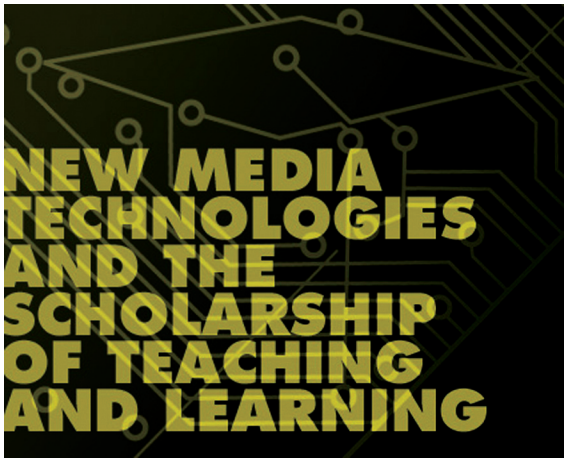
Academic Commons

"New Media Technologies and the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning"

January 2009 issue of Filtered: The Academic Commons Magazine

Edited by Randy Bass with Bret Eynon and an editorial group from Georgetown University's Center for New Designs in Learning & Scholarship (Eddie Maloney, Susannah McGowan, John Rakestraw and Theresa Schlafly)

CNDLS
Center for New Designs in Learning and Scholarship



Reprinted from the January 2009 issue of Academic Commons on "New Media Technologies and the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning," edited by Randy Bass with Bret Eynon and an editorial group from the Center for New Designs in Learning and Scholarship (CNDLS) at Georgetown University– Eddie Maloney, Susannah McGowan, John Rakestraw and Theresa Schlafly
http://www.academiccommons.org/issue/january-2009

Center for New Designs in Learning and Scholarship (CNDLS)
3520 Prospect St. NW, # 314
Washington, DC 20057
http://cndls.georgetown.edu

Table of Contents

New Media Technologies and the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning:

Making Common Cause: *Electronic Portfolios, Learning, and the Power of Community*

Kathleen Yancey, Barbara Cambridge, and Darren Cambridge

In Electronic Portfolio 2.0: Emergent Research on Implementation and Impact, edited by Darren Cambridge, Barbara Cambridge, and Kathleen Blake Yancey, contributors from diverse institutions of higher education in sites across two continents share their research on electronic portfolios. Here, excerpting from the conclusion to this volume, we consider how electronic portfolios provide a vehicle for a transition into the future of higher education.

In 2003 the National Coalition for Electronic Portfolio Research (NCEPR) was formed, its purpose focused on a single large question: what difference(s) might electronic portfolios actually be making in higher education–for instance, in student learning generally, in student learning in specific disciplines, and/or as reflected in specific measures like student retention?[1] In forming this coalition, we thus intended to assist institutions engaging students, faculty, and staff in eportfolio projects with research that would catch up with their practices. Moreover, we expected the need for such research to grow. We anticipated that as the power of electronic portfolios became more and more apparent, practitioners would want to go to scale, a move that would require agreements both about learning outcomes supported through portfolios and about infusion of resources justified by evidence. We also understood that although many faculty members were asking excellent questions about their practices, there were few *designed inquiries* into those practices. The coalition, first nationally based and now internationally based, was thus established to bring together practitioners ready to ask insightful questions about their practices and ready to apply findings to improve their practices and those of others.

At this point in time, some five years later, and as we reflect upon the research documented by participants in the Inter/National Coalition for Electronic Portfolio Research, a sampling of which we report here, we see three transitions central to the *future* of eportfolio practice:

1. moving research from a national focus to an international articulation;
2. transforming accountability driven by testing into richer conversations around inquiry into learning; and
3. opening a detached, hierarchical academy to engagement across the multiple knowledge spaces of the digital world.

As important, just as the work of the Inter/National Coalition for Electronic Portfolio Research has pointed towards the coming of these transitions, so too the continuing work of the coalition will move them forward.

---

1 http://ncepr.org/

Moving Research from a National Focus to an International Articulation

Our initial national focus on electronic portfolio research expanded early on to a more international perspective, at least in part because we understood that not only inside but also across national boundaries eportfolio educators face similar issues that can better be addressed by international dialogue. Members of the coalition from each of the four countries represented so far–Canada, the UK, the Netherlands, and the US–have confronted very similar challenges, among them motivating learners and teachers, integrating eportfolio practice into programs, balancing learning and assessment, working across disciplinary and professional boundaries, and supporting and evaluating reflection. Presentations by European scholars and practitioners at the conferences on eportfolios organized by the European Institute for E-Learning each of the last five years reflect all of these themes, and preliminary results from a comprehensive survey of eportfolio practice in Australia show that these issues top the agenda there as well.[2] In short, bringing participants from multiple contexts to explore these issues made international sense.

