

## Lift Every Voice: ePortfolios for Creating and Integrating

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Adapted from the 2018 Batson Lecture delivered at the annual meeting of the Association for Authentic, Experiential, and Evidence-Based Learning (AAEEBL) at Capilano University in Vancouver, British Columbia, this editorial challenges readers to think closely about the value and purpose of ePortfolios in higher education and posits a rationale for why ePortfolios are more important than ever for our students, our institutions, and our democratic society.

In summer 2018, the Annual Meeting of the ePortfolio professionals' Association for Authentic, Experiential, and Evidence-Based Learning (AAEEBL), focused on practices and sessions encouraging attendees to explore the ways ePortfolios bridge learning from one context to another; the connective tissue and sinews that bind together powerful student learning for success in our institutions, in careers, and in life. The Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) calls this *liberal learning* to collectively describe essential learning outcomes all learners need for success and the integration of these learning outcomes across the student's chosen field of specialized study, their choice of institution or program, and their lives within and without the formal academy.

Here, the focus is on ePortfolio's role in promoting liberal learning and the work in which that community is engaged; to engage in thinking about why we encourage utilization of ePortfolios, what is the work we do, and where we are in this landscape?

### Why ePortfolios?

In common media parlance and among policy-makers as well as many academics, the "Why?" often is connected to the student's first job and salary (i.e., employment and employability) or to reporting for state or accreditation accountability. But why "e" portfolios?

ePortfolios place the focus on learning and allow for multiple ways in which to present and enact learning in formal and informal classrooms, in life outside the academy, and for learning brought to the academy and learning that grows within the academy. ePortfolios involve educators and learners in a shared dance of give and take. The point of ePortfolio is to engage educators and learners in a process of advancing learning; learning that is not for a grade on a test or paper or performance—albeit that purpose is important and motivating—but for learning that is integrated into one's identity and being so that it has a shelf life for years and lifetimes.

ePortfolios are a means to break out of pervasive structures we have inherited and acquiesced to that require us to organize our work within fiefdoms of

departments, programs, institutions, wealth, race, gender, identities—in short, to separate ourselves, to emphasize difference, to unbundle learning.

ePortfolios allow learning to be re-bundled. Indeed, ePortfolios as a pedagogy (when done well) require users to connect their learning, to reflect on their learning, and to intentionally engage with their learning as it is happening.

ePortfolios also allow for a dynamic, sustainable record of learning through ongoing engagement and utilization, an ability to constantly document and experiment, and develop learning through active engagement with exploration of learning as it is happening that prompts integration and connection for higher order aspects of learning—the very types of cognitive, emotional, and relational activities that have made recognition of ePortfolios as a high impact practice—not only enhancing learning but also student retention, graduation, and equity. In short, ePortfolios serve a purpose of helping, in actively inviting, learners to create (a) their own identities as learners and as people, (b) their own agency as an active influencer and creator of learning, and (c) as a person who is an educated participant in creating not only their own world but the global environment they share.

ePortfolio pedagogy is not a panacea; yet, it is a powerful approach integral to our mission of enhancing learning—so what does this mean for what we do?

### What is the ePortfolio Work We Do?

ePortfolios are not a thing, although we often speak of them in such manner. They are variously, a pedagogy, a curriculum, and a way of thinking, of knowing, and a mindset. Borrowing from Helen Chen's (2011) *folio thinking*, ePortfolios are a unique way of conceiving and defining education. It is no longer a boxed set of knowledge for faculty to deliver but an ecology of educators and learners and environments. Borrowing from Kathleen Yancey (2019), ePortfolios are a curriculum, not in the constrained sense of a set of courses one takes starting with x and progressing to y, but as the term was originally used to represent: a course, a disciplined path of studying, intentionally

developed to learn and to educate, to develop as a person, and to liberate the mind.

The starting question for ePortfolios is not which ePortfolio technology to adopt; it must be, “What learning do we need?” The “what we need” is not what “we” the faculty/educator need exclusively. The curriculum requires room for the learner to also have voice and intentionality to achieve learning. Increasingly, concerns about technology and the growing role of artificial intelligence (AI), data collection profiling every move we make, and the frequent lack of control individuals have over their own digital identities further challenge technological solutions to educational issues. ePortfolios, however, are premised on personal control and curation of information, narrative, and presentation. The challenge higher education confronts is not so much making technology or AI more human but making better humans as users of technology.

