

Modeling High-Impact ePortfolio Practice: A Review of *Catalyst in Action: Case Studies of High-Impact ePortfolio Practice*

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This article reviews *Catalyst in Action: Case Studies of High-Impact ePortfolio Practice*, edited by Bret Eynon and Laura Gambino. A follow-up to the authors' earlier volume, *High-Impact ePortfolio Practice: A Catalyst for Student, Faculty, and Institutional Learning* (Eynon & Gambino, 2017), the new book presents a series of 20 case studies focused on various aspects of ePortfolio practice but with a particular emphasis on pedagogy and professional development. The chapters represent a highly diverse group of institutions, from community colleges to small private institutions to large public and private research universities. The various case studies presented are informative and even inspiring, providing a formidable body of evidence supporting the potential value of ePortfolio practice for students, programs, and institutions and attesting to the growing sophistication of ePortfolio research approaches, pedagogical strategies, and professional development practices. *Catalyst in Action* is highly recommended to longtime ePortfolio leaders and practitioners as well as to those new to the field. Publisher: Stylus (Sterling, VA, 2018). ISBN: 9781620368671. List price: \$35.00 (U.S.). 380 pages.

The 2017 publication of Bret Eynon and Laura Gambino's *High-Impact ePortfolio Practice: A Catalyst for Student, Faculty and Institutional Learning* marked a turning point in the ePortfolio field. Based on the results of a three-year, 24-campus national project, the book presented compelling evidence for three "Value Propositions" posited by the authors: briefly, that well-designed and well-executed ePortfolio projects—"ePortfolio done well"—advance student success; support reflection, integration of learning, and deep learning; and catalyze learning-centered institutional change. The volume further delineated a five-part framework, the Catalyst Framework, for doing ePortfolios well and a proposed set of design principles, Inquiry-Reflection-Integration, for effective implementation of the framework.

Eynon and Gambino's (2017) ambitious study had its own immediate high impact: it persuaded higher education scholar George Kuh, author of the Association of American Colleges & Universities' influential 2008 monograph, *High-Impact Educational Practices: What They Are, Who Has Access to Them, and Why They Matter*, to recognize ePortfolios "done well" as the eleventh high-impact practice (HIP) in higher education (Kuh, 2017). This recognition had the further impact of legitimizing ePortfolios in the minds of some skeptics (on my campus and, I suspect, on others) and of situating ePortfolios primarily as a powerful teaching and learning approach, rather than as another assessment tool or instructional technology fad. The book quickly became required reading for ePortfolio leaders and practitioners, offering guidance that confirmed lessons that leaders of long-established ePortfolio initiatives had learned through trial and error and mitigating the need for new practitioners to "reinvent the wheel."

Now Eynon and Gambino have followed up with a new volume, *Catalyst in Action: Case Studies of High-Impact ePortfolio Practice* (2018), an edited collection that explores in greater detail what it means to do ePortfolio well. Each of the case studies presents a detailed description of a well-developed current ePortfolio practice related to one or more of the five Catalyst Framework components: integrative social pedagogy, professional development, outcomes assessment, technology, and scaling up (Eynon & Gambino, 2017). Case study authors also connect the development and refinement of the practices they spotlight to the Inquiry-Reflection-Integration principles (retroactively, in some instances) and provide evidence of the practices' impact in relation to the three Catalyst Value Propositions.

Taken together, the 20 case studies in the collection present a diverse set of exemplary, and often inspiring, ePortfolio practice models and a formidable body of evidence supporting the potential value of ePortfolio practice for students, programs, and, to a somewhat lesser extent, institutions. A striking feature of several of these studies is the rigor and sophistication of their research approaches in comparison to studies conducted even a few years ago. As Eynon and Gambino note in the epilogue, these institutions have gone beyond comparing outcomes of students who create ePortfolios with those who do not. A study conducted at Bronx Community College offers an illustrative example: the college created a year-long, peer-mentored faculty development seminar focused on ePortfolio pedagogy, HIPs, and course re-design. Among other purposes, the seminar aimed to use ePortfolios to support a shift in course focus away from traditional information transmission and toward fundamental concepts, reflection, and metacognition. Then researchers compared student outcomes for First-Year Seminar

sections taught by seminar participants to outcomes for students taught by faculty with much more limited exposure to ePortfolio professional development and faculty who had no ePortfolio training. The results showed dramatic differences between the groups taught by seminar participants and the other two groups in pass rates for the course, retention to the following semester, and average credits earned in the first semester (Getman-Eraso & Culkin, 2018). Other institutions represented in the volume report similarly significant gains from carefully implemented ePortfolio pedagogy, sometimes using advanced statistical analysis techniques.