Very quickly, we have seen results from this coalition-sponsored international collaboration. For example, Sheffield Hallam University in the UK, a member of Cohort III, is using in its research the developmental scales for assessing reflection developed by Alverno College, a US Cohort I member. Likewise, coalition members from Stanford University (Cohort I) and the University of Waterloo (Cohort III), along with colleagues from Scotland have published a shared conceptual framework for ways eportfolios can be used to support learning throughout life.[3] At the same time, we are aware of the need to go truly global. While the work of the coalition, as well as most of the published work in eportfolios, has so far focused on the Europe and the Anglophone world, the use of eportfolios is now becoming a more thoroughly global phenomenon, with important work underway in dozens of countries, including Japan, Korea, China, the United Arab Emirates, Brazil, and South Africa. Because eportfolio scholarship and practice as we now know it reflects distinctively Western beliefs about individual identities and institutional dynamics, more research is needed to learn how the purposes and forms change in these new cultural contexts. Put simply, how will the idea of the portfolio be transformed by educators and learners worldwide? Since an ever increasing portion of students in higher education in most Western countries also come from non-Western cultures, the answers have the potential to help the educators in the West better embrace the diversity of their learners.

Transforming Accountability Driven by Testing into Richer Conversations around Inquiry into Learning

Assessment, of course, is an integral part of the learning process. As learners develop, it is important that they receive feedback on their learning, identify how their learning occurs and progresses, and develop their own abilities as self-assessors. Formative assessments that literally help *form* students' process and progress in learning are essential. Eportfolios as evidenced in

---

2 S. Lambert, L. McAllister, and C. Brooks, "Audit of ePortfolio Practice in Higher Education in Australia: Methodology, Data and Trends" (paper, Australian ePortfolio Symposium, Brisbane, Queensland, Australia, February 7, 2008).

3 D. Tosh, B. Werdmuller, H. Chen, T. Penny Light, and J. Haywood, The Learning Landscape: A Conceptual Framework for ePortfolios in A. Jafari and C. Kauffman, Handbook of Research on ePortfolios (Idea Group, 2006), 24-32.

Coalition projects provide opportunity for formative assessment in deep and extended ways. Through their own reflections students practice self assessment, and as students post learning objects and reflect on them, they invite response from peers, teachers, and other readers of their portfolios, both formally and informally. Then, through analyzing their own reflections and the feedback of others, students become more knowledgeable about the progress of their own learning. Eportfolios are, therefore, ideal vehicles for formative assessment.

Accountability, however, requires summative assessment, most often scaled to levels beyond the classroom or institution. Because scaling involves costs of administration, evaluation, and dissemination, governments, through a variety of accountability and accreditation systems, rely most often on one-time tests. Although literature about assessment and evaluation establishes that to be valid, assessments must be varied and multiple, one-time tests dominate both nationally and internationally. Policy decisions about funding and structuring of education are often made on insufficient data from such tests, which fail to reveal the extent or depth of student learning.

Eportfolios are an antidote to the inadequacies of testing. Even if testing is so entrenched that it is unlikely to be replaced soon, institutions and governments can build into accountability systems additional information for decision making. As described in *Electronic Portfolio 2.0*, several institutions--including the University of Georgia, IUPUI, and Portland State University in the United States–have demonstrated that eportfolios can provide multiple stakeholders with rich evidence of student learning that provides a compelling rationale for curricular, pedagogical, and budgetary decisions. Similarly, work in the state of Ohio to build an infrastructure that coordinates eportfolio use and availability of eportfolio evidence for decision making statewide is paralleled by the California State University system in a newer cohort of the Inter/National Coalition for Eportfolio Research. In the United Kingdom, eportfolios are a natural outgrowth of nationwide mandated Personal Development Plans. If foundation and governmental funding were channeled to support eportfolio system development in the same way that such funding has supported test development and implementation, eportfolios would emerge as essential complements to tests. More importantly, in the future they can replace testing as a more responsible method of documenting student learning, especially as institutional and governmental control of education continues to dissipate with ubiquitous sources and sites of learning.

