The Quest for Expertise: A Review of *Documenting Learning with ePortfolios: A Guide for College Instructors*

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This article provides a review of *Documenting Learning with ePortfolios: A Guide for College Instructors* by Tracy Penny Light, Helen Chen, and John Ittelson. A much needed and highly accessible manual for understanding the significant pedagogical foundations for the use of ePortfolio in the college classroom, the text offers a practical design for instruction that facilitates the successful implementation of folio thinking and, subsequently, the development of effective ePortfolios. *Documenting Learning with ePortfolios: A Guide for College Instructors* is not a how-to guide for using a specific portfolio product; instead, it prioritizes thoughtful pedagogy over technological tools. The authors focus on the development of effective instances of student learning and provide advice on selecting the best tool for the job. Publisher: Jossey-Bass (San Francisco, 2012). ISBN: 9780470636206. List price: $40.00 (U.S.). 160 pages.

Nearly twelve years ago, I attended a workshop that introduced the use of asynchronous discussion forums as a part of a course management system that was being adopted by my university. The presentation was very interesting, as the concept was relatively new back then; it was the dawn of the 21st century, after all, and new and exciting tools promised to revolutionize teaching and learning. Once the presenters completed their exhibition of the discussion tool, I raised my hand and asked a question that—unbeknownst to me—would lead me down myriad paths and permanently impact my own practice. The question was simple enough: "What are the pedagogical implications of this tool?" The two gentlemen looked at one another and chuckled—Were they embarrassed? Did I put them on the spot? "That's a good question," one answered. They said nothing else, but proceeded to hand out instructional booklets on how to create a CourseInfo site as if in response to my query. I didn't press them further, feeling a bit self-conscious and naïve; I was the new kid, and I didn't want to cause trouble. I clutched my instructional booklet tightly, vowing to read every word.

In the wee hours of the following morning, I pushed my chair back from my desk and sighed deeply. I must have missed something. I read every word of that instructional booklet. I dutifully followed the steps and set up a course site. Intuitively it seemed the right thing to do—building new technology into my Medieval Humanities course was sure to be a hit with the students, almost Guttenbergian, I felt—but something was missing. I learned the *how* of the technology, but I still didn't know *why*. Going back to the booklet, I actually searched the back pages for a toll-free number to call. I needed an expert, someone to tell me why I should use this technology, when and under what circumstances it would be the most appropriate, and who would ultimately benefit from its use. Of course, the booklet yielded no such toll-free number. There was to be no answer to my question; it was up to me to determine the pedagogical implications on my own—for better or for worse.

As an early adopter of new technologies and a social constructivist who believes in a learner-centered teaching and learning environment, I have grown accustomed to the struggle of determining the pedagogical value of new tools. Over the years and through trial, error, honest reflection, and a dedication to my philosophy of teaching, I have come to live by the rule of the three E's: If a technology does not enliven, enrich, or extend my students' learning experiences with the content, then I simply do not use it—regardless of its bells and whistles. There are myriad technological tools at our fingertips, but just as we wouldn't use a hammer to drive a screw into the wall, neither should we adopt a tool that fails to align with our pedagogical purpose. This premise is appreciably addressed in *Documenting Learning with ePortfolios: A Guide for College Instructors* by Penny Light, Chen, and Ittelson (2012).

With the publication of *Documenting Learning with ePortfolios: A Guide for College Instructors* earlier this year, Penny Light et al. (2012) provide a text that contributes to the development of master teachers of the 21st century who seek to possess a "content-pedagogical-technological expertise" (Pierson, 2001). Beyond what researchers have defined as *pedagogical-content expertise*, "knowledge about specific learners, curriculum, and the various and most useful ways to represent the particular subject matter being taught" (Pierson, 2001, p. 427), a qualitative study by Pierson (2001) found "technological expertise" to be a critical quality of a practicing teacher. Defining technological expertise as "not only a basic technology competency but also an understanding of the unique characteristics of particular types of technologies that would lend themselves to particular aspects of the teaching and learning processes" (p. 427), Pierson (2001) suggests that true technology integration lies at the intersection

of content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, and technological knowledge. Lest our instruction seem disjointed and our methods superfluous, the seamless synthesis of content, pedagogy, and technology is our Holy Grail as educators.

To aid us on our epic quest for true integration as we seek to become content-pedagogical-technological experts, *Documenting Learning with ePortfolios* (2012) provides a comprehensive guide to understanding the use of ePortfolios in the instructional environment. Predicating the technological *hows* with the pedagogical *whys*, authors Penny Light, Chen, and Ittelson offer a strong pedagogical argument for the use of technology in the form of ePortfolios by prioritizing the concept of folio thinking and the significance of documenting learning for specific stakeholders; by illustrating the learner-centered, authentic, and developmental nature of the technology; and by providing practical considerations for the implementation of the technology to serve both local (course-specific and departmental) as well as global (institutional and beyond) missions.

The Whys: Folio Thinking and Habits of Mind

For two decades I have had in my possession a three-inch three-ring binder that is bursting with samples of my work, selections of lesson plans and learning activities, reflections about the viability of those plans and activities, notes from former students, and various miscellany, all of which contributed to my growth as a professional educator. With yellowed pages that have torn with age and wear, this binder—my first teaching portfolio—accompanies me to class as a prop, a visual representation of reflective practice. It is a cumbersome object to tote to class, inelegant in its bulk and forced linearity; however, my portfolio contains documents that denote the discreet moments that impacted my learning, and subsequently, the way I think about and approach my role as a teacher. My portfolio is evidence of the development of the habits of mind that now tacitly function throughout my everyday life.

