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The Educational Potential of e-Portfolios: supporting personal development and reflective learning

Lorraine Stefani, Robin Mason & Chris Pegler

London: Routledge, 2007, 186pp. ISBN-13: 978-0415412148 (pbk)

What are the difficulties facing practitioners, managers and institutions when choosing and implementing an e-portfolio system? Why should you consider an e-portfolio system as a tool for learning? What is their purpose in education? What software is available? How do you get started? Can e-portfolios be aligned with assessment practices? Are e-portfolios a tool for inclusive learning? How can we use e-portfolios with other new technologies? What could the future hold for e-portfolios? These are all questions and themes that are addressed in one of the very few books written about e-portfolios.

This book gives a comprehensive overview of the potential of e-portfolios in education with a number of supporting case studies and a considerable amount of useful online resources from the UK and worldwide. It is a practical handbook to help those interested in e-portfolios for learning and teaching. The book is structured in a way that takes the reader through the stages of e-portfolio implementation that would be applicable to the newest of users. The themes follow a logical sequence and have a consistent fluidity between chapters. It highlights the complexity and potential issues users may face when implementing e-portfolios, whilst simultaneously identifying the advantages and potential benefits to learning and teaching that can be experienced by using e-portfolios.

In Chapter 1, the book discusses the broad context of e-portfolios and how they fit within the sphere of e-learning. It gives a useful overview of policy drivers in a clear and comprehensive way. From a technological perspective, the first chapter briefly introduces standards and software; however, there is a much more comprehensive technologically-focused overview in a later chapter. This chapter highlights the potential difficulties that institutions can face when implementing a new technology, such as e-portfolios.

Similar themes are addressed in Chapter 2; however, there is more focus on e-portfolios as a tool for learning, the technical skills needed by the learner and identifying ways it can be embedded into the curriculum. This chapter discusses the potential role of e-portfolios for Personal Development Planning (PDP) and lifelong learning. It finishes with two very different case studies of e-portfolios in practice, giving the reader a real life look at how the ideas discussed in the chapter have been put into practice.

The theme of 'how to get started' with e-portfolios is addressed in Chapters 3 and 4 with some interesting and practical ideas on course design to support the implementation of e-portfolios and finishing with a selection of very good online case studies for further reading. These chapters include extensive discussion of the pros and cons of implementing an e-portfolios system, covering a range of issues from finance, technical infrastructure and scope of the e-portfolios through to preparing the different user groups. Particularly useful is the section on suggested approaches to the upgrading of both staff and students in basic technical skills before implementation of e-portfolios. An overarching strength to these particular chapters is that they continually encourage the reader to reflect, question and clarify the purpose and reasons why they are considering e-portfolios for their particular educational context. Although course design is addressed in these chapters, it is revisited in a later chapter where considerable time is spent discussing course design to ensure inclusiveness and accessibility for all learners, with some particularly good practical advice and guidelines. The inclusive chapter contains extensive online resources and further reading which are really useful. Also cited in this book is another selection of case studies set in practice, 'Handbook of Research on ePortfolio' by Jafari & Kaufman (2006). The case studies in this book are predominantly situated in practice in the United States, but it does gives some good examples to supplement interest in early reading around e-portfolios practice.

It is good to see that the book dedicates a chapter to e-portfolios and the assessment of student learning. The potential of assessment through e-portfolios is an element that repeatedly comes up for discussion and for some practitioners and managers can be a potential sticking point in their e-portfolio debates. The book tries to give practical advice on categorising e-portfolio types and how they might align with assessment methods and strategies. In addition to the practicalities, I found the theme around changing views on assessment most refreshing, importantly discussing the 'creative curriculum'. As with most themes, assessment comes with advantages and disadvantages, and these are outlined clearly and concisely.

A theme I found particularly thought-provoking was that of e-portfolios as a tool for professional development, encouraging staff to model e-portfolios for their students, with some really good ideas of what potentially could make up e-teaching portfolios supported with some online worldwide resources which give extensive advice and guidance on how to create an e-teaching portfolio. This is a refreshing look at a potential new way to evidence professional development and practice.

As we have seen, the book consistently addresses the underpinning pedagogic issues and considerations relating to e-portfolios. This makes it a particularly insightful and useful book to anyone in practice. In addition to this, it does give time to the technological perspectives, and addresses some potential software solutions whilst also relating e-portfolios to other new technologies. There is information describing the types of systems and the pros and cons of commercial versus open source versus proprietary systems, with supported examples given. The difficulty in this area is that systems are evolving and appearing at such a rate that you could write a book in itself about the different e-portfolio systems available, but minutes later there would be more to add or elements to update. This book does a good job at giving a point-in-time snapshot of some of the systems out there and a really useful and thoughtful overview of the difference between open source, proprietary and commercial concepts, as this can sometimes be confusing in the early stages of deciding on a system. For those interested in other technologies and how they might align with e-portfolios, the book gives an insight into the learning potential of blogs, wikis and podcasts.

The book finishes with some thought-provoking scenarios and a wonderful quote that encourages you to continue questioning and exploring as you have done throughout the book. I found this book a really good starting point for e-portfolio conceptualisation and for addressing potential uses in a variety of contexts, all with pedagogy at the core. I would highly recommend it to people who are new to e-portfolios, or who perhaps are still in the decision-making process. It could also be useful for more experienced practitioners interested in developing (or further developing) assessment through e-portfolios, as the chapter on assessment mentioned earlier has an interesting overview about assessing the 'creative curriculum'. It also has a number of case studies and scenarios that could appeal to both new and more experienced users. A particular strength for the experienced user may be the chapter on e-portfolios as a tool for professional development, for practitioners who may use e-portfolios with their students and who are interested in using it for their own professional development.

The book recognises that it is notoriously difficult to write about a practice that is still so new to the sector. The book does not claim to have all the answers. It aims to, and successfully does, provide much practical and theoretical information to potential users so that they can make an informed decision as to whether e-portfolios could enhance the learning experience for their students. There are very few books written about e-portfolio practice, and this is one of the first books written in the UK that focuses on the issues surrounding implementation and embedding e-portfolios within practice, and it does it very well. A particular strength is that it consistently gives the pros and cons for all the themes and does not try to influence the reader, but effectively presents information in a thoughtful and practical way, from both sides of the e-portfolio fence, allowing the reader to make a more informed decision about the potential of e-portfolios in their particular educational setting.

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Reference

JAFARI, A. & KAUFMAN, C. (2006) *Handbook of Research on ePortfolios*, London: Idea Group Reference.