

Editorial: A Pointillist Portrait of ePortfolio Implementation at One University

Case studies from Nursing, Professional Practice, University Honors,
English, and Business at the University of Cincinnati

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This special issue of the *Journal for Research and Practice in College Teaching* is devoted to case studies of eportfolio implementation in a decentralized context. This article serves as an introduction to the special issue, provides a background for the current research in eportfolio implementation, and concludes with an assessment of the changing influence of technology in relation to eportfolio implementation.

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Eportfolio implementation presents practical and philosophical challenges. An important practical challenge centers on technology. The “e” of eportfolio receives a great deal of attention because the software platform presents potential costs in time and funds. In the past, eportfolio platforms were more challenging than they are as we approach the first quarter of the 21st century. Free platforms are more plentiful, more powerful, and more user friendly. Vendor developed platforms are following the same path. Thus, it would seem that the problem of technology is fading to the background of eportfolio implementation, but with the increasing variety of choices, the platform is still often cited as the first step in implementing eportfolios. Philosophical changes are also required in the adoption of eportfolios. Faculty and students’ roles shift as eportfolios are integrated into the curriculum. Students learn to take ownership of their learning through the processes of collecting, selecting, and reflecting on the artifacts that document their intellectual journey. In this special issue of the *Journal for Research and Practice in College Teaching*, we present a multi-faceted, grass-roots implementation of the idea of eportfolios that did not begin as a question of platform, but rather as a question of the teaching and learning afforded by eportfolios. The question of platform was a practical after-thought given that there was no institutional funding involved, except in one case where the pedagogy drove the choice to use free, online platforms. While we tell the story of our university from distinct programmatic implementation of eportfolios, we suggest that each facet, seen in the larger university context, suggests a sustainable alternative to top-down development which, with appropriate cultivation, can be sustained through communication and mutual community support.

The literature on eportfolio implementation suggests that our experiences of challenges and opportunities are consonant with the general experiences of implementation reported by other researchers. Ten years ago, which is a long time in terms of technology development, Wickersham and Chambers (2006) reported challenges of integration of eportfolios into the

curriculum, resulting in students perceiving eportfolios as unrelated to their learning. Nevertheless, from a student satisfaction survey, the researchers report, “However, the majority of students did find that the eportfolio development process led to an increase in their overall technical skills and confidence in using technology” (p. 741). It is interesting that while the idea of eportfolios was challenging to students, the technology was not, and in fact, was the major benefit of eportfolios. Technology was also the principal concern of implementation for Meeus, Questier, and Derks (2006) as they reported a focus on open source software helped speed up implementation of eportfolios due to its low cost and flexibility.

In contrast, Clark and Eynon (2009) suggested that choices of technology may limit the usefulness of eportfolios in that the software platforms may be too rigid to accommodate the extensive reflection and personalization that engage students in ownership of their eportfolios. In this case, Clark and Eynon were referring to a single institution wide platform. This challenge of addressing the many and varied needs of eportfolios across programs and courses is an important technology challenge to consider in eportfolio implementation. The challenge of technology seems to be hard to address since, in 2014, Hains-Wesso, Wakeling, and Aldred still identified technology as a central concern in their implementation strategy of eportfolios. Nevertheless, Slade, Murfin, and Readman (2013) principally identified the implementation of eportfolios as a technological implementation. They noted, “Without alignment to institutional and user needs, any new technological solution is likely to be problematic, making it more difficult for pedagogical innovation to take place” (p. 177). They asserted that in the absence of an institutional plan, early adopters will innovate without institutional support, thus creating challenges to institution wide adoption. It is worth noting that the challenges for eportfolio implementation changes depending on whether the implementation is driven from the bottom up or the top down. Bottom up challenges focus on issues of teaching and learning with eportfolios, and top down decisions focus on the institutional application of the technology. It is interesting that Slade, Murfin and Readman identified early adopters as a challenge to eportfolio implementation.

Mirroring these concerns about the technology barriers and funding, Fisher and Hill (2015) noted, “challenges with digital literacy of staff and students; disruptive change in the Higher Education milieu and organisational change and cost” as the principle challenges to implementing eportfolios at their institution (p. 1082). An interesting question this poses, and

which is dealt with in the case studies presented in this issue, is what happens when the technology and the funding are not the central concern to implementation? Are faculty and students still halted by the technology, or are there other issues that challenge eportfolio implementation?