The Bronx Community College example (Getman-Eraso & Culkin, 2018) highlights the key role of sustained professional development and thoughtfully planned and executed pedagogical approaches that place ePortfolios at the center of course and curriculum design. These emphases, which will resonate with the experience of long-time ePortfolio leaders, typify many of the well-developed and rigorously honed practices included in this collection. At the same time, the diversity of models for scaling professional development and incorporating ePortfolios speaks to the importance of adapting ePortfolio implementation strategies to campus type and culture. It is one thing to adopt and scale ePortfolios at a small private college or within a single program; it is quite another to do so across a large comprehensive campus or public flagship university. (For this reason, I have always found the third Catalyst Value Proposition—that “ePortfolio done well catalyzes learner-centered institutional change” [Eynon & Gambino, 2018, p. xxii]—somewhat problematic. I have yet to see an example of effective ePortfolio adoption across a large university.)

The University of South Carolina, for example, developed its own model for scaffolding and scaling both faculty/staff and student learning from and about ePortfolios (Van Scoy, Fallucca, Harrison, & Camp, 2018). The campus’s Graduation with Leadership Distinction (GLD) recognition was created to encourage student participation in experiences like community service, global learning, and research, and to support integration of these out-of-class experiences with course-based learning. The recognition, which appears on students’ transcripts, requires a one-credit senior capstone seminar in which students work with peers and mentors to complete reflective, integrative ePortfolios that demonstrate their accomplishments and capacities. Faculty and staff participate at several successive levels: first, as trained evaluators of students’ capstone ePortfolios; next, as mentors to small groups of seniors as they create and refine their ePortfolios; and, finally, as capstone seminar instructors. As faculty and staff learn to evaluate and then facilitate student reflection on and integration of learning in ePortfolios, they become

ambassadors to their disciplinary departments and programs, seeding ePortfolio practice across the university (Van Scoy et al., 2018).

The South Carolina GLD program thus aimed to enhance student and faculty learning, and to widen campus adoption of ePortfolios and reflective, integrative pedagogies within departments and programs. It is within disciplinary programs, Eynon and Gambino (2018) find, that the “emphasis on coherence” (p. 288) essential to high-impact ePortfolio practice has been most easily and often enacted. Many of the case studies in *Catalyst in Action* are drawn from disciplinary majors and graduate programs where faculty can work collaboratively to “design longitudinal ePortfolio practices, spanning multiple semesters, helping students recursively examine their experiences and build academic and professional identities” (Eynon & Gambino, 2018, p. 288) and where “the powerful resonance between integrative curriculum and pedagogy, on the one hand, and integrative ePortfolio-enhanced learning on the other” (2018, p. 289) is most often realized. Experience at my own university suggests that program-level ePortfolio adoption can often stimulate faculty collaboration to develop more purposefully integrative and sequenced curricular and pedagogical designs. In this collection, case studies from institutions as diverse as LaGuardia Community College, Elon University, Northeastern University, and the University of Waterloo in Toronto describe approaches to aligning curricula and pedagogy with reflective, integrative ePortfolio learning.

All five components of the Catalyst Framework are addressed by the ePortfolio initiative at Salt Lake Community College (SLCC; Hubert & Dibble, 2018). SLCC has scaffolded required ePortfolio development across its general education program, leveraging resources to support students and faculty with extensive virtual and physical infrastructure: comprehensive web resources and examples, drop-in ePortfolio labs, peer mentors for both faculty and students, and faculty workshops and boot camps centered on ePortfolio pedagogy and technology. In addition, the SLCC ePortfolio initiative has pursued a careful strategy to embed ePortfolio assessment in the curricular review process for general education courses. Thus, when courses came up for periodic re-approval for inclusion in the general education program:

