

The Integrity of Electronic Portfolios in the US

A Background Paper for the Conference

Darren Cambridge, George Mason University, 5 May 2005

Context

In the United States, portfolios have long been used for promoting and assessing learning in primary, secondary, and higher education. While certain types of portfolios have an extensive history in design disciplines such as Fine Arts and Architecture, the model for portfolio practice that underlies the current boom in the use of electronic portfolios originates in Rhetoric and Composition and Education. Educators in these disciplines began to use digital media to support these portfolio processes in the early 1990s.

As the value of these innovations in other disciplines and functions of the University, such as helping students find employment after graduation, became clear, the scope of use of electronic portfolios grew from the individual course, to entire programs, to institution-wide initiatives. Little comprehensive data is available about the extent of portfolio use in the US. The Campus Computing Project's survey of CIOs shows a growing use in higher education. Approximately 28% of public universities reported ePortfolio services on their campus website in 2004, up from 26% in 2003. 18% of private universities reported use in 2004, up from 15% in 2003. Use by public four-year colleges jumped to 32% from 18%, use by private four-year colleges to 20% from 12%, and use in community colleges to 10% from 4%.¹ However, the extent and purposes of the reported use remains unknown.

Unlike in the UK and Europe, there is no policy mandate for portfolios (or similar records of learning) from either the federal or state governments. Given the tradition of local governance of education in the United States and strong resistance to any centralized record keeping about individuals, it is unlikely that there ever will be such a mandate. However, educational institutions are under increasing pressure from the government to produce evidence of student learning. Simultaneously, the regional agencies that accredit institutions of higher education and the professional associations that accredit professional educational programs are increasingly requiring more comprehensive assessment of learning

¹ Campus Computing Project. (2004). *Campus Computing Survey*. Encino, CA: Campus Computing Project.

outcomes.² Many programs and institutions have identified portfolios as a powerful mechanism for performing this assessment in a manner that captures the complexity of student development and contributes to their learning.

Beyond higher education, support for electronic portfolios is provided primarily by entrepreneurial government agencies, NGOs, and schools. This work is largely accomplished within existing budgets or through grants from foundations and the government. At the state level, workforce development agencies in some states, most notably Minnesota and Indiana, are beginning to embrace portfolios. However, this work is still in its infancy and is far from widespread. At present, there has been little interest from the private sector in applications in human resources and training.

Defining Electronic Portfolio

Because of its disciplinary origins, rhetoric and composition and education, two central ideas characterize the electronic portfolio as an ideal type in the US, here termed *digital composition* and *learning through*.

At the heart of US practice is the idea of an electronic portfolio as what Kathleen Yancey terms a "digital composition."³ A composition is more than a repository. It is also more than a document. It is a carefully crafted message within a rhetorical situation linking the portfolio author to an audience. This distinction has several implications.

- A portfolio is not just owned by its author. It must be the result of that author's agency.
- A portfolio is integral. It is consciously composed, not automatically compiled.
 - It is not merely a container for discrete data; it must be viewed as a whole, and its arrangement and design matter.
 - While potentially quite useful, deployment of a part completely divorced from the whole is not a portfolio activity.
- In its integrity, a portfolio offers a theory or narrative about its subject. It is not merely a well-organized collection. It explains and predicts.

² See, for example, Western Association of Schools and Colleges. (2002). *A Guide to Using Evidence in the Accreditation Process*. Alameda, CA: Western Association of Schools and Colleges. Available from http://www.wascweb.org/senior/Evidence_Guide.pdf.

³ See Yancey, Kathleen Blake. (2004). "Postmodernism, Palimpsest, and Portfolios." *CCC* 55(4): 738-761.

Also central to the US conception of an electronic portfolio is a focus on *learning through* the composition process. The portfolio does not simply document past learning or inform future learning, although both of these activities are important. The process of composing a portfolio and using it to persuade an audience is itself a significant learning experience.

This learning process is *reflective* within the *integrative* context of the portfolio.

- The learner does not simply collect reflections about her learning in the portfolio. She reflects on the artifacts of learning she has collected for use in her portfolio.
- Reflection on the artifacts is more than making meaning of them in relationship to their original context of creation. Portfolio reflection makes meaning of the artifact, in relationship to other artifacts, in the context of the larger explanatory narrative.
- Through charting the relationship of the part to the whole, reflection enacts integrative learning. This integration is not merely the aggregation of collected reflections. The process of composing an integrative theory of one's learning creates new meaning, and this new meaning is what makes a portfolio a portfolio.

However, a portfolio is not freestanding. To serve as a message within a rhetorical situation, it requires authors and audiences to interact around it. While this interaction is not part of the portfolio, the portfolio cannot exist without it. The portfolio's *venue* provides the means through which authors and audiences connect around portfolios.⁴ Venue is essential to maximizing learning through portfolio composition. A fundamental advantage of *electronic* portfolios is that they may be composed and read within much more sophisticated venues than paper portfolios. Much of the next generation of electronic portfolio technology being developed in the US rightly focuses on creating more powerful venues for portfolio practice.⁵

⁴ For a discussion of the concept of venue in rhetorical theory, see Farrell, Thomas. (1993). *Norms of Rhetorical Culture*. New Haven, CT: Yale UP.

⁵ See, for example, the requirements for version 2.5 of the Open Source Portfolio, available on the Open Source Portfolio Initiative website at <http://www.theospi.org>.

Portfolio venues should be evaluated by the extent to which they support the two reasons individuals need portfolios in contemporary US society, self-authorship and self-representation.

- *Self-authorship* enables learners to deal with rapid change.⁶ Portfolio authors achieve self-authorship by learning through the composition of portfolios.
- *Self-representation* is essential to effective participation in communities of practice, educational, professional and civic. Portfolio authors achieve self-representation when they use the digital medium effectively to connect with appropriate audiences.

Portfolio venues that effectively support self-authorship and self-representation are likely to have three characteristics, expressiveness, connectivity, and remixability.

- The *expressiveness* of a venue is determined by the diversity of modes of representation available to authors and the degree of control they are offered over the reader's experience. The greater the expressiveness afforded to authors within a portfolio venue, the more effectively they can tailor their self-representations to the demands of community.
- The *connectivity* of a venue is defined by the variety and bandwidth of connections with audiences it facilitates. The greater the connectivity of a venue, the more easily authors can locate or form communities for self-representation and the greater support they may access as they work toward self-authorship.
- The *remixability* of a venue can be judged by how easily and flexibly it enables artifacts and narrative elements to be repurposed and recombined to create new portfolios. Remixability promotes self-authorship and self-representation that embraces changing and multiple contexts of connection.

As US electronic portfolio practice and technology advances, two primary tensions must be resolved, standardization and distribution.

- Divergence between the institutional motivation of external accountability and the individual motivation of self-authorship leads to a tension between expressiveness and connectivity. While connectivity is facilitated by *standardization*, standardization threatens to restrict expressiveness.
- Increased connectivity can be achieved through the use of parts of portfolios in connection with social software systems distributed throughout the network. If the part is divorced from the context of the whole by this *distribution*, however, the dislocation threatens the integrity of the portfolio as a digital composition.

⁶ For an extended application of the concept of self-authorship, see Baxter Magdola, Marcia. (2001). *Making Their Own Way*. Sterling, VA: Stylus.