This new world of distributed learning sites and multiple identities as teachers and learners also mandates investigation into how learning occurs in these new circumstances. One movement especially knowledgeable in such investigations, the scholarship of teaching and learning, includes as foundational practices a designed inquiry into important questions about learning with findings shared for critique and use. One reason that this movement has gained momentum internationally is that every discipline and educational environment must study the implications of new learning sites and modes in order to prosper. The growth of the International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning evinces the widespread commitment of educators to study and apply new knowledge concerning students' lifelong and lifewide learning.

Educators are, however, not the only inquirers into student learning. Because they are at the center of such inquiry, students can become co-inquirers and, increasingly as they gain experience with reflection and integration, independent inquirers into learning processes and products. In their book *The Advancement of Learning: Building a Teaching Commons,* Mary Huber and Pat Hutchings recommend that students have a greater role in discussions about learning.[4] Eportfolios provide that greater role as students document, reflect on, and analyze what occurs during their own learning processes. As we see in Coalition research projects, students can participate in the intellectual work of discovering how they learn--through keeping a continuous record, making links among occasions and products of learning, and building on past experience as they move into deeper and deeper learning. When Huber and Hutchings call for "new genres and forms to document the work of teaching and learning," they echo Peter Smith's call for a new kind of learning passport that enables students to move among educational sites. The new genres and forms need to be transportable to many sites, understandable by multiple audiences, and guided by learners themselves, all features of electronic portfolios.

Opening a Detached, Hierarchical Academy to Engagement across the Multiple Knowledge Spaces of the Digital World: Or, How Eportfolios Help Us All Learn

As explained by Carl Raschke in *The Digital Revolution and the Coming of the Postmodern University*, precisely because of the digital revolution and Web 2.0, higher education risks a fatal irrelevance. Talking specifically about the spaces where knowledge is made, he notes that the university no longer holds the monopoly on such space. One question he raises, then, is how the postmodern university can continue to maintain its relevance and authority in the twenty-first century.[5]

As Coalition research demonstrates, eportfolios may be the most likely vehicle to help us make the transition to an academy of the future that is both relevant and authoritative. In such an academy, higher education will welcome students' experience in increasingly significant and transformative ways. What's relevant here, of course, is the promise of such an academy already: in Coalition projects where a key assumption underlying research reports is that student accounts of learning can help us all understand learning differently. In other words, we invite student accounts of learning, especially through reflection, because those accounts from a Vygotskian perspective promote and enhance *student* learning. Inside eportfolios, where they use multiple systems of representation to map learning in new ways, however, students also help *faculty learn* about how learning actually works such that we all understand learning in new ways.

A few current examples can help us see how the contours of such future practice might look. In one, accounting majors at the University of Waterloo articulate and show the distinction between two outcomes: *mastering* concepts, which students say is not difficult, and *determining the relationships linking them*, which they say is. Students explain this doubly, through verbal explanation and visual map, both inside of an eportfolio. Through student articulation, we literally *see* distinctions between novice and expert in new ways from a student vantage point. In a second, student teachers at Virginia

---

4 M. Huber and P. Hutchings, *The Advancement of Learning: Building a Teaching Commons* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2005), 119-120.

5 C. Raschke, *The Digital Revolution and the Coming of the Postmodern University,* (London: Routledge Falmer, 2002).

Tech show us another aspect of learning: how they have adopted and adapted the *theory* of the classroom to the *everyday realities* of classroom practice, and what that adaptation means for their professional futures. Such knowledge can only be made by these former students, who help us see the value of our curriculum as they enact it in real world contexts. And as members of a community, these new teachers continue--two years beyond graduation--to engage in reflective practices together, committing to a profession that in the US loses fifty percent of its early professionals within five years. And in a third, in the blogs of the University of Wolverhampton students' eportfolios we see Web 2.0 tools enriching eportfolio learning through documentation, dialogue, and community. These practices--documentation, dialogue, and community--are characteristics of the Coalition as well, a real and virtual community of learners working on institutional projects and on projects across a larger international network.

In Sum

Over the current lifespan of the Inter/National Coalition for Electronic Portfolio Research, we can see a movement from the past to the present: from implementation to designed inquiry, from formal schooling to lifelong and lifewide learning, and from local contexts to larger contexts. This reflection, pointing from the present to the future, suggests that in the future, all learners will operate more and more in an international context; that designed inquiry will become even more the purview of learners themselves; and that the digital revolution will challenge formal schooling in even more ways. Eportfolios provide a unique way to feature student inquiry and knowledge, to benefit from what technology offers as a mode of and vehicle for learning, and to place each individual's learning in the broadest of contexts.