E-Portfolios: Go Big or Go Home

As recently as five years ago, many of the CIOs and directors of academic technology with whom I spoke saw e-portfolio implementation as a significant challenge. It was a complex undertaking, and there was much uncertainty about available products, policy, and support. Today, many see the process as more straightforward, similar to implementing a course management system. The role of academic technology is to choose a tool that is reliable, provides a reasonably well-defined set of features, and is likely to be used by an appreciably large number of individual faculty members—perhaps also at the departmental level—and then to support and promote this use. There are enough stable technology options and sufficient consensus about essential pedagogical and assessment practices that such an implementation seems quite manageable.

I have spent the last fifteen years researching, developing, and teaching and learning with e-portfolio technologies and practices. Today I believe, even more strongly than I did when I began, that e-portfolios can play a central role in strengthening teaching and learning in higher education. A body of research has grown over the last decade—including through the work of the Inter/National Coalition for Electronic Portfolio Research (http://ncepr.org/), which I co-direct—that points to the contributions of e-portfolios to increased student engagement, retention, learning skills, professional identity development, and self-direction. However, just using an e-portfolio does not necessarily lead to these outcomes.¹

The thoughtful use of e-portfolios at the level of the individual course, based on learning research and pedagogical best practice, is certainly to be encouraged, and there are good resources to help faculty members do so.² But it is unclear that centralized technology support is essential or even desirable for such scholarly teaching and learning. When the management of large volumes of e-portfolios is not a requirement, free tools such as Google Sites match up favorably with many enterprise solutions.

At the departmental level, the most common use of e-portfolios is to gather artifacts of student work to demonstrate fulfillment of standards as a component of programmatic assessment. Although this is certainly an improvement on less-authentic forms of assessment, experts generally agree that such applications of e-portfolios usually do little to further learning and may actively work at cross-purposes with the use of e-portfolios to support learning. It is an oversimplification to say that e-portfolios cannot be used simultaneously for learning and assessment, but such use requires the integration of e-portfolio activities across the curriculum at a scale almost never attempted by programs invested only in meeting the demands of external accountability.

When deeply integrated into and across the curriculum and co-curriculum, e-portfolios go far beyond an enhanced resume or transcript. They can help students develop abilities essential to long-term success: the strategies and confidence to learn independently; the understanding of one’s own strengths and predilections to allow for more effective collaboration; and the reflective linking of values and aspirations with knowledge and action to enable charting career trajectories and fulfilling responsibilities as a citizen.

Such integration is not easy. This is in part because e-portfolio implementers tend to assume that institution-wide implementation need only replicate course- and program-level implementation on a larger scale. In 2010, researchers from the University of Nottingham and the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) examined the results of twenty-one JISC-funded e-portfolio projects at universities across the United Kingdom. Looking at common features of those projects that exceeded expectations as well as those that were more disappointing, they identified five “threshold concepts”: key implementation principles that are critical to the success of a broad e-portfolio initiative. The fifth and most provocative of these key principles is that, when brought to scale, e-portfolios “are disruptive from a pedagogic, technological and an institutional perspective.”³

As EDUCAUSE Review readers know well, disruptive innovations do not simply strengthen an organization’s ability to do what it is already doing; they have the potential to change the very nature of what an organization is seeking to achieve. Embracing a disruptive innovation means applying a changed set of values. E-portfolios are hard to implement at scale in a way that embraces their transformational potential.
because they require not just changes in practice but changes in responsibility, in three areas.

First, on transformative e-portfolio campuses, faculty members must take much broader responsibility for student learning than they have traditionally. If we are serious about supporting students as self-directed, lifelong learners who make connections across disciplines and between the classroom and their world, then faculty members must seek to understand and support students’ learning throughout their undergraduate learning careers, not just the learning that relates directly to the intended outcomes of a particular course.

Second, embracing responsibility for this broader understanding of student learning requires expanded and sustained collaboration with other educators across campus such as student affairs professionals, librarians, and learning technologists. These educators understand elements of student learning and development that have not traditionally been the focus of faculty teaching.

Finally, and perhaps most challenging, taking students seriously as self-directed, lifelong learners with emerging professional identities requires colleges and universities to give students a substantial voice in decision-making about curricula and programs throughout the institution, more so than is offered by course-evaluation forms or student-government elections. Students need to see clearly that their own interpretations of their learning and experience, as represented in their e-portfolios, are carefully analyzed by faculty members and institutional leaders and that decisions they care about are guided, at least in part, by that analysis.

These three changes in responsibility make the thought of attempting to strategically implement e-portfolios across an institution daunting, to say the least. Indeed, there have been far more failures than successes to date. However, making an institutional commitment to transformative e-portfolio practice does not need to mean that everyone is going to use e-portfolios everywhere, all the time, all at once. What is needed initially is a set of less-threatening activities that most faculty (and other educators) will be willing to integrate into their teaching. These can then be combined with a set of strategically chosen opportunities for students to synthesize the outputs of those activities into e-portfolios that both support student learning and inform institutional decision-making.

Following the lead of the TLT Group, I call the initial set of activities “low-threshold” assignments. These assignments may not involve e-portfolios directly or at all. Rather, they have two possible goals: either supporting the development of students’ reflective practice, or using multimedia and social software to document experience and identity. Reflective assignments ask students to plan how they will undertake course activities, collect evidence about how they engage in those activities, and interpret that evidence to guide future action. Multimedia documentation assignments ask students to keep records of what might otherwise be ephemeral and invisible components of their learning. For example, students might shoot video of themselves working together on a group project or regularly tweet updates on the progress of a service learning project.

The products of these low-threshold assignments could be collected in a shared e-portfolio space provided by the institution. Integrative e-portfolio activities could then ask students to select from and reflect on this archive of evidence of their learning. These activities might be situated within courses and other learning experiences where faculty are most likely to be sympathetic to the new responsibilities of an e-portfolio culture of teaching and learning—such as first-year experience programs, capstone courses, study abroad, internships, or co-curricular leadership programs.

The combination of low-threshold assignments across the curriculum/cock-curruculum and thoughtfully placed integrative e-portfolio activities can bolster an institution’s investment in implementing and supporting e-portfolio technology. Academic technology leaders alone are unlikely to be able to shepherd such an e-portfolio initiative into maturity. Making it happen will likely require close collaboration with academic and student affairs professionals and faculty leaders across campus. This approach has the advantage of placing pedagogical values squarely in front of technology. These values align with those being promoted by a range of existing movements for educational transformation, ranging from the scholarship of teaching and learning to open educational resources. By establishing institution-wide alliances with faculty and other educators, academic technologists can embrace the disruptive nature of e-portfolio practice in support of student success.

**Notes**


4. In *E-Portfolios for Lifelong Learning and Assessment*, I call this process “deliberative assessment” and examine both its philosophical basis and its practical application.

5. See the TLT Group website: “Low Threshold Applications (LTAs)”: <http://www.tltgroup.org/resources/ltas.html>.

**Darren Cambridge** (dcambridge@air.org) is Senior Consultant, Education Technology and Online Communities of Practice, at the American Institutes for Research, is Co-Director of the Inter/National Coalition for Electronic Portfolio Research, and is winner of the MacArthur Foundation Digital Media and Learning Faculty Prize.© 2012 Darren Cambridge