Creating community engagement around the concept of ePortfolios: An innovative planning process

Caroline H. Steel
Teaching and Education Development Institute
The University of Queensland

Stephen C. Ehrmann
The Teaching and Learning Technology Group

Phillip D Long
Centre for Educational Innovation and Technology
The University of Queensland

ePortfolio progress has been slowed at many institutions by a technology-first attitude: a platform is chosen and then wider use of that platform is encouraged. One flaw in this strategy is that ePortfolios can be used for a variety of activities, each of which has somewhat different support needs (often including different technologies). A planning team at the University of Queensland decided to widen the engagement of the academic community by focusing attention on the activities, rather than on the software. The team's innovative planning process has many points of interest including the involvement of international expertise, the list of ePortfolio-supported activities, the workshop's tasks, and the use of Google spreadsheets to make small group breakouts work more quickly and effectively. The resulting half-day workshop has energised wider interest in ePortfolios at the university.

Keywords: ePortfolios, implementation, dissemination

Introduction

While some people view ePortfolios as a technology – a software platform – that can be used for one or more purposes, it is more useful to conceive of ePortfolios as a collection of the author's works, that are:

- stored online and accessible for viewing (and sometimes commentary);
- often accompanied by reflective commentary about how those works collectively provide evidence of what the author can do and/or what the author has learned; and
- organised to support one or more activities (e.g., those described in this document), each aimed at a particular audience (Ehrmann, 2008).

An ePortfolio collection can include many interdependent functional activities (Smith & Tillema, 2003). For individuals, ePortfolios can function in ways that may be categorised as a *supporting application* for admission (eg. study or work related), *supporting transition* to new environments (eg. presenting detail of personal or learning achievements), *supporting learning, teaching and assessment* (eg. evidencing, assessing and reflecting on competencies, standards and learning achievements) and *supporting PDP and continuing professional development* (eg. scaffolding and setting personal goals, documenting achievements, experiences and professional development over time) (JISC, 2007). These categories can be extended to include Ravet's (2006) vision for ePortfolios as a "personal, lifelong, and lifewide learning landscape" (p.xxxi). In a university context, ePortfolio functions can also serve a range of institutional, disciplinary and programmatic purposes (eg. program review, certified academic records and professional communities).

Despite the enormous potential of ePortfolios, in many quarters their implementation has been described as somewhat of a 'sticky' issue (Jafari, 2004) which is exacerbated by a technology-first attitude. Implementation has been unexpectedly difficult and slow at many institutions because ePortfolios have been treated as a new technology. The common implementation strategy has been to pilot software that

can be used for ePortfolios, to pick a standard platform, and then to promote its wider use. At least two barriers make this strategy problematic:

1. Different ePortfolio activities have different technical requirements that require different software platforms. One size does not fit all.
2. The success or failure of these various ePortfolio supported activities depends on many factors, of which software is only one. Beware a change strategy that treats all activities alike and that assumes that providing new software will lead swiftly to transformational programmatic change.

In universities, the focus of ePortfolios must be on learning, not on the technology used to facilitate that learning:

> ePortfolios will be worth the effort if and only if we use them to improve important activities in academic life. To put it another way, we need to shift our focus from the ePortfolio software itself – its features, its reliability, and so on – to the activities and outcomes for which that software is to be used (Ehrmann, 2006, p. 181).

It makes sense to begin by fleshing out the functional activities where ePortfolios might provide the most needed avenues for improvement (e.g., reflection, using authentic assessors), to reflect on how those activities have been carried out without ePortfolios (what factors encourage and inhibit the activities), and then to see the advent of ePortfolios as part of a systematic approach to improving that activity. The *final* consideration in this initial stage should be the selection of technologies that meet the technical requirements of the intended functional activities.

In this case study we describe an innovative planning approach that was designed to maximise initial community engagement around the concept of ePortfolios. The steps we took to organise the first phase of this effort may be of interest to readers. These include the framework of activities for ePortfolios used to organise our discussion and our workshop (see appendix); the approach itself, which could be applied to engage a community in discussion and adaptation of other innovations.

