

## Who's Hijacking Our e-Portfolios?

In recent months I have been struggling with the stark contrast between the concept of a 'generic-and-portable' e-Portfolio and the vast majority of institutional, content laden applications, or so-called e-Portfolios as found in most universities, adult-training institutions and work-place schemes.

At a recent and most impressive multi-national conference (eP2007, Maastricht) I was almost overwhelmed by the predominance of Industry and University representatives – was I in the wrong meeting? or, Was there something that I didn't know? What was it that gave them the right to hijack my perception of the e-Portfolio concept? These ungracious and somewhat bemused murmurings lasted several days until finally the explanation dawned upon me:

**Industry?** The Problem of e-Portfolios and industry is quite simple. Many industries may not have a generally available learning platform for all of their workers particularly at a time when issues like PDP and worker re-location need urgent attention. Where workers do have access to their company's network it is probably a purpose-designed system with limited usability for anything other than work purposes. It is therefore a natural solution to establish a separate subject-specific e-Portfolio as a common learning platform (with all the links to content that one would expect of an LP) available to everyone. Specific to their company's needs and tailored to provide primarily what may be considered good for their workers, an 'institutional e-portfolio' of this type can be a logical and well designed product. However, by my definition this is not an e-Portfolio.

**Universities?** For e-Portfolios in the universities, almost the opposite situation has come at the right time to resolve a near crisis frustrating many academics. A decade or more of disorganised effort into uploading a century's presentations, generations of discussion documents and cohorts of previous coursework and examination questions onto an ever-expanding network has ended up with a grotesque mass of documents 'splattered all over the universe' as one friend reflected, accessible by almost everyone in the institution. Perhaps we might even discover, hidden away in some folder on some long-forgotten file-server, a manuscript belonging to Pasteur or even Monteverdi. The chance to start again, without some of the over-protective security policies, to assemble a fresh curriculum archive, to select just those documents which are immediately needed is an opportunity not to miss. And this, I would suggest, is a possible explanation for all the content laden Learning Platforms which many universities misappropriately call an e-Portfolio. Whether the logic of uploading 19<sup>th</sup> century materials for a 21<sup>st</sup> century vision of e-learning is appropriate is a matter beyond the immediate question this paper attempts to address.

**The QCA?** The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority has the responsibility of validating and authorising all examination boards in England, their standards and the issuing of certification to students. It appears that the QCA was planning to use some form of e-Portfolio to enable schools to submit students' assessable elements of examinable

coursework. Already some courses, including DiDA, encourage students to put together some form of 'portfolio' for electronic assessment. However, at this stage there is no requirement for any particular format and thus some schools are compiling a CD of files, others, PowerPoints with html links to documents and others web-pages. For the QCA to formalise this and hijack students' private e-Portfolios would, in my opinion, be totally disruptive. The proposed 14-19 Diplomas need to clarify their requirements concerning e-Portfolio evidences.

**Schools**, however, are in an altogether different situation. The vast majority of schools have some form of intranet or learning platform and those which have managed to adapt their platform for remote access now have some sort of VLE with well-connected MIS facilities. Such VLEs are becoming increasingly refined and 'curriculum loaded' as more and more departments come on line and teaching and learning strategies are beginning to embrace the on-line world.

Whether using one of the many vendors or having built their own, most schools' VLEs are thus able to provide their students with an on-line work-space and equally are thus capable of supporting an e-Portfolio. Both teachers and students are rapidly adapting to the whole concept of VLEs and most coursework is progressing relatively seamlessly by all accounts within their VLE.

Assuming, therefore, that a school has a functioning learning platform or VLE, that all official MIS data is being processed for the Local Authority, that teachers have appropriate access to that MIS data, that on-line profiling tools, formative and summative assessments are running, that curriculum outlines, access to all support materials, a range of rich media resources are available, and that parents have access to the VLE to check up on their latest personal information, progress of their child, attendance etc, what then is the function of the e-Portfolio?

Recent research has shown that the majority of schools are 'thinking about it'. Some schools may have e-Portfolio software installed and managed by the school. There is some advice and speculation as to what an e-Portfolio might or might not do for a school, and more importantly what it can do for the learner.