Student resistance is a profound philosophical challenge in eportfolio implementation. Ring and Ramirez (2012) reported on an institution wide implementation that was slowed by a platform that students and faculty did not like, in addition to a lack of clarity concerning integration of the eportfolio in the curriculum. Both students and faculty resisted the implementation because they saw the eportfolio as an extra burden, rather than as an integral learning process. Bryant and Chittum's 2013 literature review reported that 42% of the articles they reviewed were descriptive in nature, often incorporating suggestions for successful implementation. Many seemed to cite negative student perceptions due to the novelty of the eportfolio or unclear expectations or instruction on how to use them. In this case, it is clear that no matter how good the technology is, the crux of successful implementation is in the actual use of the eportfolio as an idea embodied in the technology in the process of learning.

Silva et al. (2015) discussed how student involvement in deciding how the eportfolio experience is designed can be an important strategy for students' understanding of the usefulness of creating eportfolios as opposed to eportfolios being merely another hoop through which to jump. These researchers suggested that the barrier of technology disappears when the stakeholders feel there is a choice in what to use to enact the learning process of eportfolios. In this manner, Posey et al. (2015) described how a group of faculty and administrators came together to implement eportfolios across the university. They did cite technology as their starting point on which they tested the various uses of eportfolios. Their next move was supported by the provost of the university to pilot an institution wide platform. Following the technology piece, they considered technology support and faculty and student development. Posey et al. (2015) identified the group of early adopters, working on their own, as a key element of the later institutional success of their implementation. The cooperation of this community, committed to the idea of eportfolios as a learning process, may have facilitated the technology piece of their eportfolio implementation.

Despite advances in technology, the same challenges of technology and funding seem to be enduring. In a study of eportfolio implementation between 2013 and 2015 (Watty et al.

2016), researchers identified a lack of resources and support for the adoption of the technologies and a lack of staff engagement in the pedagogy of eportfolios as the top two challenges of implementing eportfolios (p. 21). Their first key recommendation is, "... it is essential to scope the implementation of ePortfolios by designated program and/or discipline major" (p. 30). It seems that as the idea of eportfolios as a beneficial teaching and learning process becomes more accepted, the challenge of technology remains as different stakeholders require that the technology meet their specific needs. This desire to tailor the technology to the programmatic or even course based needs may be working against single platform solutions. Thus, it makes sense that Holt et al. (2016) identified lack of institutional strategy, reluctance to innovate, lack of familiarity with eportfolios, lack of technology solutions, and a small early adopter base as the primary challenges of eportfolio implementation. They summarized the difficulty as facing "multiple points of resistance to the use of eportfolios amongst staff, students, professional bodies, and the institution..." (p. 10). As eportfolios become more widely accepted, and as technologies become more widely varied and accessible, the idea of the eportfolio as a learning and teaching practice seems to be coming to the fore as an issue that must be addressed as the primary challenge, and the technology, while still important, may become a secondary concern.

In the case studies that follow, we describe how a bottom up adoption of eportfolios is being implemented across our university. These implementations all began independently of each other, but as the implementations grow in scope, and are sustained over time, a loose affiliation of eportfolio practitioners is coalescing through the efforts of a task force created as a sub-committee of the University eLearning Committee. In this issue, we believe it is valuable to consider the individual case studies of implementation to demonstrate how individual early adopters can grow into contributors to a multi-faceted approach to eportfolios, using an eclectic approach to technology, and yet adhering to a shared vision of the power of eportfolios for teaching and learning.

In the article titled, "University of Cincinnati, University Honors Program (UHP), Learning Portfolios," Debra Brawn describes how the program moved from a single vendor product to free, online platforms because the free, online platforms better met the students need for ownership of their portfolios and creative personalization, as well as integration of learning throughout their undergraduate careers. In the article titled, "ePortfolio Implementation for Career Education," Rich Robles and Erik Alanson present how the Division of Experience-Based

Learning and Career Education is implementing eportfolios to incorporate multiple touchpoints in a student's career, while allowing students a choice of platform and multiple opportunities for reflection. In the article titled, "ePortfolio Implementation as a Means for Achievement of Standards," Missi Stec describes how the Doctorate of Nursing program is using Evernote as an eportfolio platform to track student progress through the program and allow flexible access for multiple assessors. In the article titled, "ePortfolio Implementation One Person at a Time: The power of personal connection," Ruth Benander and Brenda Refaei present how an English program with an extensive background in portfolio pedagogy made the shift from paper to eportfolios, describing the pedagogical and assessment changes that the change in media initiated. Finally, in the article titled "X", Pam Rankey and Michele Kegley describe a program wide portfolio implementation that began with requiring a single platform but moved to student choice of platforms as the pedagogy took priority in the development of the implementation. In all of these implementation stories, the technology plays an important part in the implementation of the portfolios, but since the availability of free, user friendly online website platforms eliminated the problems of institutional funding and support, the implementation challenges focused on the teaching and learning issues afforded by eportfolios.

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