

E-Portfolios: Purposes and Rationale for Use in Higher Education

Compiled by Dr. Robin Alison Mueller, Educational Development Unit

An e-portfolio is most often conceptualized as a multi-media environment where networks of evidence are reflected on, synthesized, and presented in order to demonstrate and substantiate learning. There are a variety of reasons for using e-portfolios in higher education, and these reasons may differ significantly between contexts. The purpose that underpins the implementation of an e-portfolio approach will determine the structure and format of that approach; for this reason, **it is essential to ensure clarity of purpose with respect to the use of e-portfolios** for everyone who is involved.

E-portfolios can be used for multiple purposes in higher education that serve programmatic, instructor, and student needs. **Some of these purposes are to:**

- Provide long term storage for student, staff, or faculty members' work;
- Collect different forms of assessment data to be used as evidence of learning or development;
- Provide a means for capturing individual perceptions of, and reflections on, learning experiences;
- Serve as an artifact for particular competencies;
- Act as a medium/venue to share information with others;
- Provide an open space to explore the impact of learning and connections between discrete learning experiences;
- Serve as a tool for learners to focus and refine their thinking about a particular topic, issue, or discipline;
- Provide a fluid online environment where individuals can continually and iteratively express their reflections, ideas, and understandings;
- Provide an opportunity for learners to translate theory to practice;
- Act as a conceptual framework that grounds the content of, and progression through, interactive courses;
- Serve as a metacognitive planning tool for future learning and/or experiences; and
- Facilitate career development and/or transitions from higher education to the workforce.

The **benefits of using e-portfolios at a programmatic level** pertain to long-term evaluative function. While the use of e-portfolios can prompt both student and faculty member awareness of connections across various aspects of a program of study, the most significant impact of e-portfolio use relates to its ability to capture program assessment information. Patterns that emerge from e-portfolio assignments over time indicate how program outcomes are being met and can provide insight into the general impact that programs of study have on the students who engage in them.

Benefits to teachers who implement e-portfolios in their classes are significant. First, and perhaps most importantly, the use of e-portfolios helps instructors to pro-actively and explicitly align the intended outcomes of the course with their instructional strategies and assessment approaches. The evaluation benefits are substantial because an e-portfolio can be used for pre-assessment, formative assessment, and summative

assessment of learning. Furthermore, learning outcomes that many instructors find difficult to evaluate—such as critical thinking, reflection, civic engagement, self-regulation, leadership development, integrative learning, and creativity—are more easily evidenced through an e-portfolio approach. Whether the e-portfolio is an individual assignment or a holistic framework for course assessment, this approach allows instructors to quickly and effectively gauge a student’s development of ability over time, and captures many ways of demonstrating knowledge that move beyond traditional exams or writing assignments. The e-portfolio process can also be used by instructors as a mechanism to engage students in collaboration or creative work in an innovative manner. Finally, there is potential for the instructor’s assessment workload to be reduced when using e-portfolios because it is a strategy that is inherently well-suited to self-assessment and peer-review.

Finally, there are considerable benefits experienced by students as a result of e-portfolio use. E-portfolios engage students in authentic assessment that allows them to see how and what they are learning, and how they are progressing over time. E-portfolios acknowledge the value in diverse approaches to learning and students have the opportunity to use multiple strategies for demonstrating their knowledge. The e-portfolio offers a rare opportunity to conduct an in-depth exploration of, and reflection on, learning. Students experience metacognitive benefits as a result of creating e-portfolios because the process requires active reflection, identification of connections, and integration of themes.

Students can also use their e-portfolios as an opportunity to showcase their competencies, the scope of their course work, and the richness of their learning experiences. E-portfolios allow students to share their knowledge with others in a clear and concise manner, and most e-portfolio platforms allow the student to carry their portfolios forward from academia to the workplace.

References

- Cadd, M. (2012). The electronic portfolio as assessment tool and more: The Drake University model. *The International Association for Language Learning Technology Journal*, 42(1), 96-126. Retrieved from: http://www.iallt.org/sites/default/files/07_cadd42-1final.pdf
- Lamont, M. (2007). What are the features of e-portfolio implementation that can enhance learning and promote self-regulation? *European Institute for E-Learning*, 32-42. Retrieved from: <file:///C:/Users/ramuelle/Downloads/ePortfolio%202007.pdf>
- Nguyen, C. F. (2013). The ePortfolio as a living portal: A medium for student learning, identity, and assessment. *International Journal of ePortfolio*, 3(2), 135-148. Retrieved from http://www.theijep.com/past_3_2.cfm
- Parkes, K. A., Dredger, K.S., & Hicks, D. (2013). ePortfolio as a measure of reflective practice. *International Journal of ePortfolio*, 3(2), 99-115. Retrieved from: http://www.theijep.com/past_3_2.cfm
- Pitts, W., & Ruggirello, R. (2012). Using the e-portfolio to document and evaluate growth in reflective practice: The development and application of a conceptual framework. *International Journal of ePortfolio*, 2(1), 49-74. Retrieved from: <http://www.theijep.com/pdf/IJEP43.pdf>
- Richards-Schuster, K., Ruffolo, M. C., Nicoll, K. L., Distelrath, C., & Galura, J. A. (2014). Using e-portfolios to assess program goals, integrative learning, and civic engagement: A case example. *International Journal of ePortfolio*, 4(2), 133-141. Retrieved from <http://www.theijep.com/current.cfm>