The faculty who shepherd courses through the committee have to address questions about signature assignments, reflective pedagogy, and ePortfolio integration in the course (so it is not just an add-on to an otherwise unchanged course). . . . The committee has a vibrant discussion of ePortfolio pedagogy in each course up for review. This has been nothing short of transformational in

terms of promoting ePortfolio culture among faculty. . . . ePortfolio implementation has, in fact, catalyzed learning-centered institutional change. (Hubert & Dibble, 2018, pp. 205-206)

As we saw at the University of South Carolina, faculty involved in this process become ePortfolio advocates in their home academic departments once they understand how ePortfolio practice can result “in greater student intentionality and engagement” (Hubert & Dibble, 2018, p. 200) in their learning and enhance “students’ sense of ownership of their education [and] ability to demonstrate progress toward attaining learning outcomes” (p. 207). And, importantly, ePortfolio practice is embedded in SLCC’s tenure and promotion processes. As virtually all of these case studies demonstrate, effective ePortfolio practice demands collaboration and a substantial time commitment. Faculty are more likely to devote such effort when they can expect to be rewarded for it.

Each of the case studies, which make up the book’s 20 chapters, follows a consistent format including (a) a brief introduction, (b) description of the institution, (c) description and discussion of the highlighted practice and its relationship to one or more Catalyst Framework sectors, (d) discussion of connections to other Catalyst Framework components, (e) evidence of impact related to one or more of the Catalyst Value Propositions, (f) lessons learned, and (g) a conclusion. In many cases, the practices described were so carefully designed, comprehensive, or creative that I wished the format allowed for more information on their background or history, comparison between the initial vision for a given practice and its eventual realization, and barriers encountered and overcome along the way.

As I reviewed the case studies in this volume, I was struck by several recurring themes:

- ePortfolio technology, while clearly essential to ePortfolio practice, is no longer as strong a focus of attention or the source of as much frustration as it was five or 10 years ago. Only a few case studies give extended attention to ePortfolio technology and only one, Dublin City University, makes it a major focus (Donaldson & Glynn, 2018). If anything, many campuses seem to be moving away from commercial ePortfolio platforms toward web development tools that meet students’ expectations that their ePortfolios will “represent their efforts in a visually compelling and professional way” (Goodwin & Lithgow, 2018, p. 165). Elon University is one of several in the book that allows students to select their own platforms, but requires them “to articulate their rhetorical

rationale for choosing one platform over the other, making the selection of an ePortfolio platform part of students’ demonstration of integrated learning” (Moore, Pope-Ruark, & Strickland, 2018, p. 175).

- ePortfolio assessment is moving toward a more holistic model. The early days of ePortfolio assessment were typified by a focus on isolated artifacts associated with specific outcomes or competencies. In the 2000s, leading ePortfolio researchers Darren Cambridge (2010) and Kathleen Yancey (2004), among others, urged practitioners to consider ePortfolios not as collections, but as integrated compositions, and to teach students to approach their ePortfolio as a unified narrative of learning and identity. This approach supports integrative student learning and coherent self-representation and enables nuanced assessment of more complex forms of thinking and of what Kuh, Gambino, Bresciani Ludvik, and O’Donnell (2018) termed *dispositional skills*.
- The role of ePortfolios in supporting academic, professional, and personal identity development has been a central theme of ePortfolio research and practice, and it recurs throughout the case studies in *Catalyst in Action*. This focus on developing the whole student aligns with holistic ePortfolio assessment, current discussions of high-impact practices, efforts on many campuses to connect the work of student affairs offices with academic programs, and newer general education designs, including at my own institution. I highlight identity development here in part to draw attention to Carol Geary Schneider’s (2018) rousing prologue to *Catalyst in Action*, wherein she emphatically affirms the importance of this aspect of high-impact ePortfolio practice to the larger purposes of higher education:

Leaders in the ePortfolio movement pay considerable attention to students’ development and demonstration of . . . essential proficiencies. But, in a striking reclaiming of one of the oldest purposes of a liberal and liberating education, ePortfolio pedagogy is equally interested in the selves students are creating *behind* those public performances. (p. x)

Like Eynon and Gambino’s previous book, *High-Impact ePortfolio Practice* (2017), *Catalyst in Action* is a rich resource, providing useful and usable guidance to

ePortfolio practitioners at all types of higher education institutions and at all levels of those institutions. The models presented show us what thoughtful, high-impact ePortfolio practice looks like and—perhaps more importantly—provide evidence that tells us why we should aspire to achieve it.

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