

## What, Exactly, Are We Amplifying? A Decade of AAC&U's ePortfolio Forum

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What does ten years of ePortfolio research and practice look like? The AAC&U ePortfolio Forum celebrated a decade in 2019. This article offers a brief overview of the past ten years of forums in the context of the 2019 forum. Five key themes were highlighted in 2019: 1) the history of ePortfolios in higher education, 2) the ethics of ePortfolios on campus, 3) student voices and self-authorship, 4) highlights from the current research agenda, and 5) the questions that persist, often as a moving target, in using ePortfolios on campus. Together, they revealed a field that is grounded and mature providing an opportunity to see evolution over time.

The AAC&U ePortfolio Forum, hosted in conjunction with the *International Journal of ePortfolio* and the Association for Authentic, Experiential, and Evidence-Based Learning (AAEEBL) has become one of two annual loci for information about ePortfolios in higher education. It, and the annual AAEEBL summer conference, provide a central space for novice and experienced ePortfolio practitioners to come together with those who are curious about ePortfolios. This year's day-long forum featured 29 sessions and three plenaries.

A decade in, the sessions offered a notable change. Previous forums often focused on definitional issues; "how tos" from the creation of individual student ePortfolios to the nuts and bolts of ePortfolio program construction; individual and programmatic ePortfolio exemplars; classroom case studies; classroom, programmatic, and institutional assessment data; and anecdotal examples all designed to provide compelling evidence for the value of ePortfolios. This year's forum was a study in a field that is grounded and mature. The forum provided a place to see evolution over time as campuses presented long-term initiatives firmly embedded in the landscape of their colleges and universities. The forum also created space for pushing back in some key areas such as privacy. Rather than creating a narrative of why, the forum highlighted five key themes:

1. The history of ePortfolios in higher education.
2. The ethics of ePortfolios on campus.
3. Student voices and self-authorship.
4. Highlights from the current research agenda.
5. The questions that persist, often as a moving target, in using ePortfolios on campus.

### Charting an ePortfolio Landscape

A quick look back at previous forums shows how the annual focus has contributed to establishing ePortfolios as a field in higher education. Focusing on assessment, high-impact practices, learning, student

voices, research, equity, ownership, and positioning within the university, the forum has built, and recursively reexamined key themes, deepening the learning of the community and highlighting the signature moments in shared learning.

- 2010 (pre-conference symposium): "The Search for VALUE: Innovation, Economic Uncertainty, and E-Portfolio Assessment"
- 2011: "Deepening High Impact Learning"
- 2012: "Look What I Can Do: Reclaiming a Focus on Learning"
- 2013: "E-Portfolios: Foundational Knowledge, Student Voices, and Best Practices"
- 2014: "Defining Practice and a Research Agenda"
- 2015: Global Digital Positioning Systems: E-Portfolios in a Digital Age"
- 2016: "Achieving Equity through Student Success and E-Portfolios"
- 2017: "ePortfolio as the Eleventh Meta High-Impact Practice for Student Signature Work"
- 2018: "ePortfolios and the American Dream: Empowering Students to Take Ownership of Their Futures"
- 2019: "ePortfolios and the Value of Higher Education: Celebrating 10 Years of AAC&U's ePortfolio Forum"

Working collaboratively with both AAEEBL and the *International Journal of ePortfolio*, the forum has been able to provide a space for continued examination of ePortfolio practice while also highlighting best practices and exemplars.

### How Did We Get Here?

ePortfolios as a field have a larger history than the AAC&U Forum, something keynote speaker John C. Ittelson was well poised to chronicle. Ittelson (2019) began his talk, "Documenting Learning: A Perspective . . ." with literal pomp and circumstance, ascending to

the stage in full academic regalia as Elgar's Pomp and Circumstance March No. 1 played. He focused on the origins of ePortfolio, tracing one history back to 1999 at California State University when the CSU teacher prep program moved from paper binders with sticky-noted feedback to CDs. He highlighted the early work of Helen Barrett and Helen Chen, marking Chen's *folio thinking* as a vital anchor in our work today. He focused on 2001-2002 as a key moment when ePortfolios began to take hold. He presented a session for the National Learning Infrastructure Initiative on teaching and learning assessments with ePortfolios. He also wrote an article in *Educause* on "Building an E-dentity for Each Student" (Ittelson, 2001). The same year, Trent Batson (2002) wrote "The Electronic Portfolio Boom," looking at the emerging trend of ePortfolios on campuses and raising key questions for consideration as a field.