And this is where I must return to the title, that of hijacking the e-Portfolio. I want to ensure that no one department within a school hijacks the e-Portfolio for their own specific use and configuration but that it will remain a tool 'owned' and managed by the student. Below I list some of the functions and benefits of the e-Portfolio to both students and staff:

**'Showcasing'** is invariably the first term that comes to mind when describing an e-Portfolio – for providing a window through which one may view some part of a student's world. However, it should be clearly understood that it is the student that is in charge of opening and closing that window – or any number of different windows - selecting to whom he or she chooses to reveal any information and, of course, being in control of disclosing exactly what

is seen through the windows. Although often described as the perfect tool for adults presenting their CV on line, there is no reason why the 5-year old cannot celebrate any form of artefact, an audio recording of a poem, a video of a dance or sports event, a still photograph of a collage or a scanned image of a handwritten exercise etc as a ‘celebration’ of his/her attainment with parents, friends or peers – it is here where pride of ownership and motivation begins.

**Portability** is the criterion upon which most e-Portfolios fail. The versatility of the e-Portfolio depends upon the student being able to move from one institution to another, or even to another state or country, and still able to access all the personal and private notes and resources contained within their e-Portfolio. Unless the e-Portfolio is a ‘free-standing’ resource, independent of any institution, much of this document makes little sense.

**File-storage** needs understanding. The e-Portfolio is not the place to archive every minor mental arithmetic test, incomplete essay, one’s whole life-story and that of every relative, friend and colleague. After all, this e-Portfolio is seen as a ‘5-95’ application and is thus in need of regular management. An appropriate place for that total archive of every item that ‘might just be useful’ would be off-line and stored on the school’s file-server, on a PC at home, on some DVDs or even in a bank vault! The e-Portfolio should be seen as a ‘transit-camp’ whereby materials relevant to present needs, work-in-progress, or jobs-to-do, can be stored for access whenever and wherever needed. Furthermore, media-rich files may better be stored on any of the popular Web2.0 repositories and accessed through hyperlinks from the e-Portfolio.

**Digital Competence** needs to be recognised. The e-Portfolio must be simple to operate whatever the age or stage of the student. If the one e-Portfolio is to be owned for a lifetime it should be capable of being adopted by the youngest and least able within our community and similarly be of sound practical use for those with specific access problems, the elderly and infirm or disabled.

**Personalisation** is an immature science at the moment and is often better contained within the VLE and PLE if available. Personalisation is about recognising the digital identity of the user and providing the appropriate tools in context of the work in progress. Certainly, I identify such tools as diagnostic profiling, subject-based assessment tools which recognise what previous tests or topics have been covered, Web.3 or ‘semantic’ tools and predictive curriculum ‘route-mapping’ and suggested employment paths are all part of a new era in personalised learning. I do not see that the sophisticated links required to MIS data and the powerful tools within a PLE should be incorporated within an otherwise ‘light’ e-Portfolio system.

**Customisation** is perhaps the biggest motivator of all. The benefits of being able to change the working environment to suit the needs of the worker are well documented. How pages look, the colour schemes, fonts and images used all go towards a statement of ‘this is ME’. When a child accesses their e-Portfolio and the front page of the e-Portfolio creates a sense of

*'Wow! This is me!'* there is an engendered feeling of involvement or ownership. Possibly in this technological world of providing systems that work, and particularly in Secondary schools and FE colleges, we have forgotten something of the wonder and excitement that we, as teachers, should be laying before our charges.

**Progression:** The e-Portfolio should be capable of being adopted at any point throughout a person's life and should be capable of matching their immediate style and needs. Ideally it should be introduced as soon as the youngest child in a school wants to celebrate an activity or artefact, to share it with others or just keep it in the interim for posterity. However, as the child grows and matures, the representational 'self' or ego will demand that the portfolio matures with age. New menu items will be required, images, fonts and colour schemes all change Key Stage by Key Stage. The whole e-Portfolio interface will no-doubt change many times as that 5-year old progresses through academia, work and on to retirement. New technologies must also be capable of being seamlessly 'bolted on' as Web2.0 moves on to Web3.0.

**Plurality** – or the recognition that a student has more to life than 'school' is an integral part of the e-Portfolio culture. The e-Portfolio is not just a tool for the school's use. Students of all ages have a variety of learning environments, formal schooling, extra-curricular studies, informal learning, external clubs, organisations and home-tuition etc. All these have some part to play in the totality of a student's learning and can easily be accommodated within the pages of the e-Portfolio. This is particularly significant when one considers the working life of a young student. Of the waking hours of a child some 21% is involved in timetabled class activities. But what of the other 79%? This is where the e-Portfolio can prove its worth.