The planning process

The University of Queensland (UQ) allocated a small team to initiate community engagement around ePortfolios in order to inform future directions and a model for implementation. Our team was keen to harness the wealth of knowledge that existed in the area of ePortfolios nationally and internationally. We invited people from the Teaching and Learning Technology Group (The TLT Group) based in the United States, the Inter/National Coalition for Electronic Portfolio Research and leaders of the Australian Learning and Teaching Council's (ALTC) Australian ePortfolio Project to join us in planning and implementing our workshop approach. Thus our team was striking in at least one respect: half its members were located in Australia but the other half were from outside the country.

Our team's immediate goal: plan a half day ePortfolio workshop to initiate the process of community engagement. Using a combination of Skype (VoIP and text chat) and Google spreadsheets, our team planned the workshop outcomes, structure, communication and other details. We agreed on the outcome goals for the workshop as follows:

- Develop a shared understanding of the potential of ePortfolios to contribute to effective learning, personal and institutional goals
- Test and refine a list of functional ePortfolio characteristics to form the basis of an agreed understanding across the University of what constitutes an ePortfolio;
- Gain an understanding of the driving forces for use of ePortfolios across UQ by Faculties and Schools and likely timelines for implementation;
- Gain an understanding of shared interest in particular functions of ePortfolios as a basis for forming natural groupings of UQ faculties and schools;
- Develop a process that builds a shared data model for ePortfolios and identify national standardisation processes to which UQ could contribute.

Our team decided that this initiative needed to be strongly connected to the university's strategic plans and to students and grassroots staff. We felt that early involvement of students in the discussion was essential, and that participation should be inclusive of the various levels of hierarchy. We wanted participants to be representative of the diversity of the university community. We also agreed that the workshop format should be highly conversational and interactive. Our ultimate goal was to develop an

initial strategy and working model for evaluating ePortfolio development and implementation at the university.

During our calls, our team identified about twenty different teaching/learning activities (e.g., reflection) and programmatic uses (e.g., support for learning communities) where ePortfolios can provide value (see appendix). We decided to focus our institutional conversations on the applications of ePortfolios first, and to help participants conceive of ePortfolios as a means to improve activities with which they were already familiar rather seeing ePortfolios as a complete break with current practice. To encourage this thinking, we purposefully decided to take the 'e' (technology systems) out of the discussion and concentrate on the portfolios as a concept pertaining to the learning process. Specifically, the challenges facing our planning team were to:

1. Develop a shared understanding, first in our team and then University-wide, about what an ePortfolio is (the definition on which we agreed is stated in the lead paragraph of this paper);
2. Increase the number of academic staff considering whether to use ePortfolios to improve their programmes;
3. Help both groups of staff, the users and the potential users, to focus on the activities for which ePortfolios were to be used;
4. Help the administration decide where to invest limited resources;
5. Identify policy questions that might affect many or all uses of ePortfolios (e.g., what responsibilities does the university have for storing student ePortfolio material after the student graduates?).

Framework and strategy for an introductory discussion of ePortfolios

The workshop was entitled 'The many faces of ePortfolios' to suggest the variety of activities that could be enabled by ePortfolios. In the weeks before the workshop, we distributed a survey to academic staff and students likely to be interested in the workshop. < http://tinyurl.com/6emxcg>. Survey findings helped us to plan the working session. They also confirmed that our participants would represent the diversity of the university community.

As a workshop venue, we used a collaborative learning centre that enabled both seminar and group modes of working. We stimulated strong discussion on the concept of ePortfolios and their functional application through a combination of in-person and virtual speakers and facilitators, an icebreaker and two breakout activities. A number of technologies contributed to making this a truly international event; Wimba Classroom was used for short presentations from international speakers; Skype was used as a 'back channel' communication mechanism (among these speakers) to troubleshoot any technical issues and for the conference organisers and virtual participants; to adjust on-the-fly to the conversations occurring in real-time; and Google Docs was used as a way of managing breakout sessions and to facilitate time efficient report back. The latter was a particularly novel and powerful method.

An innovative approach to managing breakout sessions and reporting back

We anticipated about seventy participants in this half-day workshop. We wanted to explore with them what sort of foundational activities ePortfolios might improve at the University. However, with a very full agenda, it was imperative that these breakout sessions and the subsequent reporting of their findings move quickly.