While my giant binder facilitated my reflection and growth in one area of my learning, and while my other life experiences may have been implicitly revealed through my reflections and musings about my teaching practice, my paper-based portfolio did not allow for the exploration and overt integration of the connections to the myriad events that reciprocally impacted my learning and my identity. Penny Light et al. (2012) explain to their readers that ePortfolios contribute to the greater act of "folio thinking" by adding a multidimensionality, a "richer representation of the learners' experiences" (p. 61), which text-based portfolios cannot readily provide. As noted by

Backlund et al. in their 2001 *Personal Learning Portfolios: Folio Thinking* proposal to the Wallenberg Global Learning Network Funding Program, "faculty and academic advisors increasingly feel that the 21st Century student experience lacks coherence" (p. 2). This lack of experiential coherence results in a "fragmentation of purpose," which establishes silos of student experience and fails to encourage integration and synthesis among them. Through such fragmentation, individual experiences are preserved historically as stand-alone and arbitrary, memorialized as being "outside" or "separate from" other acts of student learning and knowledge-building. The principles inherent in folio thinking encourage the development of a habit of mind "that builds connections across experiences and ideas and across learning experiences inside and outside formal schooling" (Cambridge, 2007, p. 5); this connection of experiences allows for a more comprehensive integration of learned ideas and affords students an opportunity not only to create a living scrapbook of their "learning careers" (Penny Light et al., 2012, p. 36) but to synthesize what they have learned into a holistic view of who they have become as a result of their learning—both experiential and classroom-based.

The potential for encouraging the processes involved in metacognitive reflection and epistemological growth through folio thinking should not be understated and should serve as the ideological foundation upon which the use of portfolios in instruction is based—whether text-based or electronic. The pedagogical imperative of folio thinking requires learners to "evaluate the knowledge claims offered by authorities, construct their own convictions, seek out new possibilities and sources, and apply the knowledge they are acquiring to complex and real-world problems" (Penny Light et al., 2012, p. 15). This preference for active and critical reflection also encourages learners to examine their own belief systems: why they have them, where they come from, and "what points in their learning caused their belief systems to shift or change" (p. 15). As a tool for operationalizing these pedagogical principles, ePortfolios enable students to collect those impactful artifacts across time and space and to explain and reflect upon how the culmination of the series of documents contribute to their overall growth.

The Hows: Stakeholders and Strategies

Simply being presented with the opportunity to create an ePortfolio does not instill in the learner the ability to effectively use the tool. Because "making connections among learning experiences . . . is not necessarily a natural part of what students come to colleges and universities knowing how to do" (p. 41), Penny Light et al. (2012) dedicate considerable time in *Documenting Learning with*

ePortfolios to the ways in which instruction may be designed to encourage both folio thinking and ePortfolio development through the deliberate selection of evidence and the critical reflection of its significance. The authors speak of students as the most critical stakeholders among a potential plethora of stakeholders involved in an ePortfolio initiative, and, as such, they must buy-in to the activity of creating an ePortfolio; they must see its value and recognize it as an integral part of their learning, not just as an add-on activity. Appropriate scaffolding must be provided for students to become aware of and skilled in the acts of collecting, reflecting upon, and integrating evidence of learning. Students must also be encouraged to identify the various other stakeholders and audiences of their ePortfolios and develop a sense of appropriateness for their work by being empathetic toward the needs and concerns of those stakeholders and audiences.

In consideration of these concerns, and what I find to be the most instructive aspect of their text, Penny Light, Chen, and Ittelson promote the use of "design thinking," made manifest in the principles or "d.mindsets" used in the Stanford d.school; further, they highlight eight issues for ePortfolio implementation (see Chen & Penny Light, 2010) that serve also as guideposts for effective and efficient instructional design. In *Documenting Learning with ePortfolios*, the authors include relevant, real-world examples from colleges and universities that showcase the methods our colleagues are using to address the issues of

- designing and articulating learning outcomes;
- understanding our learners;
- identifying stakeholders;
- designing appropriate learning activities;
- including multiple forms of evidence in ePortfolios;
- using rubrics to evaluate ePortfolios;
- anticipating the external use of the evidence included in an ePortfolio; and
- evaluating the impact of ePortfolios.

While addressed directly in Chapter 3, "Designing Effective ePortfolio Learning Activities," these eight issues are also threaded throughout the text as the authors explore the value and functionality of folio thinking and the construction of an effective and comprehensive ePortfolio for a variety of stakeholders. These issues are also omnipresent when considering the many guises of assessment and evaluation inherent with ePortfolio creation and implementation; Penny Light et al. (2012) support the development and use of rubrics for instructor-based assessment as well as for learner-centered self-assessment, which encourages further reflection and objectivity with respect to an individual's own process and ultimate ePortfolio product.

Documenting Learning with ePortfolios is, indeed, a true "Guide for College Instructors." With the exception of the chapter outlining faculty development issues and the chapter discussing the evaluation of the institutional impact of ePortfolios, both of which seem more appropriate for an audience geared toward resource management and administration, Penny Light, Chen, and Ittelson offer a highly accessible and informative manual that provides readers with both the *whys* and the *hows*. While the authors do not provide a toll-free number to call in the event of a pedagogical emergency, they do provide a web-based companion to their text, documentinglearning.com, which gives readers access to an abundance of examples and resources. Perhaps even more useful than a toll-free number, the website invites readers to join the online community of educators who thoughtfully and reflectively incorporate the use of folio thinking and ePortfolios into their instruction in their continuing quest for content-pedagogical-technological expertise.

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