**Collaboration** is a fundamental tool within the e-Portfolio which can only enhance and enable several of the other functions listed below. Within the controlled environment of the e-Portfolio it is logical to provide simple 'permissions' for selected students or 'friends' to view items of each other's current coursework assignments or ideas, and comment constructively. Even without any blogging tools it is possible to run simple surveys or feedback forms so that students can collate ideas and further respond where appropriate in perfect e-safety. As and when appropriate, schools could, if they wish, add proprietary blogging tools and forums which reflect the style and ethos of the school or college. However, as with any new tool, it is necessary to teach new users how it can be used, identifying the benefits and dangers and above all, providing examples of good practice.

**Mentoring** is not well developed in schools in the UK, however I have seen moving examples of good practice from the USA. Basically 'mentors' in the school context should be understood as academic 'godparents' promising to watch over the young student, giving testimony as to their relationship with the student and how they intend to encourage both academic and social endeavour. Termly or half-termly comments posted on the e-Portfolio by the mentor as a 'neutral' and respected mediator provide an illuminating addition to the support that both teachers and parents can provide. In FE/HE some good examples exist of

mentoring using alumni in both formal and informal contexts. However, as far as I can see these sessions could have been very much enhanced by using the collaborative features of an e-Portfolio.

**Counselling**, by either the child's teacher or a high school counsellor or form-tutor, is the more official aspect of accessing the e-Portfolio in order to provide informal counselling and advice from a professional point of view. Again, it is up to the student to provide as much or as little access as is felt appropriate. However, either by face-to-face or virtual conversation, both the counsellor and the student can document formative comments and strategies etc.

**Mapping**, which may or may not be an outcome of counselling, is the student's opportunity to plan the future direction of their life. From an early age children can be taught to consider matters of career choice, possibly through an imaginative story or wish-list. This can lead on to entertaining flow diagrams, mind-maps or concept maps. Again, the digital nature of an e-Portfolio lends itself to linking to a range of illustrational media some of which may be personal and highly informative. The bottom line is that mapping can be a powerful tool for the visualisation and enhancement of thinking skills.

**A scrapbook** is perhaps not an immediate aspect of the e-Portfolio that comes to mind and yet is an essential component of the thinking person's toolkit. To have a logical place or folder in which to drop all those fragments of ideas or flashes of inspiration which could be developed later is sensible. But, to have that scrapbook immediately available, on line anywhere, anytime is presently beyond the common practice of most people. The e-Portfolio is the logical solution for 21<sup>st</sup> century thinking.

**Keeping a Diary**, again, is not everyone's best habit – particularly amongst men and boys. It is an art-form that needs reviving – and the e-Portfolio is the natural tool to revitalise a dying craft. At one time writing a diary was an essential exercise of any educated person and only posterity can truly bear witness to the importance of some of the great classical diaries or personal histories recorded throughout the centuries. The keeping of a modern electronic journal whether for private or public display can now be a multi-media exercise much enhanced through the capabilities of personalisation and accessibility that the e-Portfolio affords.

**Reflection**, although one of the most fundamental aspects of any teaching environment, can be best performed after the above activities have been achieved. Although teachers are advised to allow students sufficient time at the end of a lesson to discuss in plenary what they have learnt, reflection can be so much deeper. Mature reflection can be a significantly more personal and deep-seated, even gut-wrenching and soul-searching activity – but how do we enable students to experience this level of thinking, of rationalisation and internalisation? Quite simply, the e-Portfolio is that natural 'quiet place', a confessional and 'trusting place' often marginalised in the hurly-burley of today's society.

**Planning** is an essential component of any student's portfolio and should be an habitual point of visiting. There are two aspects of 'Planning'. Firstly there is the semi-formal calendar of events personal to the individual student. Possibly provided initially as the school diary it can then be edited to match the individual's activities and social calendar. In many UK schools this could very well replace the 'Planner' or 'Home-School Notebook'. Secondly, as an obvious outcome of reflection (above) and perhaps transferred from the 'scrapbook', the e-Portfolio provides an indispensable repository of 'to-do' lists, draft ideas and documentations which may or may not come to fruition.

