

Reflecting on ePortfolios for lifelong learning and lifelong employability

Corrinne Hills DipLIS, BAppSci(LIM)

Moreton Bay Regional Libraries

Abstract

ePortfolios are often thought of as a repository for evidence of knowledge, education and experience that can be used for resume building and they are used in several Australian Universities. But they truly come into their own as a professional tool by providing a platform for assessing and recording evidence of implicit skills and knowledge. The key to their success is Reflective Practice which makes library students and librarians into strategic professionals who are aware of their strengths and potential, and applies that knowledge to addressing a range of professional requirements such as evaluation, accreditation, career development, AND resumes.

This presentation will discuss the power behind reflective practice and how ePortfolios, as a personal learning space utilises Reflective Practice to plan and record learning for lifelong employability. Reflective Practice will be defined and discussed in context with finding the relevance of prior learning and experience, and secondments to professional library practice. The power of Reflective Learning to build confident and empowered professionals will be highlighted and finally the link between life long learning and lifelong employability will be discussed.

ePortfolios provide a flexible and versatile platform that is a repository for qualifications and other explicit information but it is also a platform for Reflective Practice, it is a lifelong learning tool for library professionals who are valuable employees, motivated personally and an inspiration to their colleagues.

Introduction

The value of lifelong employability has become evident in recent years as eligibility for the age pension is moved further into the future, superannuation funds fail to keep pace with inflation and we retire later than our parents did. The Australian Government document 'Towards higher retirement incomes for Australians' states that from 1910 until 1993 the retirement [eligibility for age pension] age for men in Australia was 65 and 60 for women (p.68). In 2010 the age is 67 and Government policy has it increasing incrementally over the next 13 years. Indeed the Australian government is encouraging those over 67 to stay at work longer (Fagg, 2009). And while there is no statutory retirement age in Australia, until recently very few Australians over 50 waited until qualifying for the Age Pension before retiring. The average retirement age for men was 58 and 47 for women. However in an astonishing cultural change, reported in February 2009 more than a third of older Australian workers now plan to work until they are at least 70.

An ABS report released in November 2008 showed that:

- 60 % of men aged 60 to 64
- 29 % of men aged 65 to 69
- 7% of men 70 and over were still in the workforce

And

- 39% of women aged 60 to 64
- 15% of women aged 65 to 69
- 2% of women 70 and over continued to work.

The 'recession we had to have', the Global Financial Crisis' and other economic downturns mean that many of us do not have the independent income to support us in retirement that we would like to enjoy and so retirement is becoming an event we will enjoy when we can afford to rather than when we reach a certain age.

Demographer, Mark McCrindle (2011) summed up the future employment landscape for Generation Alpha, those born between 2010 and 2024, stating that Gen A will study longer than previous generations, change careers at least five times and will more likely be self-employed. They will take longer to start earning a living than generations X, Y and Z, but they will work into their 70s and possibly into their 80s. "Not only will the children being born in Australia this year live longer than previous generations, but they will work later in life and across more careers than ever".

To maintain lifelong employment, it follows that lifelong learning is fundamental to ensuring that skills and knowledge are continued throughout our working lives. So how do we manage to keep ahead of redundancy? The tools generally used for career development, particularly for applying for positions, are the Resume or the CV. Essentially these are a portfolio of artifacts that demonstrate appropriateness for the desired position. Job applications consist of a cover letter, a resume and evidence of personal experience that addresses the selection criteria. Preparation of job applications is time consuming and looked upon with dread by even the most

enthusiastic job hunter. Often meeting the requirements for experience is difficult for anyone but particularly so for new graduates.

Universities recognise the value of high employment rates among graduates to encourage new enrolments, and therefore the advantages of a strong portfolio to supporting graduates in achieving employment. So they are introducing subjects around career and portfolio development. The inclusion of an ePortfolio in the suite of tools provided to students is commonplace in Europe and the UK, and within Australian it is gaining a foothold in the larger universities. The Australian ePortfolio Project stage 2 (AeP2) reports (pp 17-18) that more than a dozen Australian universities are piloting ePortfolios and that a pilot group study among librarians performed in conjunction with ALIA has developed a regular Community of Practice. This group has gone on to form the ALIA ePortfolio Practice Group and is offering trial ePortfolios to ALIA members. The progression from student to learning professional has begun.

