

What is *not* an ePortfolio?

There exists a measure of obfuscation and equivocation in the theory and practice of 'eportfolio'. The former resulting, at least in part, from the plethora of technical projects adding to the extant vocabulary: thin model; domain mapping; identity management; IMSeP; interoperability; transferability etc. The latter arises from the very word itself, used variously to describe inputs; outputs; processes; tools and functions. I will attempt then, in the remaining 1000 words or so, to provide some clarity – or further muddy the waters – by defining what is *not* an ePortfolio. I hope that in so doing we will arrive at a clearer sense of what is an eportfolio.

Some time ago I completed a Myers-Briggs Type Indicator questionnaire and discovered something about myself. The questionnaire indicated that I was an INTJ and I subsequently read and learnt more about types, their strengths and my own areas for development. This process of discovery and subsequent action is common to 'development planning' of various persuasions. For me this process began on paper; though today many similar inventories are taken on-line. Even though the resultant report, or artefact, was added to my CertEd portfolio neither the process nor the artefact was 'portfolio' in itself. Several existing tools provide opportunities for learners to self-audit their abilities, competencies or tendencies. They produce results; assets; reports or profiles but neither the tools nor the artefacts are eportfolios.

Employability almost certainly includes the skills and aptitude to work collaboratively. Much of my own professional learning takes place in a communal context and I use whatever tools best allow me to communicate and collaborate with others. When I create a document that is intended to be seen and worked on by my team I sometimes choose to place it in a group folder in Outlook. I then assign permission to the folder to allow others to view, or write to it and return to observe the results from wherever I am in the world. However, this ability to store items and to share them with others is not an eportfolio; it is file storage and sharing, and is replicated in systems like Flickr, YouTube and SlideShare.

When, in a previous life, I taught for a living, we designed programmes which encompassed a wide range of subject specific, personal, and generic outcomes. These were aligned with the requirements of the professional body for that award and were mapped across multiple modules to ensure that all were covered. Some would appear in different forms in different modules to give learners sufficient opportunity to demonstrate and develop the *abilities* considered most important. Of course, keeping track of which students had demonstrated which abilities in which modules; of identifying which outcomes caused most students the greatest difficulty, or which were easily attested, was problematic. Whether managing outcomes; placements; research projects or competencies the issues are much the same and electronic tools are in use to provide information to both tutors and learners about timelines, deadlines, items done and items pending. These tools are more or less useful for the 'manager' or the learner depending upon their design – but they are not an eportfolio.

So what if I decide to create a scrapbook or file in order to 'sell' myself to a potential customer, employer or assessor? In that book I include only content that supports the story I know or believe the recipient wants to read and I illuminate, evidence or enrich my story with documents, pictures, letters and feedback from others. We would recognise that as a **portfolio** and its, apparently oxy-moronic, 'digital analogue' is the **eportfolio**. In the eportfolio the book is replaced by a website and the documents, pictures, letters and feedback are digital – augmented by sound, video and animation.

In partial conclusion, an eportfolio is simply a story or a presentation: a purposeful aggregation of digital items - ideas, evidence, reflections, feedback, data etc - which 'present' a selected audience with information about the subject of that eportfolio.

The information presented in an eportfolio may be for the purposes of:

- Assessment (formative and summative; for, of and as learning)
- Advancement (promotion or transition)
- Appraisal (self - peer - 360)
- Accreditation (professional bodies and awards)
- Application (course, job, funding)
- Articulation (informative story telling) ...and myriad other purposes

Of course not all of us are able to build websites and so we need tools that help us construct our digital presences. Having constructed a digital presence most people would like a means of controlling who has access to the stories we create; particularly if those stories involve others or are deeply reflective, challenging or personal. Controlling access means choosing who can see **this** eportfolio and the level of interaction they have with it: to view, to comment, to collaborate.

It is important to separate the notion of the file or asset store from the 'purposeful aggregation of digital items' which make up **this** story, presentation or eportfolio. In real life when we relate ourselves to others we draw upon particular evidence to enhance the story we are telling at that time. We rarely, if ever, expose all of our selves to any one person; some parts of our story are reserved only for our self. So it is with an eportfolio, it draws upon a much larger pool of evidence. Some tools provide a file or asset store along with the means to create eportfolios; some also allow links to be made to distributed asset stores so that any one eportfolio may draw upon evidence that is held within its own system as well as elsewhere such as within Picasa or Photobucket.

Increasingly it is important to be able to link to evidence in institutional systems. For example a learner will want to link to their transcript; a tutor will want to link to CPD records in the HR system and a researcher might want to link to one of their papers held in a research repository. Equally, the learner might want to use an eportfolio to apply for a course; a tutor might want to seek HEA accreditation and the researcher might want to apply for funding. These activities require systems to talk to other systems often using what are called 'web-services' and people start to talk again of eportfolios as systems. They are not. ePortfolios are simply evidence-based stories. This indicates though that you do have to ask some questions about the stories you wish to tell; the kinds of uses you will put them to, and the skills your story-tellers have.

Simple stories require simple tools. Why complicate it any further? Some stories are developed over time to be related to just one audience. They are the kind of stories that say 'here are the 43 things I have done to gain entry to... or become a...' These kind of stories are supported by tools which report progression, mark items as 'done' and allow validation by others.

Some stories relate to personal journeys and rely upon the engagement and contribution of others. These kind of stories are supported by tools that allow sharing with others in confidence whilst retaining control over those parts of the greater story not yet ready to be exposed.

Some stories talk of group experiences and achievement; they aggregate the ideas and evidence of many though ultimately they may need to be 'frozen' so that the group and its observers can see what they were able to do at a particular point in time. Tools which provide collaboration permissions and which allow versioning and archiving may be helpful for these story tellers.

The concluding, conclusion. An eportfolio is a story, a presentation of digital evidence. Some of that evidence might have been generated by tools specifically designed to engender insight; tools to capture knowledge or ability but these tools are not eportfolios in themselves. Some of the stories will be shared with others or supplemented by data from other systems but the sharing and consuming services are not eportfolios simply tools that enhance the power of the story if the story needs it.

So, don't just go and buy an 'eportfolio' and don't just use what you've got. Most things labelled 'eportfolio' are actually competency management systems, ePDP, student placement systems or CV builders. Some systems labelled eportfolio now realise that the 'presentations' are only one outcome from a much more meaningful 'personal learning space'. Against all current trends, 'Don't just do something. Stand there!' Think about the stories that you and your learners want to tell and to read and then start to think about the tools and services that will support what you want to achieve. Then you'll be better placed to ignore the labels, cut through the obfuscation and unequivocally describe the tools you want to support learning.

Shane Sutherland
Pebble Learning
November 2007