Folio thinking recognizes the reality of what the futurists point out—knowledge is doubling every two years or even more rapidly. There is no way the curriculum, especially as we have instantiated it in higher education currently, can deliver that knowledge to our learners. What we need is a concerted, intentional shift by educators to forefront the preparation of learners who are well-equipped with the skills and abilities to make sense out of knowledge and information, to make meaning of and with their knowledge for themselves and others.

### How Did We Get Here?

ePortfolios have been around for decades. Because I am an assessment advocate, I include assessment as central to why we do anything around learning and its centrality to ePortfolio adoption. It is distressing that higher education institutions so often lead with justification of ePortfolios for assessment purposes, typically couched in terms of accreditation and accountability reporting. This justification resulted early in assessment being presented as an either/or (i.e., assessment of learning as compliance versus assessment for learning improvement)—a false dichotomy, as is so often the case with our penchant to frame our work as oppositions. Just as ePortfolio technology has evolved, assessment methodology and tools (e.g., the VALUE rubrics and the VALUE Institute<sup>1</sup>) have also developed to more intentionally

and robustly provide externally confirmed valid and reliable evidence of quality learning applicable to all students, and as measurement of learning at higher order levels necessary for learners to be better equipped to recognize and respond to complex, unscripted issues permeating modern society and life.

Educause has tracked the growth of ePortfolios to a point where well over half of U.S. schools appear to have ePortfolios in use on their campuses. Less systematic surveys following the designation of ePortfolios as a High Impact Practice (HIPs) reflect a modest uptick in ePortfolio usage on U.S. campuses. The hoped-for universal adoption broadly across higher education has simply not occurred as anticipated. However, steady growth does seem to continue apace and right now ePortfolios are the best pedagogy we have to address learning integration and pedagogical improvement.

### Where Are We?

Given this picture—incomplete and cursory as it is—where is the ePortfolio community of practice and higher education as a part of the social structures expected to educate people for the future? In a better place than we have been. The need for forceful narratives has never been more urgent. ePortfolios are particularly well-positioned to provide the systematic, visual, tangible evidence of needed quality learning to challenge fleeting, often reductionist, popular sound bites about how higher education is failing.

The ePortfolio community (and some accreditors) are stepping up to demand institutional attention to the quality of student learning discussed above. Yet there is substantial evidence that what higher educators currently are doing is not achieving the learning needed for learner or institutional success. There is ample evidence that HIPs enhance deep learning; that unbundled, disconnected curricula truly limit learning quality; that viewing learners as deficit-bringers rather than asset-bringers undermines learning; that even to argue that finding out about the quality of learning takes too much time, and then to act as if continuing to do what we do and ignore this research is okay. This is no longer acceptable.

How do we make the case that higher education is not about preparing learners for the career of a lifetime but rather to prepare them for a lifetime of careers? Why should we believe that if we keep doing what we have been doing, it will result in something better or different?

Higher education educators are about making humans better through developing and instilling deep learning skills and abilities practiced at higher order levels of complexity. Learning is relational and social in its creation and practice over time. As such it requires responsibilities as a learner and as an educator. Learning is not passive, it is not a one-off enterprise, it

<sup>1</sup> “VALUE” stands for AAC&U’s Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education rubric initiative. The VALUE Institute is a nationwide effort to invite institutions to use VALUE rubrics for external validation of the quality of their students’ work <http://valueinstituteassessment.org>

is not solitary. Learning is iterative: it is work, it is questioning, and—at its best—it is integrative and energizing. It is not only educators who often struggle with these concepts of learning, many of our students—including the students we refer to as those who come to us most privileged on traditional measures of achievement—resist a shared notion of engaged learning, identity creation, and equity.

In short, the authors in this volume, as well as the ePortfolio community writ large, are being looked to to make the difference. You are the ones already engaged in whatever way you have chosen or been delegated to realize the distinct possibility that higher education can utilize ePortfolios as an effective approach to quality learning in order to lift up the voices of all student learners and to bridge learning in higher education from elementary and secondary education to graduate education and to employment and civic life. Now is not the time to be distracted by excuses nor the arguments for why ePortfolios are imperfect and cannot become reality for our students. This is exactly the time to stand up for the necessity of folio learning for our students, our institutions, and our democratic society.

### References

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