Serge Ravet, Chief Executive of the European Institute for e-Learning (ElfEL), cites the modern ePortfolio as evidence of a learning society, one that links individual, community, organizational and territorial learning. ElfEL is championing the idea “that in 2010 every citizen will have an ePortfolio” and believe that this will contribute to achieving the Lisbon goal of raising Europe to be the most competitive knowledge based economy in the world by supporting the learning community concept (Ravet, n.d.). Wales is providing each of its citizens with an ePortfolio to promote its “Learning Country” policies and lifelong and life-wide learning ideals (McAllister, Hallam & Harper, 2008). This tells us that ePortfolios are important at global levels, but why? And how do they move beyond the collection of artifacts that has defined traditional portfolios?

So what is the difference between an ePortfolio and a portfolio and why all the fuss about the ‘e’?

A portfolio is simply an organised collection of work (Batson, 2002; Halstead and Sutherland 2006, p201) Batson notes that traditionally it has been art students who have utilised the portfolio to collect examples of their work to show potential employers and sponsors. This demonstrates the potential for portfolios to support more than text. A historical look at portfolios shows that they have been around for a very long time. Perhaps the most famous folio belongs to Leonardo Da Vinci.

Therefore an electronic portfolio is simply an organised collection of work that is stored electronically. An ePortfolio is more specifically defined as a digital collection of information describing and illustrating a person’s learning, career, experience and achievements (Lougheed, Bogyo and Brokenshire. n.d.). For social media sites such as LinkedIn and those used by job seeking websites such as Seek.com this is definition appropriately describes the resumes and CVs that users attach to their profiles. It is a static, electronic version of what was traditionally presented to potential employers as a resume or CV. Its only intended use is as a job seeking tool.

However, with advances in technology there is potential for so much more and so the ePortfolio has moved into the realm of specialised software and platforms. Mahara (2011), an open source ePortfolio platform, describe their product as “the new generation of the three ring binder”. The Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) (2008) describe ePortfolios as a product owned and managed by the individual (as opposed by the institutionally controlled environment of learning centres), where digital items are purposefully collected and aggregated into presentations to a selected audience that provide evidence of the individual’s learning and /or ability (pp 6-7). They describe an environment where the individual controls and ‘owns’ the data and that as well as capturing and storing evidence of knowledge and skills, it also enables the individual to plan, collaborate and present tailored ‘webfolios’ to selected audiences (pp 7 & 28-29).

If they are introduced as a learning technology during tertiary or even primary education, ePortfolios earn a new definition in versatility and portability, taking the student from school, to university and into their careers. The ePortfolio supports a range of portfolio activities, variously described as Process, Showcase and Assessment (Abrami & Barret, 2005) or Learning, Credential and Showcase (Zeichner & Wray, 2001) that may be mandatory or voluntary (Smith & Tillema, 2003) resulting in four distinct types of portfolio: Dossier, Training, Reflective and Personal Development. This is a diversity that would be difficult to achieve in hardcopy but becomes practical and efficient using electronic technology.

Reflective Practice or ‘Deep Learning’

The ePortfolio is more than technology, McAllister, Hallam and Harper (2008) identify the success of ePortfolio as the way of thinking and learning, as a way of connecting theory and practice. They note that ePortfolio thinking is derived from reflective practice. Reflective Practice is recognised as an important learning tool that is “essential to encourage lifelong learning skills and approaches” (Candy, 1995). It is used in as many formats as can be imagined, journals and reflective essays are the most obvious forms, but also more imaginative formats like video.

Reflection is practiced by many great thinkers, Plato said “know thyself”, and the theoretical roots of reflection are planted deeply in information seeking and learning paradigms by John Dewey, Jürgen Habermas, David Kolb and Donald Schön. David Kolb’s Learning Cycle is the theoretical core of Information Seeking Behaviour as studied by librarians today. Reflection is the basis of learning and self development (Barrett 2011)

Dr Helen Barrett, researcher and consultant in the field of education and ‘Deep Learning’, defines Reflective Practice as “metacognition”, which literally means thinking about thinking. Dr Barrett in her website *Reflection for learning* goes on to describe several ‘recipes’ for Reflective Practice, one of which offers the simplest format for the learner and advanced thinker alike:

What? : What did you do?