We allocated our workshop participants into five working groups. We assigned an eScribe with a laptop to each group. An eFacilitator was also assigned to keep groups on task, provide guidance to eScribes, and ensure that discussion was inclusive of all group members. As we had five student participants we assigned each to a group so that student voices were part of all discussions. We kept our eScribes, eFacilitators and students together for all activities to help them establish a strong working relationship (our students appreciated this). Remaining participants changed groups for our two breakout activities according to colour-coded stickers on their nametags. This strategy enabled us to construct groups with diverse disciplinary perspectives for our first activity and then move to more disciplinary-focused teams for our second activity (where we expected discussion to move to a more disciplinary-centric level). We created a Google spreadsheet with an identical worksheet for each group's notes (colour coded). Each worksheet already included a framework for note-taking for each session. For example, in our first breakout session,we gave each group the list of nine ePortfolio activities depicted in the appendix and asked them to describe examples of current practice at the University that did not (yet) use ePortfolios for that purpose. They were also to identify "what's missing from this list?" The eScribe listed the examples and any missing functionalities in the cells to the right (see Figure 1).
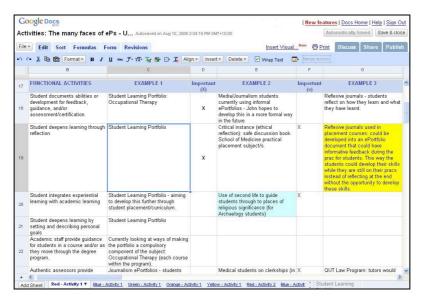
Figure 1: Example of group activity in Google Docs

Because Google spreadsheets are web-based, our facilitator (who happened to be on the other side of the planet at the time) could quickly click from one group to another, watching their notes appear in real time. Our facilitator's first task was to select from among the experiences described by the group those that that were particularly relevant to portfolio learning issues, using these selections to focus their reports to the plenary session a few minutes later. The facilitator picked 2-3 cells per group, each representing an experience not described by the other groups but likely to be of wide interest. In other words, our facilitators' goal was to help five groups create reports that would be a) of wide interest, b) not duplicate each other, and c) be very brief (each group identified 30-50 experiences but reported publicly on only 2-3 of them. The facilitator flagged these experiences by highlighting their cells in yellow. The eScribes could see those yellow highlights appear in real time. Later, after each group had reported, our facilitator was given 5 minutes to report on the thinking of all five groups. Using the Google spreadsheet, anyone in the workshop could see the full reports of all five groups online, then or later on.

Although we originally developed this approach to group management because our facilitator would not be on campus at the time of our workshop, the technique is so powerful and efficient that we recommend its wide use for face-to-face workshops, conferences and courses. Among its many advantages:

- the group reports are far more accessible and easy to read than if scribes had written notes on easel paper;
- the facilitator can click from one group's notes to another instantly rather than needing to take time to walk from one group to another (when groups might be meeting in different rooms);
- the facilitator can flag or annotate notes without interrupting a group's conversation.

Workshop feedback: Where to from here?

At the conclusion of the workshop we sought feedback from workshop participants (40 people replied). The diverse range of responses received highlighted the various scales of readiness across our audience. In regard to their future intentions around ePortfolios, most people wanted to further consider the possibilities while others were ready to move forward. Very diverse needs were expressed on potential topics for future workshops but overall our audience was very satisfied with our workshop format. Thirty-eight of the 40 respondents (95%) strongly agreed or agreed that our workshop was a valuable use of their time. One student representative said that her student peers felt heard, and believed they made an impact. In the feedback data, students commented: 'I would like to see them introduced in a curriculum intensive format in the university. It would be great to see assessment and learning resources around the ePortfolio'. 'As a student, I think these offer a great opportunity for students to develop an understanding and integration of their degree. I truly hope that students remain a part of this process.'

The participant inputs before, during and after the workshop, serve as important data to inform our conceptual design of ePortfolios for UQ. As our conversations around ePortfolios progress, technical requirements can be determined and a range of software can be identified that may be fit-for-purpose. Our process of community engagement and discussion will continue and student involvement is a critical

factor in the success of this initiative. Early stages will focus on needs assessment, pilot projects, and identification of initial challenges. This will strengthen the later stage approach that will encompass the needs of all disciplines. We envisage that crucial future activities will include faculty-based projects and strategic task forces (including external experts) that facilitate and propagate cross-fertilisation of models. We hope to elicit further engagement institutionally, cross-sector, nationally and internationally. With the recommendations from the Australian ePortfolio Project now in discussion, there are increasing opportunities to draw on best practice models of ePortfolio use in and beyond the sector.

