutions of higher education. Bridgman (2019) developed the ePortfolio curriculum aware of the importance of connecting students to the physical areas surrounding the university in order to understand their places in their current and future communities. This was imperative for an ePortfolio program at this institution. Students were guided through the process of building the ePortfolio, with the first step being to engage with their world, both within the university as well as outside of it. The second step involved documenting those experiences. As an exemplar assignment to support student engagement with the broader community, students were tasked with interviewing someone in a career related to their major and reflecting after the interview. As with other ePortfolio programs, this assignment encouraged students to reflect on their identities as current and future members of many communities. While Bridgman (2019) provided advice specific to a university’s needs, the advice is appropriate for many ePortfolio programs. It is important to consider the specific needs of your own university, the surrounding community, and the students.

After reading this series of case studies, many will likely feel excited and optimistic about implementing an ePortfolio program at their own institution or within their programs. Advice such as not advertising a new program, as Denning (2019) discussed, may seem counterintuitive, but as with any new program it is important to be realistic about starting small then building up from that point. These two case studies, along with many others in the publication, provide some concrete advice for challenges to expect and ways to solve them either preemptively or as they come up.

### Areas for Improvement

ePortfolio research encompasses a large and varied range of methodologies, from anecdotal evidence to empirical studies. Earlier, I cited Matthews-DeNatale (2019) study, which includes thematic analyses of interviews with alumni who had used ePortfolios to understand what students had learned in connection with the ePortfolio process. The author provided helpful details and information (pp. 116-121). In this chapter, and others, it would have been interesting to read a thorough methodology, similar to what one can access in peer-reviewed research articles and reports. This additional information would be helpful for

understanding the research and designing future, similar studies as the field of ePortfolio research continues to grow and develop.

The figures, images, and resources accessible through websites and QR codes supplement this publication very well, especially because ePortfolios inherently include many visual features. A minor recommendation, which could still be implemented, would be to include all the supplemental resources from this book in one, organized location (e.g., a website) similar to an ePortfolio. This would be a helpful instrument for readers who may not be as familiar with ePortfolio, in addition to the sample ePortfolios cited throughout.

### Conclusion

All authors of this publication graciously offered concrete advice and evidence for effectively engaging in ePortfolio work with students. Topics included specific prompts for faculty just beginning the process of encouraging their course or institution to engage in this work; evidence of exemplary ePortfolios from students; guides for creating an ePortfolio program on your own campus, including analyses of platforms like WordPress; fruitful reflections of program implementations; and syllabi from courses implementing ePortfolios. Importantly, this publication includes research on the efficacy of ePortfolios by reporting student views, as well as content analyses of student products. As Rhodes (2019) mentioned in the book’s foreword, this publication is accessible to many hoping to develop an ePortfolio program, including those who have ample experience as well as those just learning about the use and value of ePortfolios in higher education.

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