**Learning Styles** are not often treated seriously in schools. Here, within the e-Portfolio there are no rules about punctuation or underlining titles. Colour schemes and styles of presentation, essays or bullet points, interviews on MP3 or statistical graphs, music or video, photography of 3D artefacts or scanned images may be compiled and presented as the owner chooses. The publishing of rich-media is an art-form in itself which lends itself to the whole range of Gardner's 12 'intelligences'.

**Telling a Story**, as Helen Barrett suggests, covers a range of approaches. The formal presentation to a potential employer, for instance, can be an interesting 'story' using a range of media to demonstrate progression, variety of experience, and linking to one's career highlights etc. A variety of apposite 'stories' can be created within an e-Portfolio dipping into a range of source materials and media links as appropriate. However a second type of perhaps more creative story is also possible:

**The Campfire Story** allows a more romantic approach to explaining one's life-history or experiences. As Dr Joanne Carney quotes in Helen Barratt's document on Metaphors, "Technology is the campfire around which we tell our stories," says musician and performance artist Laurie Anderson. If that be so, what tales will be shared in the flickering glow of teachers' electronic portfolios? Will web and multimedia technologies be used to help teachers capture their knowledge of practice and share it in ways not possible with older technologies?

**Teachers and Lecturers** as hinted at by Laurie Anderson, above, need not be excluded from any of the previous notes. In fact, in order to communicate with the students' e-Portfolios they will need to familiarise themselves with the system anyway. However, many informal or semi-formal activities can take place between staff either within departments or even socially where, perhaps, formal school structures preclude social interactions particularly in the larger institutions.

**At Institution Level** there is also a significant need to communicate using a range of rich media beyond the scope of any simple e-mailing system. Governors, school managers and departmental policy makers all need to communicate strategic thinking in more than simple text. Recognising that Web2 has arrived and when rich media is already centrally available any appropriate staff should be able to access and relay materials through their e-Portfolio without the usual complexities of VLE access, download formats or issues of storage.

**Lifelong Learning and Leisure** is also not precluded – in fact the very opposite! The largest proportion of potential e-Portfolio users are neither children nor academic students but ordinary people, whether in employment, between jobs or retired. The e-Portfolio for many may become the communications system par excellence for job applications or part-time learning – but this is only a small part of the whole e-Portfolio set of facilities. At a time when the Government is so very concerned about the uplifting of a sub-literate underclass in UK society, the e-Portfolio is an excellent medium for self-improvement strategies, developing a sense of self-worth and providing an effective platform for community projects.

**Lifewide Learning** is not so far on anyone's horizon as far as I can see – for the simple reason that no-one outside of 'education' has presently any vested interest in supplying an e-Portfolio to meet the needs of the wider community. It must be recognised that if the needs of people of varying abilities, disabilities and motivations are to be equally met then 'learning' is about more than going through the formal academic and credentialist routes. The needs of the 'hard to reach' and those suffering economic, social, philosophical or technical aspects of the 'digital divide' should equally be addressed. Perhaps rather than just emphasising the 'Learning' bit, we should be using the banner of Lifewide, Lifelong Learning and Leisure or LLLL ?

**Autonomy** is perhaps the trump card or unique selling point of any true e-Portfolio system. Quite simply the e-Portfolio has no need to be embedded within any VLE or institution's file-server. In practice, institutions often change VLE vendors – the chaos that this would cause to the independent ownership of e-Portfolio content is almost beyond description and may, in fact, seriously limit the options to transfer to another VLE. In fact, unless the e-Portfolio is stored independently of any institutional system it can neither be considered to be 'portable' nor 'owned' by the end-user. The primary function of 'transition' within the context of schools would be a non-starter.

**CONCLUSION:** The e-Portfolio must not be hijacked - not by Industry, nor Higher Education, nor adult Training Institutions, nor by the QCA, nor any VLE supplier but, more importantly, not by domineering factions within the education system who may have a limited view of its real potential. The e-Portfolio is a dynamic, evolving and personal tool for everyone and for every aspect of their studies, career development or leisure use, which should be available to all - from '5-95' - by right. How it is used will vary according to school policies, learning styles, digital competencies and age. Suffice it to say that the above list of features should make the e-Portfolio accessible to all whatever their age, aptitude, ability, accessibility or attitude.