References cited

Ehrmann, S. C. (2006). Electronic portfolio initiatives: A flashlight guide to planning and formative evaluation. In A. Jafari & C. Kaufman (Eds.), Handbook of research on ePortfolios (pp. 180-193). Hershey, PA: Idea Group Reference.

Ehrmann, S. (2008). ePortfolios: Formative Evaluation, in "*The Flashlight Evaluation Handbook,* http://www.tltgroup.org/Flashlight/Handbook/ePortfolio/ePort_Strat.htm [viewed 8 Aug 2008].

Jafari, A. (2004). The "sticky" ePortfolio system: Tackling challenges and identifying attributes. *Educause Review, July / August,* 38-48.

Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC). (2007). E-Portfolios: An overview of JISC activities September 2007. http://www.jisc.ac.uk/publications/publications/eportfoliooverviewv2.aspx [viewed October 2008].

Ravet, S. (2006). Foreword. In A. Jafari & C. Kaufman (Eds.), Handbook of research on ePortfolios (pp.xxix-xxxii). Hershey, PA: Idea Group Reference.

Smith, K., & Tilema, H. (2003). Clarifying different types of portfolio use. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education, 28*(6), 625 - 648.

Contact author: Caroline Steel, Teaching and Education Development Institute, The University of Queensland, Australia. Email: c.steel@uq.edu.au

Please cite as: Steel, C.H., Ehrmann, S,C. & Long P.D. (2008). Creating community engagement around the concept of ePortfolios: An innovative planning process. In *Hello! Where are you in the landscape of educational technology? Proceedings ascilite Melbourne 2008*. http://www.ascilite.org.au/conferences/melbourne08/procs/steel.pdf

Appendix: Lists of potential functional activities for ePortfolios

We developed a list of nine activities which ePortfolios often directly involve:
1. Author documents abilities or development for feedback, guidance, and/or assessment/certification.
2. Author deepens learning through reflection (e.g., reflection on how the work itself, sometimes in combination with other artifacts, provides evidence of capability; reflection on development of a capability)
3. Author integrates/synthesises experiential (life) learning with academic learning (credit for prior learning in some cases)
4. Author deepens learning by setting and describing personal goals, goals that form the structure of the ePortfolio.
5. Academic staff provide guidance for students.
6. Authentic assessors (outside experts, peers, and others whose opinions will matter to the author and to the audience for the ePortfolio) provide feedback about the author's achievement or progress.
7. As part of the design of the ePortfolio process, academic staff redefine program (degree) goals and instruction in terms of abilities that are developed cumulatively over many courses and experiences.
8. Academic staff use the ePortfolio to see one another's assignments and rubrics (assessment criteria), thereby sharing good practices.
9. When academic staff collaborate in developing programs goals (reflected in e-portfolio structure) and providing assessment of ePortfolios, they may develop a shared, grounded ability to discuss learning in their program or across programs.

We also developed a list of ten programmatic activities which ePortfolios often support:
A. Institution supports capstone courses (i.e., author creates portfolio to reflect on prior work and/or to exhibit work done in the capstone course)
B. Institution supports learning communities (e.g., by assessment of projects, by supporting collaborative assessment of student work by two or more instructors or by peers in the community)
C. Student communicates with others, and receives assessment from others, about fieldwork and coursework (fieldwork).
D. Employers revise professional development programs (or educational programs revise plans) by examining achievements and development of people who are heading their way as potential employees or students. (articulation)
E. Institutions guide program evaluation (formative) by identifying areas where learning is a strength and areas where there are opportunities for improvement
F. Institutions guide program evaluation (summative) by providing documentation of performance to external agencies and the public.
G. Support and guidance for lifelong learning as the author is educated, works, and lives. The initiator of this activity might be the author personally, an educational institution, a political entity, or an association.
H. Institution (sometimes through an advising unit) helps students apply for a job or advanced education.
I. Through the act of creating and using the portfolio, the author increasingly thinks of himself/herself as a member of a profession or community. (developing of a sense of professional identity - membership in a professional community).
J. Institution provides certified academic records of student learning.