So what? : Why is this important? Why do you want to learn this?

What now? : What do you want to do with this? What do you want to learn now?

This model is used by one of the most popular ePortfolio platforms, PebblePad, as the basis for its artifact gathering tools. In this form it can be seen that those untutored in Reflective Practice

can easily develop their own portfolio, moreover, those who are more skilled can develop complex responses and therefore more sophisticated artifacts.

What comes first the ePortfolio or the reflection? This chicken and egg scenario illustrates how closely the two elements sit and in fact one without the other renders each worthless. John Dewey, in his treatise *How we think* (1910) said that “we do not learn from experience...we learn from reflecting on experience”. From these roots we can deduce that experience is of no value unless we reflect on that experience and determine what was to be achieved, what worked and what did not, and what, if anything, would we do differently next time. Reflections have their value in encouraging students and practitioners to improve their skills and knowledge but also have the additional benefit of providing evidential artifacts to demonstrate skills and knowledge. Artifacts such as these are often found in Resumes and Curriculum Vitae and there lies the root of ePortfolio efficiency. Reflective Practice is the element that makes the modern ePortfolio more valuable, more useful and a driver of lifelong learning. ePortfolios ensure that the lessons learned through reflection of our learning are put to use.

The practice of reflection through ePortfolio use trains the user to think and work reflectively. It makes librarians better managers because they work on a fundamentally strategic level. It becomes habit to ask: “what is happening here, why is it important [to me/my library], what will I do with it, how will I do it better?” Recording these reflections as critical events in an ePortfolio means that these reflections are available when they are needed again, for appraisal, accreditation, a new job or simply to do the same task again...better.

PebblePad describes its product as “not just an ePortfolio”, it says that over time users can create, store and review multiple assets’ which can be aggregated into powerful presentational portfolios, called webfolios, to provide rich stories of learning or achievement for myriad purposes including:

- Assessment (formal and informal)
- Advancement (promotion or transition)
- Appraisal (self - peer - 360)
- Accreditation (professional bodies)
- Application (course, job, funding)
- Articulation (informative story telling)

PebblePad (2011)

Karen Barnstable lists forty-one benefits of an ePortfolio in her 2010 blog. She divides these among benefits for students, educators (or for this paper read Librarian), and employers or corporate companies. She notes the benefits derived both from the process and from the product for each group. Contributors to the blog note additional benefits such as motivation; pride; ownership and connectivity (between owner of the data and employer/educator/mentor). Of particular note are the benefits of ePortfolios as a Personal Learning Environment. An ePortfolio does in effect become a personal space for learning, providing opportunity for reflection and processing of ideas as well as a place to save resources and develop reports.

Dr Joan Dominick (2004) presents the metaphor of a kaleidoscope reflecting the view of self to global society.

“Just as a kaleidoscope needs light to view the endless possibilities of visual combinations of the coloured glass, a e-portfolio provides the illumination for the learner to view the endless possibilities of the potential views and connections of his/her learning experience from self to global society.”

This is a particularly nice metaphor as it highlights the potential for ePortfolios to utilise the stored artifacts in different presentations, to illustrate the different needs of the user and for the user to develop different messages tailored for specific events and audiences. Through reflection on these kaleidoscope webfolios, the user views themselves in different scenarios and this encourages them to develop in new ways. They are a career development tool as well as a job seeking tool.

Conclusion

ePortfolios continue to be taken up by universities and schools. Graduating students take their ePortfolios with them into the workforce and some professions are moving toward ePortfolio based accreditation for professional status. The health field is notable in its interest within Australian and our own professional organisation, ALIA, has an active ePortfolio practice group and accepts ePortfolio submissions for its Professional Development scheme.

ePortfolio thinking is aligned with strategic management practices and encourages critical self awareness that is essential to lifelong learning skills and approaches (Candy, 1995). I use my ePortfolio almost everyday to record critical events at work, for my study or just as a student of life. I use it to develop myself as a professional, to improve my work, learn and communicate events and activities to my managers, mentors, lecturers and colleagues. I reflect at times on how much I have grown, I am often surprised to realise how much I have achieved, of how much I want to learn and yes I am proud. I do feel more in control of my learning and development than my pre-ePortfolios days as I have a plan and I can see what I need to work on to achieve my goals. I can learn in privacy and share my learning and success when I want to.