Ittelson's (2019) abbreviated history highlighted key moments in the progress of ePortfolios in higher education including (a) the establishment of the ePortfolio Action Committee (ePAC); (b) AAEEBL; (c) Darren Cambridge, Barbara Cambridge, and Kathleen Blake Yancey's (n.d.) Inter/National Coalition; (d) *Electronic Portfolios 2.0* (Cambridge, Cambridge, & Yancey, 2009); (e) *The Handbook of Research on ePortfolio* (Jafari & Kaufman, 2006); (f) AAC&U and AAEEBL's *Field Guide to ePortfolios* (Batson et al., 2017); (g) the inclusion of ePortfolios as a high-impact practice (Watson et al., 2016); and (h) Bret Eynon and Laura Gambino's two-book series, *High Impact ePortfolio Practice: A Catalyst for Student, Faculty, and Institutional Learning* (2017) and *Catalyst in Action: Case Studies of High-Impact ePortfolio Practice* (2018). These contributions, and others not highlighted in Ittelson's (2019) talk, have all contributed to a shared language and shared values about ePortfolios and an understanding of ePortfolios for integrative learning, as curriculum, for assessment, for digital identity, for documenting learning, for inquiry, and for professional development.

Despite these successes, however, Ittelson (2019) pointed to the fact that some early stake holders in ePortfolios such as OSPI/Sakai, ePortfolio California, and the Carnegie Toolkit have faded away. Ittelson (2019) posited that we learned from those initiatives and then built on them in other ways.

Ittelson (2019) articulated the vital role he sees for ePortfolios in the current landscape of American higher education. He cited a recent Gallup poll indicating that confidence in higher education is down since 2015. Jones (2018) explained the nine percentage point decline: "No other institution has shown a larger drop in confidence over the past three years than higher education. The next-largest decline was a four-point decrease in confidence in the church or organized religion" (para. 5). Ittelson (2019) said that higher

education is interested in completion rates, student engagement, and employer feedback. ePortfolios are uniquely situated to provide this. But, he argued, we need to continue to get the word out.

Returning to his initial graduation metaphor, Ittelson (2019) ended by reminding us that the ePortfolio Forum functions like a graduation ceremony where learning is celebrated. But graduations are not just culminations. They also point people in the right direction as they continue on their learning journey.

### **The Seduction of Technology, The Ethics of the University**

In contrast, Sol Bermann's (2019) cautionary keynote "Beyond Technologies and Outcomes: Building Ethics and Compliance into Teaching, Learning, and Assessment" focused on the juxtaposition of technology and privacy based on his work as Chief Privacy Officer and Interim Chief Information Security Officer at the University of Michigan. He challenged the audience to consider whether legality and ethics are the same. So often, campuses faced with limited budgets, urgent assessment needs, and the promise of a decade of research into the efficacy of ePortfolios look for an easy and cheap solution: free ePortfolio platforms. Still other campuses enter ePortfolios on the utopian side of technology, believing that technology is a panacea.

Bermann's (2019) cautionary tale focused on the ethics of ePortfolio practice. He urged participants to carefully consider all the implications of technology and privacy as part of their overall ePortfolio implementation. He traced a brief history of technology and privacy focusing on how the current moment entails pervasive data collection, pervasive digital surveillance, and ethical questions over data such as who owns the data, who has access to the data, and what can be done with the data. Beyond questions sometimes posed at the beginning of ePortfolio projects, such as who owns the ePortfolio, Bermann's (2019) deeper questions about data ownership, future data mining, and what it is that we ask of students when they engage with ePortfolios reveal a deep unease with the current state of technology. He reiterated a common theme in higher education: free is never free, asking the question, "how can the user challenge any of the above questions?"