This paper is an introduction to much deeper research that has implications for the way we study and work. I have tried to briefly cover as much as possible and I acknowledge that so much has been glossed over. I hope that it has caused you to ask *Why?* and *How?* and that you will take time to review the resources I have used to gain a deeper appreciation of how we can make our working and learning lives more interesting and easier and ensure we are prepared for a productive and rewarding working life.

References

- Abrami, P, and Barrett, H. (2005). Directions for research and development on electronic portfolios. *Canadian Journal of Learning and Technology*, 31 (3).
- Australian ePortfolio Project (2009). *ePortfolio use by university students in Australia: developing a sustainable community of practice: stage 2*.
- ALIA ePortfolio Practice Group [wiki] <http://aliaeportfoliopractice.wikispaces.com/>
- Barnstable, Karen (2010). 41 benefits of an ePortfolio [Blog] <http://kbarnstable.wordpress.com/2010/01/08/41-benefits-of-an-eportfolio/>
- Barrett, Helen (2011). Reflection for Learning [Web site] <http://sites.google.com/site/reflection4learning/Home>
- Batson, Trent (2002) 'The electronic portfolio boom: what's it all about?', <http://www.tc.columbia.edu/cis/newsletter/ospiminiconf/The%20Electronic%20Portfolio%20Boom.pdf>
- Candy, P. (1995). Developing lifelong learners through undergraduate education. Paper presented at the Teaching and Learning Forum. <http://lsn.curtin.edu.au/tlf/tlf1995/candy.html>
- Department of Treasury [n.d.] Towards higher retirement incomes for Australians: a history of the Australian retirement income system since Federation. Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra. <http://www.treasury.gov.au/documents/110/PDF/round4.pdf>
- Dewey, J. (1910). *How we think*. New York: Heath & Co
- Dominick, Joan E. (2004) 'E-Portfolio as Kaleidoscopic Process: Reflective View from Self to Global Society' <http://www.eport2passport.com/journal/eportjournal.php>
- Fagg, Stuart (2009) 'Aussies divided on new retirement age" Thursday May 19th 2009, *ninemsn Money*. [Web site] <http://finance.ninemsn.com.au/pfmanagingmoney/tax/8125937/aussies-divided-on-new-retirement-age>
- Halstead, Alison and Sutherland, Shane (2006). ePortfolio: a means of enhancing employability and the professional development of engineers. <http://www.ee2006.info/docs/10.pdf>

Herald Sun (2011). 'Alpha babies face multiple careers' *Sunday Herald Sun*, June 19th 2011.
[Web site] <http://www.heraldsun.com.au/news/more-news/alpha-babies-face-multiple-careers/story-fn7x8me2-1226077644602>

JISC see Joint Information Systems Committee

Joint Information Systems Committee (2008). Effective practice with e-Portfolios: supporting 21st century learning.
http://www.jisc.ac.uk/publications/publications/pub_lifelonglearningbps.aspx

Lougheed, Patrick, Bogyo, Brittney, and Brokenshire, David (n.d.) Formalizing electronic portfolios in the SPARC ePortfolio tool. Simon Fraser University, Surrey, BC, Canada.

Mahara (2011). 'About e-Portfolios' *Mahara* [Web site] <http://mahara.org/about/eportfolios>

McAllister, Lynn M., Hallam, Gillian C., and Harper, Wendy E. (2008) The ePortfolio as a tool for lifelong learning: Contextualising Australian practice. In *Proceedings International Lifelong Learning Conference 2008*, pp. 246-252, Yeppoon, Queensland.

PebblePad (2011) [web site] <http://www.pebblepad.com.au/>

Ravet, Serge (n.d.). *ePortfolio for a learning society*
http://www.eife-l.org/activities/projects/epicc/final_report/WP7/EPICC7_7_Paper%20Brussels%20S%20Ravet.pdf

Zeichner, K. and Wray, S. (2001). The teaching portfolio in US teacher education programs: what we know and what we need to know. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 17, 613-621.