Early in his talk, Bermann (2019) said that ePortfolios should not be something that is just "done" to students, focusing on agency and choice. In the same way, his perspective on data and privacy suggested that bad platform agreements should not just happen to campuses. One of his key recommendations is for faculty and administrators to review the terms of service agreements that they require students to accept before joining ePortfolio systems. He argued that what

is legal regarding student data is not always ethical. Faculty should know and reflect on what they are asking their student to accept as part of a course. His talk concluded by urging ePortfolio practitioners and campuses to think of themselves as agents of change, scripting new agreements for ePortfolio data, management, privacy, and ownership. He suggested that this is a critical area for research and leadership in higher education.

### **At the Heart of Our Practice: Student Ownership**

While ePortfolio forums have always highlighted student work and student learning using ePortfolios, this year's Forum featured student voices in videos, written reflections, and a keynote luncheon panel. These presentations focused largely on the idea of story-telling and how students are empowered to tell their own stories about their educations. Hearing authentic student voices discuss what is meaningful and what is effective in their ePortfolio experience is increasingly important as we move from arguing for the need for ePortfolios to continuing to study and improve their use. Margaret J. Marshall led a panel titled "Students' Perspectives on ePortfolios and Learning A Student Panel Discussion" (Marshall, Barco-Medina, Devore, Thomas, & Warr, 2019) featuring four Auburn University students: (a) Genesis Barco-Medina (a graduate student in English), (b) Elizabeth A. Devore (a graduate student in Electrical Engineering), (c) Bri Thomas (a senior in Political Science), and (d) Brent Warr (a senior in Environmental Design). The panel provided a concentrated look at meaningful ePortfolios built around faculty and student learning with purposeful integration into programs and degrees. The students focused on autonomy, the importance of crafting their own narratives, and thinking strategically about how to use ePortfolios in job and future career plans. Each student placed a heavy emphasis on the importance of ownership of the ePortfolio, both in content and design. It was clear that their ePortfolios were centrally theirs, making a targeted rhetorical argument about who they are, what they have accomplished, and where they are headed for a carefully considered audience. The students also commented on the importance of having a space to translate all of their college experiences into a central location. As such, this panel centered on the rhetorical uses of ePortfolio as both a learning and communication tool.

The student presenters also talked about moments of initial resistance to ePortfolio. They reflected on being unsure of how an ePortfolio might help them in their careers. While each of the students was a powerful advocate for the use of ePortfolios in the curriculum they also provided reinforcement for the

importance of talking with students about the "why" of ePortfolios and the importance of strategic placement of ePortfolios in the curriculum to provide multiple opportunities to revisit and continue to build the ePortfolio.

### **Highlights From the Current Research Agenda**

Two strands of the day highlighted authors featured in recent publications. Five sessions focused on work included in Bret Eynon and Laura M. Gambino's (2018) *Catalyst in Action: Case Studies of High-Impact ePortfolio Practice*. These sessions situated ePortfolio practice in the Catalyst model, developed by 24 campuses using ePortfolio, which identified inquiry, integration, and reflection as central practices in ePortfolio pedagogy. The Catalyst examines how pedagogy, professional development, technology, outcomes assessment, and scaling up are key considerations in ePortfolio program development for faculty, students, programs and majors, and institutions. Three sessions focused on work included in Kathleen Blake Yancey's (2019) *ePortfolio as Curriculum: Diverse Models and Practices*, examining the importance of ePortfolio as an intentional part of curriculum development.

An additional double session led by C. Edward Watson (2019), Executive Editor of the *International Journal of ePortfolio*, focused on developing and implementing an ePortfolio Scholarly research agenda. In this session, he reviewed the relevant practices in ePortfolio research, the stages of the research process, effective study design, appropriate methodology, and how to pose and examine measurable and achievable research questions.

### **The ePortfolio Decade**

While a decade is commonly thought of as a compilation of years, it is also a unit of measurement for electrical frequency ratios, particularly when looking at amplifiers. What, then, have we been amplifying over the past ten years of AAC&U ePortfolio Forums? This decade built on the early work outlined by Ittelson (2019), moving ePortfolios from an isolated classroom practice in some disciplines into a wide-spread practice in higher education.

It is useful to consider some of the recurring questions and principles of ePortfolios. A trio of early quotes from ePortfolio thought leaders help to frame what is new, what is consistent, and what remains difficult about ePortfolio practice.

In 2001, John Ittelson explored the early possibilities for the integrative potential of ePortfolios as a centering locus for connecting personal, academic, and professional work:

Joellen is a 36-year old mother of two. She currently holds a full-time job. After graduating from high school, Joellen completed one year at her local community college. She and her husband then moved to a different state, and she took some additional courses from a local community college. She also took a college telecourse. She recently decided to matriculate at a four-year institution in her city. The college has asked for all her prior transcripts, in order to determine how many and which credits will transfer.

Joellen's educational history represents a composite of the type that students often bring to college. In this age of multiple campus enrollments, virtual campuses, and online courses, pity today's harried students as they struggle to keep track of their multiple transcripts. Isn't it time to explore a more student-centered solution? (p. 43)

While "online" now replaces "telecourse" in our considerations of digital higher education, many of the initial issues raised by Ittelson remain. How do ePortfolios continue to offer a way to connect different educational experiences and to provide a stable base for building an educational resume in the form of an ePortfolio?

In 2002, Trent Batson raised early concerns about the security of ePortfolios, thinking about how to keep online data safe:

Security: Can we maintain a high level of security for personal information transmitted over the wires or stored in a server on campus? In other words, how do we make an ePortfolio platform an enterprise application? An enterprise application keeps personal data secure from end-to-end, requiring coordination and support from central servers and data folks. A laissez-faire approach to electronic portfolios on a campus may expose the data to hacking, and the university to a law suit. ("Let's Do It," para. 4)

And in 2009, Kathleen Blake Yancey raised issues of student engagement. She pointed to the importance of keeping students connected to and engaged with the ePortfolio:

At the heart of this work in electronic portfolios is what was first a hope and then an assumption, and now a research-based claim: that *creating, evidencing, connecting, and reflecting* involved in electronic portfolios engage students in new and beneficial ways—especially when the portfolio provides a space for student-informed participation

The literature on e-portfolios suggests that student engagement is a critical element of

portfolio development (Barrett 2000; Batson 2002; Yancey 2001). The inability to get students engaged or excited about their e-portfolios will result in a flawed implementation. (p. 28)

Together, these three quotes show something John Ittelson (2019) called a moving target: while much of the field has changed over the past decade, many of the key questions remain the same. The Forum provided a space to consider the recursive questions that the field grapples with. There are tensions between ownership and privacy. Who owns the ePortfolio? How do we negotiate the space between a student-centered ePortfolio and institutional needs for assessment and documentation of student learning? Privacy and security concerns have moved even closer to the center of ePortfolio discussions as the field considers how to engage students in critical training to become digitally literate citizens. And the ePortfolio is most effective when student voices and reflection are at the center of ePortfolio practice.

John Warner's (2018) recent book *Why They Can't Write* told the anecdote of bringing a child to the doctor for a diagnosis. Warner (2018) walked the reader through the steps in what a physician does to diagnose. He says there are four key steps (2018): "(1) Knowledge (What do doctors know?), (2) Skills (What can doctors do?), (3) Habits of mind (How do doctors think?), (4) Attitudes (What do doctors believe and value about being a doctor?)" (p. 20). These steps are reminiscent of Lee S. Shulman's (2005) "Signature Pedagogies in the Professions" that formed the basis for how we now talk about signature work and signature pedagogy as a practice and habit of mind.

This ePortfolio decade firmly established ePortfolios in higher education as powerful tools for teaching and learning, for assessment, for curriculum, for professional development, and for student identity. We have amplified student voices, student learning, reflection, assessment, and explored key issues such as ownership and privacy. More than that, however, we have amplified that ePortfolios are a pedagogy and we, as a community, are practitioners. What do ePortfolio practitioners know? What do ePortfolio practitioners do? How do ePortfolio practitioners think? What do ePortfolio practitioners believe and value about being an ePortfolio practitioner?

Over the past decade, we have amplified the knowledge, skills, habits of mind, and attitudes of ePortfolio practitioners, setting the stage for continuing to explore and deepen our learning; for returning and recursively revising our practice; for creating new questions and finding different answers for questions that remain. We have also created a generous space for people who want to join this work, recognizing that there is always a place for the campus or faculty member who wants to explore "how to" and to begin this work.

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